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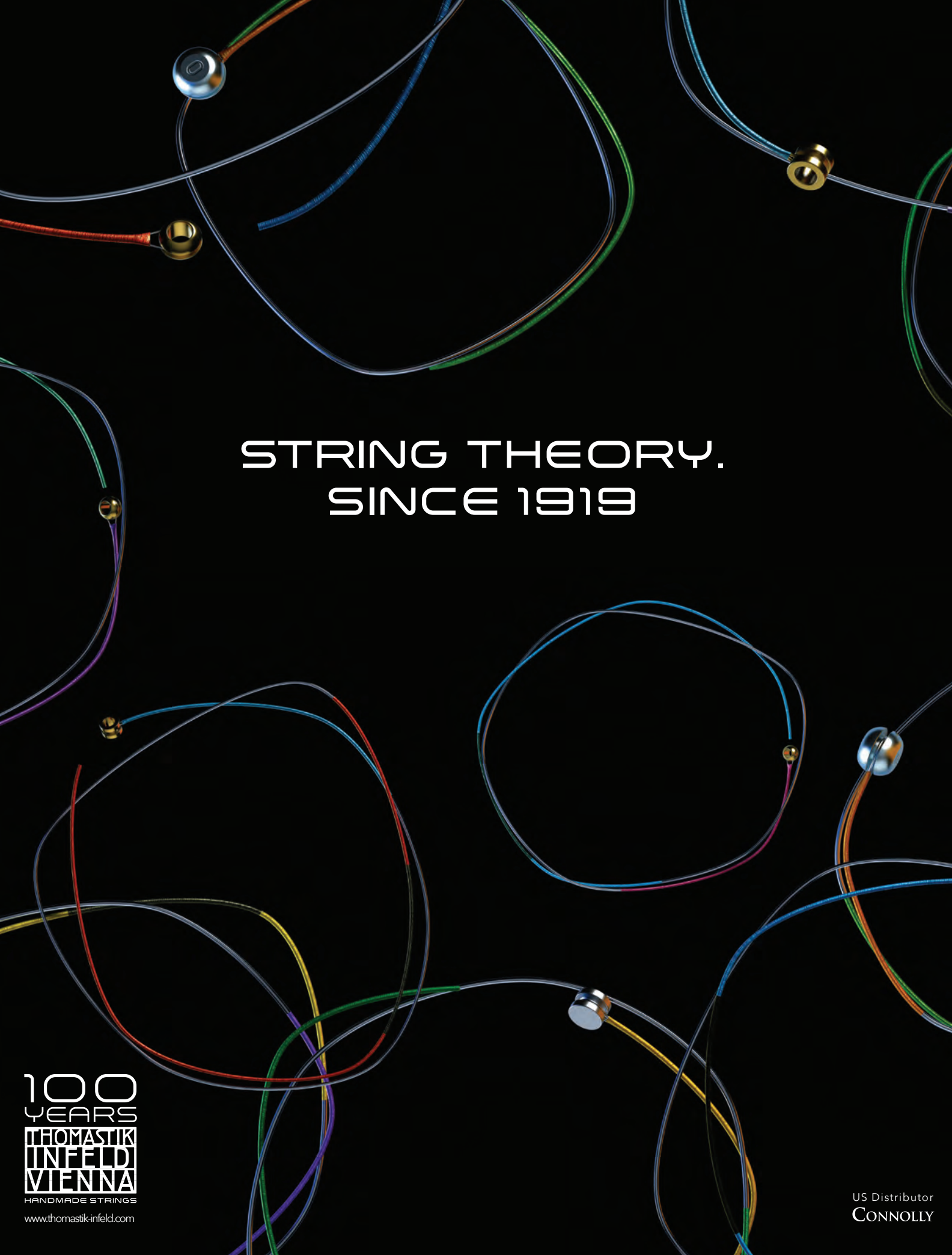
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Black Violin

It's probably fair to say that very few of us will feel the exhilaration that comes from dunking a basketball after being catapulted into the air by an elephant. And that's OK. The subjects of Black Violin's video "Showoff," from new album *Take the Stairs,* are all performing various feats of derring-do that most mortals would find extraordinary. But the two string players that make up Black Violin—violinist Kev Marcus and violist Wil B—insist that, while the performers in their video certainly are extraordinary, that sense of exhilaration is available to everyone in his or her own way. What is it you love and fills you with joy? Do it. Be bold, be positive—be extraordinary, too.

