

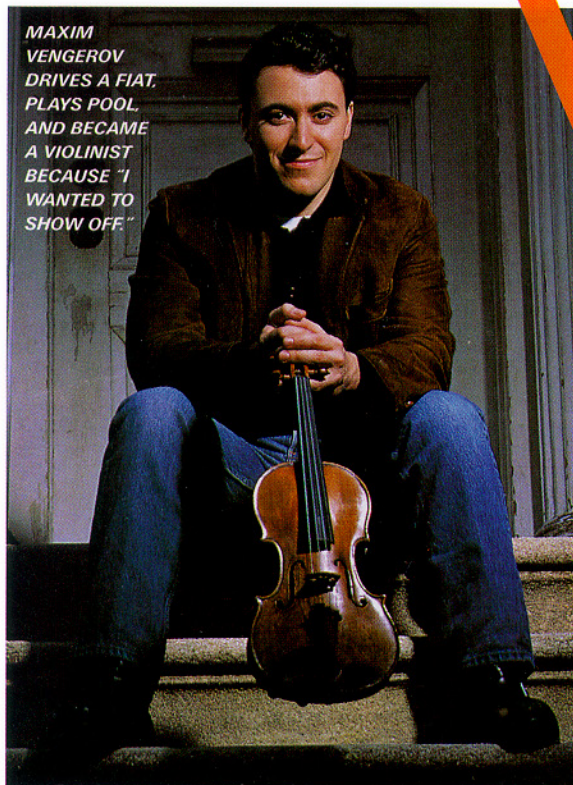
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MAXIM VENGEROV DRIVES A FIAT, PLAYS POOL, AND BECAME A VIOLINIST BECAUSE "I WANTED TO SHOW OFF."



When 21-year-old violinist Jascha Heifetz, then at his peak, performed at Carnegie Hall in 1922, it was for a packed house of 2,900 people. Earlier this year, when another 21-year-old violinist, Maxim Vengerov, playing a Shostakovich concerto, performed on the Grammy Awards along with Alanis Morissette and Coolio, more than one billion viewers watched. And what most of them remember is that spine-tingling moment when the bow hairs of his 1727 Stradivarius literally popped apart. "It really wasn't *that* exciting," insists Vengerov. "By now I have a lot of experience with this kind of thing. In fact, I've managed to switch violins with the concertmaster in two seconds while still humming the music. I'm trying for one second."

Claudio Abbado, who next month conducts the Berlin Philharmonic with soloist Vengerov at Carnegie Hall, calls him "the most talented of today's young violinists." After

Vengerov's New York debut in 1993, music critic K. Robert Schwarz wrote, "The sinful ease with which Mr. Vengerov commands his instrument renders any questions of technique superfluous."

Offstage, Vengerov alternates between intensity and playfulness. Born in Novosibirsk, Siberia, to an oboist and a singer, he was practicing for seven hours a day by the age of four. He's since left the tundra for the more temperate and lively scene of Amsterdam, where he lives in the middle of the city's most intense stretch of after-hours nightlife. When he's not obsessively perfecting a Mozart sonata, he's an ordinary 20-something guy who likes shooting pool and cruising around in his Fiat 500.

"When life gets too serious," says Vengerov, who plays 130 concerts per year and is awaiting the release of his ninth CD, due out next month, with Daniel Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, "I just want to be five years old again."—MARCY MEDINA *pata* ▶414

Top: KEN O'DONNHOUE/Courtesy of Pison, Incorporated; bottom: NICK CARDILLICCHIO.