

LIVING A DREAM

DAVID HALEN REFLECTS ON 20 SEASONS
AS ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY CONCERTMASTER.

BY EDDIE SILVA



DILIP VISHWANAT

David Halen

The St. Louis Symphony concertmaster's official bio begins: "David Halen is living a dream that began as a youth the first time he saw the St. Louis Symphony perform in Warrensburg, Missouri." Unlike the bland PR-speak of so many official artist bios, Halen's tells a poignant story in a single sentence. It's like a movie pitch you could make to Spielberg: Begin in small-town central Missouri. A great orchestra comes to the boy's town, to him a thrill greater than any circus. He's from a family of musicians and they are his first teachers. As a young man he studies in Europe. He lands a job with an orchestra back in the U.S. Then the incredible happens: he becomes concertmaster of the orchestra that so affected him when he was a boy, back in Missouri.

Nah. Nobody would believe it.

But that indeed is David Halen's story. And the dream he has been living has entered its 20th season of reality. In October, another improbable plot twist occurs: Leonard Slatkin, the music director who appointed Halen as concertmaster in 1994, returns to conduct him in one of the great works for solo violin: Bruch's Concerto No. 1, October 17 and 19, at Powell Hall.

Living a Dream

Halen has lived through the best of times and the worst of times with the St. Louis Symphony: tours across the globe, across Missouri, and historic concerts at Carnegie Hall; worldwide recognition as one of the finest symphony orchestras; talented musicians joining the ensemble; talented musicians going elsewhere or retiring; economic calamity; a fiscal and artistic re-birth. He's worked under four directors—Slatkin, Hans Vonk, (musical advisor) Itzhak Perlman, and David Robertson—and each has made his mark on the orchestra and on Halen as musician and leader. He's become a husband and father during his years in St. Louis, and his hair shows gray that he wish he had when he was a youthful new concertmaster in the '90s.

He's seen the orchestra business change in unforeseen ways in these 20 years, and he trains young musicians on how to cope and even thrive amidst these changes. He's a professor at the University of Michigan, teacher and concertmaster at the Aspen Music Festival and School, artistic director at the Insbrook Institute and the Missouri Festival of the Arts in Boonville. There's plenty more on his resume.

He laughs when he's asked about the next 20 years. I caught him in-between gigs in late August, and asked him to reflect on the first twenty.

THE CONCERTMASTER'S ROLE

"Being concertmaster is a very fluid set of responsibilities. First and foremost, you are there to assist the conductor, whether music director or guest conductor. Your job is most visible to the orchestra. To the public, you sit in front and tune the orchestra and move around in your seat. But even that moving around is based on what the conductor is doing.

"I'm trying to give counsel when needed, and not give it when it is not needed."



DILIP VISHWANATH

"There are so many dimensions to the role that it's hard to describe. It's about personalities, both off stage and on stage—encouraging people toward getting along, toward cooperation, toward engaging in constructive ways. I'm trying to give counsel when needed, and not give it when it is not needed.

"The most fun and the most rewarding part of the job is playing a concert and hearing an amazing sound—a sound you helped create. Nothing is more satisfying as a career musician."

THE EVOLVING ORCHESTRA

"It's been an interesting time in St. Louis. A generation has passed from one to another. Whenever a new musician joins, it is in part an assimilation experience. They come to work and learn that there is an institutional approach—an approach to sound, to the level of

Living a Dream

preparedness, phrasing, sound production. I play violin in a way that affects the string players, because they have to do it the same way.” [laughs]

THE MUSIC DIRECTORS

“I’ve worked under a great set of music directors—each with his own set of strengths, but very different from one another. I was appointed in Leonard’s last season. Hans took over a year later. Ironically I felt very compatible with both in different ways. Leonard taught me a great deal about being concertmaster. He has the clearest hands and technique. His gestures would teach me how to gesture as concertmaster—and when to get involved and when not to. It’s all about developing as a good judge of human nature.

“THE CULTURE OF THIS ORCHESTRA IS UNIQUE.”

—CONCERTMASTER DAVID HALEN

“Hans was a consummate musician with a depth of musical integrity. David has a combination of brilliance and technique and a lot of musical integrity. A contemporary integrity, meaning an openness of thought that allows for a reassessment of ‘war horse’ traditions. It comes from his background of working with people like Pierre Boulez—not feeling you need to fit into contrived notions from before.”

THE ORCHESTRA CULTURE

“For the orchestra, ironically because of the challenges it had financially, there is a real commitment to assure a stable future. I have tremendous responsibilities to not disappoint those who have helped to sustain our future. I know many of these people personally. We owe it to them.

“The culture of this orchestra is unique. It’s less self-centered than other orchestras. All in all, the orchestra is far better off than at any time in the 20 years I’ve been here. It all comes down to the hiring process. You can make mistakes so vividly. You choose someone with flaws and they keep making mistakes. An orchestra must tend its garden well. Orchestras that stay at a high level have the ability to choose wisely. The culture has been one of quality here for a long time.”

*David Halen performs Bruch’s Violin Concerto No. 1, October 17 and 19 at Powell Hall.
Visit stlsymphony.org for more information and tickets.*

Eddie Silva is the External Affairs and Publications Manager for the St. Louis Symphony.