The duo, who have been exploring hip-hop and other contemporary styles through the lens of their classical training for some time, have long been held up as inspiration to young string players for their creativity, collaborative spirit, and positive message. In an increasingly fractured world, they speak of hope, of changing the world by living your dreams. And that, they say, is the crux of their new album. David Templeton gets the story in our cover feature.

Speaking of dreams, when the Miró Quartet began as a student project at Oberlin Conservatory 25 years ago, little did they imagine that they'd make it this long—strong musical personalities made for frequent arguments. But instead of sabotaging their efforts, their passion fueled their ascent, enabling the ensemble to explore so many points of view that their music making remained fresh and alive. With so much to celebrate, they've embarked on an exciting season, including new Beethoven releases (completing their recorded cycle) and a project that honors the history of the string quartet in America. It is a project that appeals to violist John Largess' interest in archeology.

I hope you enjoy these features, as well as the many other exciting stories you'll find in this issue, including a primer on historical violin maker Gasparo da Salò in the Vintage Instruments & Bows special section; a feature about ensemble players who go solo; a lesson about amplifying your acoustic instrument; a few holiday gift ideas; and so much more.

As always, I'd love to know what you think.

—Megan Westberg

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Ray Chen

COURTESY OF RAY CHEN

EXPLORE

November 6, 8 PM: Violinist **Ray Chen** will join the **Los Angeles Philharmonic** as a part of the Colburn Celebrity Series. Chen will perform alongside pianist Julio Elizalde for a program that includes Grieg's Sonata for Violin & Piano No. 2 in G, Op. 13; Saint-Saëns' Sonata for Violin & Piano No. 1 in D minor, Op. 75; Bach's Chaconne from Partita No. 2 for Solo Violin, BWV 1004; and more. 111 S. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, California

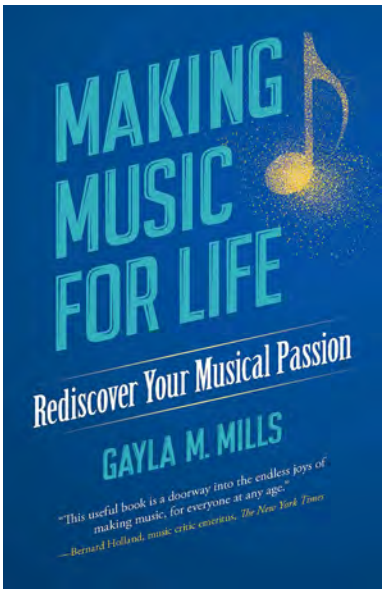
November 29–30, 8 PM: Violinist **Gil Shaham** will join the **Philadelphia Orchestra** in BeethovenNOW. The evening will be under the direction of Susanna Mälkki, who will kick off the evening with Betsy Jolas' *A Little Summer Suite*. Next up, Shaham will tackle Beethoven's only violin concerto—what he calls "an amazing trip." 1 S. Broad St., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Sheku Kanneh-Mason

LARS BORGES

December 3, 8 PM: Cellist and BBC Young Musician winner **Sheku Kanneh-Mason** will perform alongside his sister, pianist Isata Kanneh-Mason, with the **Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra**. Sheku, who skyrocketed to fame after performing at Meghan Markle and Prince Harry's wedding, will perform Barber and Rachmaninov's cello sonatas. The program also includes works by Beethoven and Lutoslawski. 200 S. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, California

