

Apollo's Fire: 20 minutes with Spanish violinist Francisco Fullana

by Daniel Hathaway



Born in Palma de Mallorca, raised in Madrid, and having spent a few summers in Aspen where he learned English, violinist Francisco Fullana was turned loose on New York City at the tender age of 16.

He made the most of that experience. Now 32, and one of the friendliest interviewees you can imagine, he told me in a telephone conversation that he was very lucky to have finished high school early so he could spend six months exploring and taking lessons in New York before his Juilliard School audition in March.

“By chance, I met this wonderful lady in Aspen — we were just sitting near each other and talking,” he said. “Susan Beckerman loved classical music, and ended up hosting me for a year in her beautiful house in New York. I had the most incredible time. I went to concerts and opera with her, but most of the time, since I didn’t know anybody, I went to museums, got into photography, and walked around taking in the whole city and falling in love with it. Then I got to Juilliard where they put you in a dorm with 200 freshmen. I was a bit wild for a little while, but it was a great life experience. No regrets!”

Fullana, who is now artist-in-residence with Cleveland’s Baroque Orchestra, will be featured with *Apollo’s Fire* this week in two local performances of Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Violin Concerto in d*, on a program that will be repeated in Weill Hall at New York’s Carnegie Hall.

In 2016, Fullana was appointed principal violin of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, when he first worked with Jeannette Sorrell preparing a performance of Bach's Double Violin Concerto. "Her vision and energy fit perfectly with my own," Fullana said, "and when one of the soloists for Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* canceled a few years ago, she asked me to step in on three days' notice. I did, and we got along smoothly. A couple of weeks later, we had dinner and decided we really needed to record the work."

They planned a tour of *The Four Seasons* for April of 2020, and we all know what happened next. COVID pulled the plug on their plans, so they regrouped and decided to concentrate on the recording project. The 11-concert tour came after the CD was released.

That recording occupied much of his time, so Fullana didn't have as large a vacuum to fill as many musicians whose entire calendar of concerts was canceled.

"I went through different phases," he said. "After the initial shock in March of 2020, with all the cancellations and uncertainties — not knowing if it was safe to go to the grocery store, spraying everything down, not knowing if you could fly or not — I actually got some practicing done. My coping mechanism was looking forward in a weird way, and I told myself, 'I'm going to try to get better on the violin, working on technique without the pressure of preparing a concert.'"

Fullana said he did that for a while, but what really worked for him was moving his activities outside. "I grew up in cities — Palma, Madrid, New York," so the great outdoors provided new vistas.

"I was lucky enough to play a couple of outdoor concerts and festivals. I had a really magical time in Moab, Utah, where I got into biking and did crazy, eight-hour rides through the National Park. I took up scuba diving as well and got my certification. For me, it's very meditative — like going into space, only underwater.

"Probably the lowest point was the early fall, when we realized that it was going to take at least until the following summer to get back because vaccines wouldn't arrive until early in 2021. So I tried to build strength, working on projects and making sure I used the time in the best way I could, musically speaking."

The result was two CDs, one of Bach's solo violin works, and a second, *Bach's Long Shadows*, on which Fullana plays both Baroque and modern violins. Then the Vivaldi *Four Seasons* CD took over.



Fullana said that when things picked up again, “It was like going from zero to 200. There were a ton of performances early in the season from June to the end of the Vivaldi tour with Apollo’s Fire in November. It was non-stop and very intense.”

Fullana illustrated his point with an anecdote. “I had the Austin Symphony season opener in September, and I had to play a different concerto three days later in Vancouver. After the concert, instead of going out to dinner, having a nightcap, and celebrating the week of work with colleagues and friends, I went back to the hotel, found a conference room, and practiced the next piece until four in the morning before my 6am flight.”

The Austin program featured the Lalo *Symphonie espagnole*, and the next concerto up would be Saint-Saëns No. 3, a piece Fullana said he hadn’t played in quite a few years. “There was something very exciting about the challenge of using the adrenaline and coming right back.”

I ended our conversation by asking what Francisco Fullana took away from his studies with Midori at Juilliard. “She’s amazing, and she’s been my musical mother and inspiration in so many ways,” he said. “She has such integrity as a musician but

also as a person, and she's devoted to making the world a better place. One of the biggest goals in my life is to aspire to do 10% of what she does."

Francisco Fullana will be featured in Apollo's Fire's local performances on March 18 and 22, and in New York on March 24. Find details in our [Concert Listings](#), and get tickets [here](#).

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