

# French horn phenom performs

■ Eric Ruske is a cross between Franz Liszt, Elvis and a smart-aleck bullfighter. And he's a fine musician to boot.

By Chris Shull

The Wichita Eagle

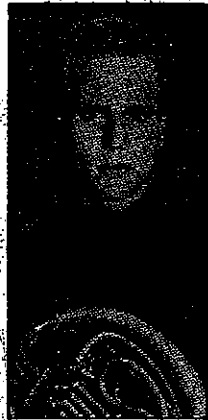
**W**hen I first heard French hornist Eric Ruske play at a faculty recital at the Cleveland Institute of Music around

1987, Ruske didn't walk out on stage as much as he burst in from the wings.

Wearing boots, skintight black pants and a black short-sleeved, long-sleeved shirt (if memory serves), he whirled into place by the piano as the applause faded and women sighed. He looked down slightly, gathering focus; his long, wavy blond hair fell into his face. With an exhale of breath, he cocked a leg, thrust his French horn straight out in front of him, jerked his head back so his locks flew back over his shoulders, gave a wink to his pianist, and blew.

I wanted to hate the man standing there on stage like a cross between Franz Liszt, Elvis and some smart-aleck Spanish matador. Ruske was then 21 but was already a phenomenon in the classical music world. He had been appointed principal French horn of the Cleveland Orchestra at the unheard-of age of 20; he was on the faculty of one of the most prestigious music schools in America, teaching students his own age how to play so that they, too, might one day sit in a professional orchestra.

That afternoon in Cleveland, I wanted Ruske's mythical reputation to be a house of



**Eric Ruske**

is the featured soloist with the Wichita Symphony this weekend.

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# RUSKE

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cards. I wanted him to be bad. But as his first notes soared into the hall, sound effortless and full floating on phrases passionate and alive, I fell instantly and totally in love.

Eric Ruske is not as good as his resume and his reputation says he is; he is better. When he plays the Gliere French Horn Concerto with the Wichita Symphony this weekend, he will blow you away and melt your heart at the same time.

I've heard Ruske, now 35, in every phase of his legendary career. He played with the Cleveland Orchestra from 1985 to 1988, then impetuously left to pursue a solo career. (Impetuously to those of us dreaming of getting an orchestra job.) He moved to Boston in 1988, within a few months landed a job in the Empire Brass Quintet and spent the next six years playing 70 to 80 nights a year with that ensemble.

Ruske, who currently lives in Boston and teaches at Boston University, has a charismatic command over the sometimes fractious French horn, a fantastic technical facility paired with majestic musical instincts. He plays concertos several times a year with the world's finest orchestras and presents solo recitals in the world's most prestigious concert halls.

"I wouldn't trade places with anybody on the planet," Ruske said. "Every piece I play is something I've chosen."

The skills of the soloist, chamber musician and orchestra section player are as diverse as the demands placed on players of the different positions on a basketball team; Ruske has mastered each type of playing while always letting musicianship — not "chops" or technique — prevail.

"Everything he played was directly from the heart," said Jeff Curnow, a trumpet player with the Empire Brass Quintet and Ruske's roommate on the road. "He would go out to the

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*Eric Ruske*

front of the stage, shut his eyes and start playing. The place could have caught fire and he would not have been bothered by it."

Curnow, who currently plays principal trumpet with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and who played second trumpet in the Wichita Symphony back in 1982-83, recalled that Ruske's complete involvement with his horn extended well beyond the concert stage.

"If we stopped over for lunch somewhere and Eric needed to practice, he would just take off into a parking lot," Curnow said. "He'd get his horn out, if it was sunny he would take off his shirt, he'd walk out in the middle of the parking lot with his French horn and just start practicing."

"People would drive by, stop and check it out: Look! There's a half-naked guy playing Bach in the middle of a parking lot."

The travel schedule on the road was often hectic; the members of the Empire Brass Quintet would snatch practice time whenever they could get it.

"We were up in first class on an airplane one time and we were sitting on a runway waiting and waiting and

waiting, and we had to run through this piece of music," Curnow remembered. "So we pulled our horns out and started playing. We ran through a couple tunes. The airplane was ecstatic; the passengers completely dug it."

Working with the Cleveland Orchestra and Empire Brass, Ruske constantly found inspiration from his fellow musicians, players who spurred him to greater heights of artistic intensity and integrity.

"I've been around such great players, I've learned so much from so many people, that what you want to do on a concert, what you want to play, has become so much more defined," Ruske said.

For Ruske, that now means concentrating on the solo repertoire, not a large library of music for the French horn but certainly a noble one. The Gliere concerto is a definitive work for the instrument, requiring lush, romantic phrasing and astounding technical virtuosity.

Teaching and concertizing is the latest chapter in the musical life of Eric Ruske. But his indomitable and adventuresome musical spirit will surely inspire some new course. He has already commissioned new music; already he is seeking means of artistic expression beyond the concert hall.

"There is nothing in my life about which I can complain now," Ruske said. "If I wake up and I'm bummed out, I can't point a finger at anyone but myself. It's amazing."

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