

Itzhak Perlman charms the Salk

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Violinist Itzhak Perlman speaks Thursday during a news conference at the Salk Institute. / photo by Howard Lipin * U-T San Diego

Curling his hand with a theatrical flourish, violinist Itzhak Perlman said, "I'm off to the plaza," then jetted away Thursday in an electric scooter.

He didn't get far before he turned his head and smiled, signaling that he was having a bit of fun on a sometimes sweet, sometimes serious day at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla.

Perlman traveled to La Jolla to give a recital in remembrance of the late Jonas Salk, who was born 100 years ago this fall. Salk developed the first safe and effective vaccine against polio, a disease that struck Perlman at age 4, after he had already started his career as a violinist. Perlman largely lost the use of his legs; he wears braces, and uses crutches and the scooter.

Thursday was a moment for mutual admiration; the institute awarded the 69-year-old Perlman the Salk Medal for Public Service, noting all that he has done to help wipe out the last vestiges of polio, and to encourage parents to have their children vaccinated.

Perlman took time to speak at length about his life and art, and to pose for photos on the "plah-zah," or the grand plaza that separates the Salk's two oldest laboratory buildings.

"1949 was when I contracted polio," said Perlman, who has silvery tufts of hair that are offset by dark, arch-like eyebrows. "My lifestyle as a child was, obviously, a little changed. But not that much. The only thing that my parents did was to move to a neighborhood where the school was about a block away.

"My parent's (attitude toward polio) was, always, they wish that it didn't happen," said Perlman, smiling as he recalled the memory. "As a result, they tried all sorts of cures. Which were obviously silly. Special diets. Eat a raw egg every morning. It was always a question of hope -- the hope that, oh my goodness, he's moving a toe that he didn't move two weeks ago."

Perlman wasn't fixated on polio, an infectious virus that killed and paralyzed hundreds of thousand of people in the U.S., particularly during the first half of the 20th century, before the vaccine was developed.

"I was busy, I was going to school, I was practicing three hours a day," Perlman said while sitting next to Salk President William Brody. "As a child, you get used to things very, very easily. It's not like somebody's 20 years-old and, suddenly, one day, they can't walk anymore. That's traumatic.

"When you're four, it is significant, but you get used to it. My parents (said) he's going to continue with his childhood and do whatever children do. In my case, it was practicing every day. Other kinds thought that was crazy. They thought, 'Could you imagine playing three hours a day instead of play outside?'"

The practice paid off. In 1958, Perlman made the first of many appearances on the Ed Sullivan Show and became an international sensation at the age of 13.

"(Sullivan's) show was truly a variety show," said Perlman. "There were no limitations as to who was going to be on that show. They had dogs jumping rope. He had wonderful ballet dancers. He had great Metropolitan Opera singers. It was great. I loved it."

Perlman flourished, establishing a career in which he's won Grammys, played for heads of state, recorded with great orchestras, and traveled the world. He's aware of how things could have turned out far differently.

"There's always instances where you hear somebody at the age of 12 or 13 and its phenomenal, but then they lose it eight, night years later," said Perlman, who also teaches music, conducts orchestras and, occasionally sings. Whenever we see someone who is really young and amazing, we always say, 'Oh my God, will they survive their gift?' About 90-percent don't

"When I hear somebody who is 11 or 12 I want to hear them play in an age appropriate way."

Perlman travels often, something that has become harder since the terrorist attacks on 9/11 due to increased security at airports.

"It's terrible, it's terrible, it's terrible," Perlman said Thursday during an otherwise playful 30 minutes of talking to the media. "I sometimes feel that terrorism actually succeeded when you go through all of the stuff you have to go through to get to the gate.

"(As a young man) I remember going from the house to the airport and allowing one hour. Half an to the airport, and half an hour you check your bag and go to the gate. Those days are gone forever. Today, for me, especially, it is a little bit weird. With my scooter I don't go through the little thing that shows whether you have metal on you. Obviously, with my braces (that would be a problem). I have to be checked manually. You've got enthusiastic people checking you. They always have to repeat (verbally) what they've going to do to you. I say you don't have to do that. They so no-no, legally I've got to repeat what I'm going to do to you. I'm going to touch your behind with the back of my hand and make sure that I don't grab you.

"I say, 'Just do it.'"

Perlman faced a far different problem when he was a young man. He had to prove that he was physically able to travel.

"I was told very, very early that people assumed that I would not be able to (perform worldwide) due to the travel,"

Perlman said. "I absolutely didn't understand that at all. I didn't take them seriously. But I did have to prove that I was able to go anywhere, and to physically do the traveling. That was a time when traveling was relatively easy. I just had to prove by deeds. If I could get into a place without any problems, that's my proof. If you look at early reviews, they always had to mention that I was walking on crutches, or in a chair. It was a pair of the review. And then it stopped because people got used to it."

Perlman's focus today is almost entirely on music, and the complex and confusing nature of talent.

"Everytime I think about people who have a certain talent, I'm always questioning where does this talent come from," Perlman said. "Is it a gift? What is it really? Is it something that you are born with? Why can certain people do things and others cannot? How can certain people hear in a certain way and somebody else says how do they do this. Maybe you can say it's from God. Yeah, but there's got to be an explanation. Exactly what makes somebody natural in math and somebody totally like me, "DUH".

He laughed at that, and the question that closed Thursday's news conference. Salk President William Brody was sitting next to him. He leaned in and said, "Do you get stage fright?"

"Yes," said Perlman. "It's part of the business. If you don't get it now, you'll get it later."