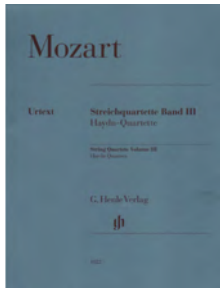
December 5, 9:45 AM: Join the **New York Philharmonic** in an open rehearsal—over two hours with the orchestra as they work with music director **Jaap Van Zweden**. Repertoire includes Beethoven's Symphony No. 2; a New York premiere and co-commission of Steve Reich's Music for Ensemble and Orchestra; and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4. 10 Lincoln Center Plaza, New York, New York



RECENT BOOKS & MUSIC

Gayla M. Mills' *Making Music For Life: Rediscover Your Musical Passion* combines both inspirational and practical ideas for overcoming musical setbacks. The book is geared toward musicians of any genre and age, and hopes to ignite a lifelong passion through various means, including tips on how to explore musical communities, gigging, camps, and more. (Dover Publications)

Following in **Joseph Haydn**'s string-quartet writing footsteps, **Mozart** wrote his own Haydn Quartets, which he described as "the fruit of a long and laborious effort." In G. Henle Verlag's latest edition, all four parts for string quartet are meticulously laid out and edited by Wolf-Dieter Seiffert. (G. Henle Verlag)



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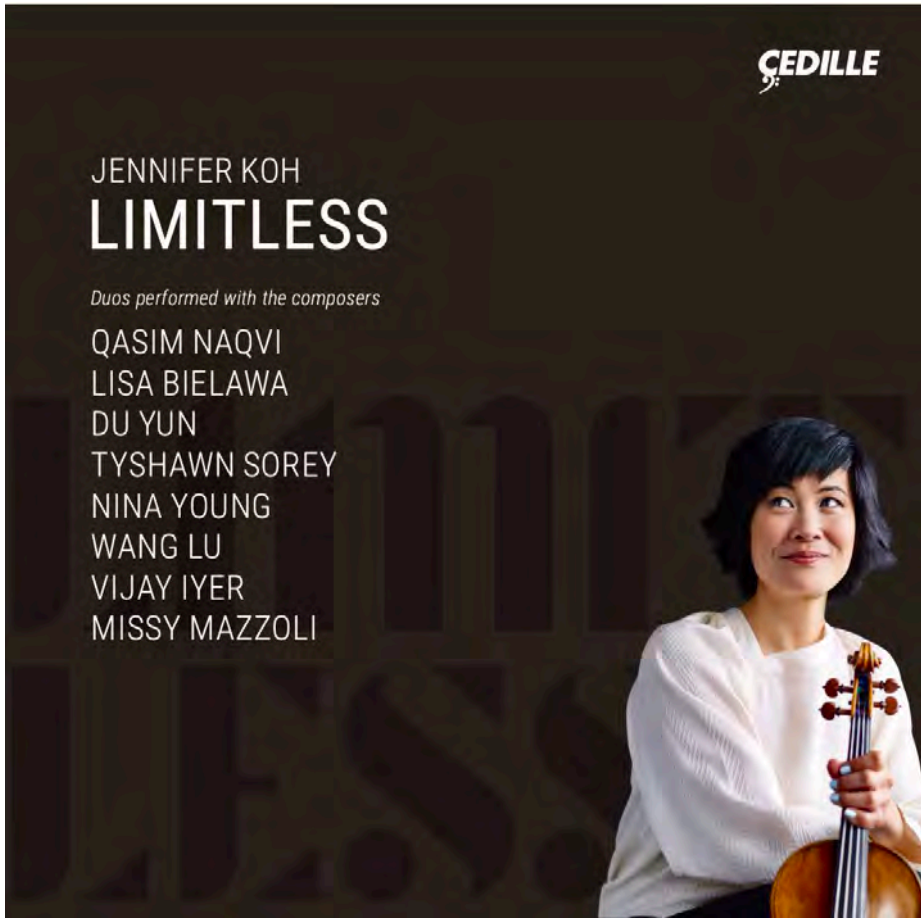
I'm so grateful. So many times in classical music, people ask us: What do we do for our communities? What is the purpose of music? I am so moved by the generosity of these composers.

