

# STUDENT SPOTLIGHT



## SIMON POIRIER *Second half: Second horn*

Audiences love the rich, bright sound of the modern French horn, which will be especially prominent today on Zemlinsky's *The Mermaid*. But twenty-one-year-old hornist Simon Poirier has fallen in love with a slightly different sound: that of the natural horn.

The natural horn is the predecessor of the horns on stage today; it has no valves and produces a slightly different tone. It was common for composers to write for the natural horn all the way through the Romantic period, but the instrument has become a rarity in orchestras today. That's why Poirier hopes to land jobs with a period orchestra and with a chamber music group.

"My master's program is in early music, so I'll be playing mostly natural horn," says Poirier, who just graduated from the Conservatoire de musique du Québec à Montréal and will this fall study early music at the Conservatorium van Amsterdam. "When I was in high school, my teacher at the time was doing his master's in Amsterdam, so he introduced me to natural horn pretty early on. I was pretty lucky for that; I was around fourteen the first time I picked it up. During my last year of high school, I had modern horn lessons at the conservatory and natural horn lessons with my teacher in high school. Then in 2013, I had my first gig on natural horn in Montréal, and I had such a great time. That made me think that maybe I had to strengthen that specialty."

Poirier says in Europe there is great interest in HIP, which stands for Historically Informed Performance. Musicians in HIP have found their passion in period instruments.

"It's pretty unique, but I think more and more people are trying it just to understand how this music really would have been played at the time," he says. "And I think as a modern horn player, playing the natural horn can really influence your interpretation of the music."

Poirier will be playing the modern, valved horn today on the second half of the program alongside AMFS artist-faculty member and Montréal Symphony Orchestra principal hornist John Zirbel, with whom he studies in Aspen. This is Poirier's second summer with the AMFS, and he is returning with the support of a New Horizons Fellowship, given by Kay and Matthew Bucksbaum. He says he is excited to tackle *The Mermaid* because of Zirbel's enthusiasm about the piece.

"He was super excited," Poirier says. "He was like, 'Oh, you've got the best part, it's so great! It's like Strauss and Schoenberg at the same time. You've got to practice, but it's going to be great.' So I'm really looking forward to it."

Indeed, Poirier is looking forward to today's performance in general. He says playing for an audience is his favorite part about being a musician.

"There's a kind of thrill you get when you get on stage," he says. "I'm always overthinking what people are thinking while they're listening, like, 'Am I playing too loud? Is that too much? Are they enjoying the horn?' I'm always thinking that people just listen to the horn," he adds with a laugh, "which is, of course, absolutely not true."

Performing in Aspen is particularly special to Poirier because of the quality of the orchestras and the high expectations of Aspen audiences.

"I love the fact that Aspen is not just a school; I feel like people are actually coming to the concerts as if it were like any other professional orchestra playing," he says. "They're just coming to experience a great moment."

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