

Rock that CELLO!

Written by SARAH McCRAW
Wednesday, 03 April 2013 15:06

Grafton cellist Patrick Hoctor is proving that his instrument is as at home in rock 'n' roll as it is in classical music

Patrick Hoctor of Grafton has a busy schedule touring as the cellist with a folk-rock band that travels around the world.

Hoctor, 25, has been playing the cello since he was 5.



Although string instruments like the cello, violin and bass are typically associated with classical music, they are part of an emerging trend in the mainstream music world seen in rock bands like The Lumineers, Mumford & Sons and Coldplay, which all feature string instruments.

Hoctor, who played classical music growing up, joined the Milwaukee-based band Mike Mangione and The Union seven years ago.

“Not until I met Mike did I realize I don’t have to use the cello just to be in an orchestra,” Hoctor said. “I imagine kids who are playing cello in high school now are more aware of the possibilities because I think it is much more prevalent in popular music today.”

The unique tone of the cello caught the attention of Mangione, who asked Hoctor to join his band.

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“It wasn’t like Mike was thinking, ‘Oh cellos are in now. We’d better get a cello.’ He just liked the sound of it, and it fit really well,” Hoctor said.

Hoctor has traveled as far as Australia, the Philippines and Italy, as well as several cities along the East Coast, to play with The Union.

Although Hoctor has a bachelor’s degree in architecture from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, he never worked in his chosen field. Instead, his passion for performing has always pushed him towards a music career, he said.

Hoctor is also a liturgical musician for a church in Milwaukee, records instrumental backgrounds for individual artists and teaches cello to students throughout southeastern Wisconsin.

Watching his students, who range in age from 9 to 45, progress after each lesson is rewarding, Hoctor said.

“When they’ve practiced and they play something that sounds good and they know they were successful and get happy, you see it in their faces,” he said. “It’s a wonderful thing.”



Hoctor said the instrument teaches discipline and commitment. It takes students months to learn proper posture and hand position, as well as how to produce a quality tone.

“You can’t really teach yourself how to play,” he said. “You have to get a teacher and you have to really be committed to it.

“Anyone can sit down to a piano and make it sound beautiful. The tone is there for you already, same with the guitar. With string instruments like the cello, the viola and the violin, that’s what you’re spending years doing — learning how to make a beautiful tone. Then, you can start playing awesome songs.”

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In addition to playing with The Union, Hoctor performs in the indie-pop band Sulek, a group he started with friends while growing up in Wheaton, Ill. “It was very much the situation of, ‘OK I’ll play guitar and you play drums,’ and none of us knew these things, but we knew we wanted to have fun,” he said.

His wife Ruthie, 26, is a member of Sulek and the artist who created album covers for the two bands.

Hoctor has recorded several albums with both groups, but The Union’s music got the attention of Grammy-nominated music producer Bo Ramsey during a recording session in 2011.

Ramsey produced the group’s latest album, which will come out later this year. Hoctor said the album has a soulful sound with bluegrass undertones.

When he’s not on stage, Hoctor plays a cello that dates back to the 1860s, but on-stage he plays an electric cello.

The variety of music he plays in the two bands is part of the fun, Hoctor said.

“Each band is different. Sulek is more catchy and pop-like so it’s more instantly enjoyable,” he said. “Sulek is a guilty pleasure for me.

“With Mike and the Union, I think the melodies are awesome, but it takes a little more time for the lyrics to really soak in. Once they do, though, it hits somewhere deeper.

“When I started playing cello when I was 5, I did not think about, ‘Why am I doing this?’ But when I play a show with Mike, I feel a very deep sense of this is why I started playing cello — to be a part of this mission and to make music that can change peoples lives.”

Hoctor said performing allows him to experience music beyond traditional classic sounds.

“The idea of singing while playing the cello never crossed my mind, but with Mike I’m doing backup vocals and I’m playing the cello,” Hoctor said.

“It’s a beautiful instrument, so it’s a joy to be able to make beautiful music and to move people.”

Image Information: Grafton resident Patrick Hoctor (fourth from left) plays cello for the band

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Mike Mangione and The Union. Photo courtesy Joseph Kang