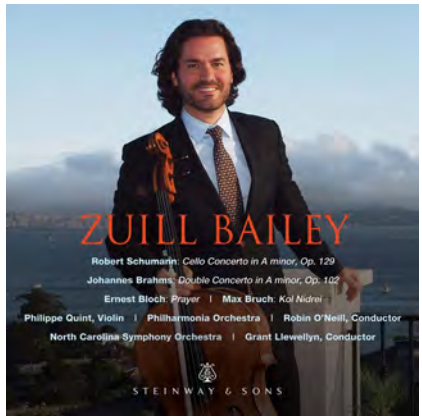
Jennifer Koh describes how rewarding collaborating can be in her previous project, *Shared Madness*

RECENT RECORDINGS



Violinist **Jennifer Koh**'s latest album *Limitless* is based on her 2018 project of the same name, where the violinist explored musical collaboration with various contemporary composers. The two-disc album presents all duos: Koh performs with the composers themselves in various world-premiere recordings. (Cedille)

Violinist **Tessa Lark** released her solo debut album *Fantasy*, which features a selection of fantasies and rhapsodies by Telemann, Schubert, Ravel, and Kreisler. Lark is joined by pianist Amy Yang, and also records her own composition *Appalachian Fantasy*, a nod to her first musical influences: bluegrass, Appalachian, and American folk styles. (First Hand Records)



Zuill Bailey's *Schumann/Brahms/Bloch/Bruch* finds the cellist performing alongside the **Philharmonia Orchestra**, violinist **Philippe Quint**, and the **North Carolina Symphony Orchestra**. The recording celebrates the Wimbledon International Music Festival's 10th anniversary with Schumann's Cello Concerto, Brahms' Double Concerto, and more. (Steinway & Sons)

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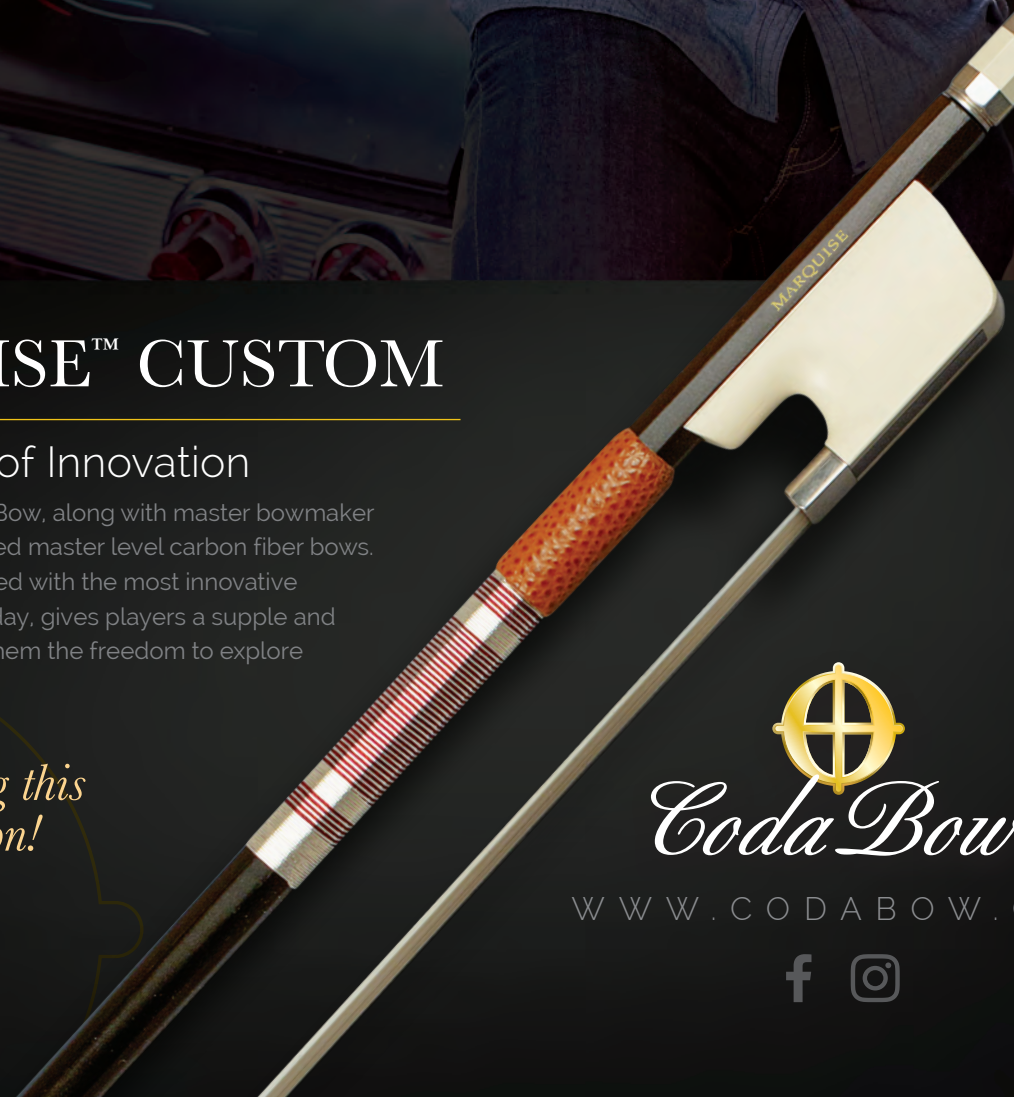

