

Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg is famous for wearing her heart on her bow

By Laurel Kallenbach

Passion Play

Choose a single word to describe violinist Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg's life and music, and that word would be "passion." On stage, with the instrument tucked precariously under her chin, she grimaces and snaps her head, eyebrows jerking up and down. She hunches over the fiddle, stabbing at the strings with her bow during an intense passage. Yet, in a quieter movement, that once-violent bow now caresses the strings, and her face melts into a heart-breaking expression of sadness and vulnerability. Welcome to the always passionate, deeply emotional world of a uniquely talented musician who joins the Boulder Philharmonic in concert on February 21 and 22.

Known for her unconventional stage mannerisms, athletic stance, exuberant personality and trademark pants suits, Salerno-Sonnenberg truly pours body and soul into her music. And what's more, she lets the audience see it, refusing to hold back any of her electrifying spectrum of emotions in hang-on-to-your-seat performances.

"I can't help but *feel* more than anyone else," she confessed in the 1999 Academy Award-nominated documentary film about her life, *Speaking in Strings*. "Sometimes that's a blessing, sometimes a curse." The 42-year-old is still dogged by a 20-year label as the "bad girl" of the violin ("By now they should call me 'the bad woman,'" she quipped.), although that reputation seems unwarranted. Unlike a celebrity such as Madonna, who engineers a public persona, Salerno-Sonnenberg professes to be nothing more than herself. It just happens that "herself" doesn't match the stereotype of a sweet, demure violinist, which has upset the traditionally staid classical music world. Instead, she interprets violin music personally and passionately.

"I open up and reveal how *I* feel about a piece," she said. "That's my natural approach to making music. I played the same way when I was 6 years old — and I always will. I'm not insulated or isolated up there on stage; I invite the audience in. It's good for an audience to feel they're right there with you."

Salerno-Sonnenberg was born in Rome but emigrated to New York at age 8, when she began studying at the Curtis Institute of Music. Later she studied with Dorothy DeLay at the Juilliard School, debuted at Carnegie Hall when she was 19 and was awarded the prestigious 1999 Avery Fisher Prize. She has dozens of classical and cross-over recordings, including a recent album with Brazilian guitarists Sérgio and Odair Assad of Eastern European, Gypsy-inspired music. This January, she premiered Assad's Triple Concerto, called "Origins," and will give a number of recitals in coming months with the duo.

On the road ... again

A traveling troubadour's life is more than curtain calls and armfuls of roses, as Salerno-Sonnenberg will attest.

"The entertainment field is certainly not a humdrum existence, but it's still a difficult job — and it involves an enormous amount of traveling and tediousness," she said. "Sometimes it's overwhelming, and you get plain tired."

In *Speaking in Strings*, the camera joins her backstage at a Colorado Symphony Orchestra performance, played while she's sick with the flu. We hear her worry beforehand that she won't perform well, even fortified with a pharmacy of cold medicines — yet on to the stage she goes.

Peak Arts grant to help students attend concert.

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"I'm lucky to have this wonderful job rather than collecting tolls at the Lincoln Tunnel," she mused. "Yet, every time I put on makeup before stepping in the spotlight, I feel the pressure of people's expectations. It's taxing on your system when you add it up year after year after year."

What keeps her going? "In a live performance, anything can happen. That's golden — and that's why I do it," she said.

Salerno-Sonnenberg's frantic concert and travel schedule surely contributed to a particularly dark period of her life, beginning when she sliced off the tip of her left pinky finger while chopping onions for Christmas dinner in 1994. In the months after her reattachment surgery, she refingered her violin parts for only three fingers so she could resume concert appearances.

Despite a heroic public attitude, privately she was depressed. Devastated by a failed relationship, she tried to kill herself — saved when her gun miraculously jammed. Music helped her battle her way back into life, starting with an emotionally charged performance at Carnegie Hall just two weeks after her

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suicide attempt.

Looking back, Salerno-Sonnenberg feels blessed that her finger healed completely and that she has been given a second chance.

“Just knowing I got through those painful times gives me a sense of confidence and serenity that I couldn’t possibly attain any other way,” she said. “It took me a few years to come out of it, but I did it in the most healthy way. So, I’m grateful for everything that’s happened to get me here — and I just want to enjoy it.”

Rocky Mountain high

Colorado audiences have frequent opportunities to witness Salerno-Sonnenberg’s artistry, since she plays often with area orchestras and spends weeks each summer at the Aspen Music Festival. And it was in Aspen, when she was 14-year-old music student, that Salerno-Sonnenberg discovered a lifelong love — fishing.

The experience was coordinated by instructor Dorothy DeLay, who hired a guide to take her music students fishing.

“Here was a bunch of little violinists — half of whom didn’t even speak English — trying to fly-fish in a pristine mountain stream,” Salerno-Sonnenberg recalled. “Just as the guide told us to reel it in, I got a bite. I was so excited feeling the tug of a fish on the end of my line. Pardon the pun, but I was hooked.

“Nowadays, fishing is something I do to relax,” she said. “There’s something lovely about it. No phones, no nothing. Just fish.”

At her Boulder performance, Salerno-Sonnenberg will play two pieces — the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto and the Bach Concerto in A minor.

“The Mendelssohn is a masterpiece, and even after thousands of times, I just don’t get tired of playing it,” she said.

Performing Bach is another of her passions (there’s that word again!).

“If I had to play just one composer for the rest of my life, it would be Bach,” she said. “That concerto’s second movement is one of the most beautiful pieces of music I’ve ever heard. If you know anything about my playing, you know it will be a committed performance.”

*Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg joins the Boulder Philharmonic on Feb. 21 and 22 at Macky Auditorium. Call 303-449-1343 or visit www.peakarts.org for tickets. You can rent Paola di Florio’s highly recommended documentary, *Speaking in Strings*, from Video Station in Boulder.*