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Laura Kukkonen and Ray Chen

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5 MINUTES WITH VIOLINIST LAURA KUKKONEN

By Laurence Vittes

On a summer night in early August, Laura Kukkonen performed the first violin solo in the first movement of Bach's Double Violin Concerto with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Ray Chen at the Hollywood Bowl. The 17 year old had won first prize in "Play with Ray," an international skills-based talent competition.

Together with the other two finalists, Kukkonen, whose regular instrument was made by Joseph Gagliano in Naples in 1792, played on a rare Guadagnini, and attended master classes and concerts in the days leading up to the concert.

More than 800 applicants from ages 6 to 76, from 73 countries (Kukkonen is from Finland) on six continents, submitted written essays and videos of themselves performing in hopes of a chance to play alongside superstar violinist Chen. *Strings* caught up with Kukkonen as she was underway with the new semester.

When you applied, what video did you post?

I decided to participate in the competition right after Ray announced it on his Instagram account in March. I sent in my application just before the deadline at the beginning of May, so I practiced about a month before applying. I posted a video that I created for the competition where I played first violin solo in the first movement of Bach's Double Violin Concerto. In the video, I also had a quartet play the orchestra part.

How did you create the video?

I have always considered myself more of a chamber musician, so I knew that I wanted to include not only myself playing in the video, but also my communication with the orchestral part. I formed a string quartet with my friends, practiced with them a few times and explained my vision of the piece. The filming was done by a friend who had a professional camera and microphones, and who did all the technical work. I also rented a church near my house for the filming, because I think Bach must be played mostly there.

What was your essay about?

The essay was about my relationship with music: an introduction, biography, and an

explanation of my musical approach using Bach's music as an example.

At what point did you realize that this might actually happen?

I was quite confident after I sent my application because I really liked the chamber music that I used in the video. But after I heard that there were over 800 applicants, I was quite sure that I wouldn't make it. It took me completely by surprise when I got the email about me being a finalist.

How did you prepare for the performance before you left Helsinki?

I learned both solo parts, and actually performed a concert where I played the second solo violin. I also analyzed the piece carefully and learned the orchestral parts to fully understand the piece. I think it's very important because Bach's music is very conversational and you can fulfill it only by knowing what others do besides the solo.

Did you get coaching from your teacher at the Sibelius Academy?

I didn't get coaching from my lovely professor Réka Szilvay, because I kept my participation a secret. I didn't even tell my mother. I think I wanted to prove to myself that I could do something completely on my own and be confident about it.

What was the audition process like in Los Angeles?

We had to play a piece of our own choice during a masterclass with Ray, which was kind of the *final*. I played Szymanowski's *La Fontaine d'Arethuse*, and then the solo part of the first movement from Bach's Double Violin Concerto with Ray.

What were your coachings with Chen like?

We concentrated on small details and tried to get the best possible sound from the violin. Ray with just the simplest suggestions helped me to discover new sides of my own violin, and also of the Guadagnini that was loaned to me for the concert.

What was the process of choosing your violin and bow?

After the master class, we had an opportunity to try three Guadagnini violins from different decades from Tarisio Auctions. I liked the one from 1775 because it felt right in my hand. I liked its pure, but at the same time soft and singing sound.

Did you know you were going to play it at the Bowl?

The next day, which was the day before the performance, we had a rehearsal with Ray and that's when I was asked if I wanted to play the Guadagnini onstage. I, of course, couldn't resist and was very happy and surprised by his offer. I had to practice on it until quite late at night so I could get used to it as quickly as possible.

How much time did you rehearse, and what was it like?

We rehearsed with Ray a day before the concert and then played through a few times on the day of the concert. I got to practice with the L.A. Phil on the day of the concert for about 15–20 minutes, because Ray had to rehearse Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* with them. I enjoyed those 15 minutes of practice and noticed that they were very

quick to respond to our ideas, and I was enjoying the chamber music that we made together with the orchestra.

What was it like playing with Ray Chen?

It was so joyful and encouraging. I learned many things from him, and not only about music. Ray is a very genuine person and I will never thank him enough for the opportunity that he gave me. I take inspiration and motivation from that event on a daily basis.

Did you have to deal with any stage fright?

I was the most nervous before the master class. It was the crucial point of my future in the competition. However, I was not nervous before the Hollywood Bowl performance. Usually I am more afraid of small halls, because I am more intimate with the audience and afraid to fail in front of them. In this case, on the Hollywood Bowl's giant stage, I felt calm and just enjoyed playing next to Ray. When I got a standing ovation after the performance, it was one of the happiest moments of my life. I loved the audience, and hopefully they felt it.

Did you get to know the other two finalists?

I was nearly always going somewhere together with the other finalists, so we really got to know each other. I really hope we will meet in the future, surrounded by music.

What's next on your agenda?

I have to make a decision about where I want to study next, because I am starting my bachelor's degree next year. I have to apply to the music universities and practice hard to get in!

VIOLINIST RAY CHEN ON SHARING THE STAGE

The three finalists and I had such an incredible week together. This wasn't just like any other competition. The goal for "Play with Ray" has always been about participation and the joy in music, and while there are definitely moments to be serious, it's also important for everyone to connect and experience the fun outside of music, too.

We spent many hours in the classroom and at meals discussing sound, and violin playing, and we also went to Universal Studios and had our fair share of screaming from the rollercoasters. I'm so glad that these young, talented women were able to have an experience that hopefully inspires them to not only work hard, but to also one day continue giving back to future generations in classical music.

—Ray Chen

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A THOUGHTFUL NOD TO PAST MASTERS

JEFF WILSON

The Miró Quartet celebrates 25 years with Beethoven and a deep dive into the history of the string quartet in America *By Thomas May*

When the Miró Quartet started out in October 1995, a prediction that it would be thriving a quarter century on must have sounded wildly optimistic. "Because we were such different personalities in terms of musical approach and demeanor, we had a lot of fights and disagreements in the first couple of years," recalls cellist Joshua Gindele, who, together with first violinist Daniel Ching, founded the ensemble as a student project at Oberlin Conservatory. "We spent a lot of time talking and actually had trouble finding time to play."

Gindele suggested their name after being impressed by a quote from the Spanish Surrealist painter and sculptor Joan Miró: "The works must be conceived with fire in the soul but executed with clinical coolness." Back then, the Mirós were champing at the bit to emulate the discipline and achievements of such "elders" as the Juilliard and Cleveland quartets. Little did they foresee that they would themselves become admired mentors—a trusted source of wisdom and advice for a new generation of chamber musicians just as eager and ambitious as they had been in those early, hungry years.

The Miró Quartet is celebrating its 25th anniversary season with two major undertakings. The first neatly converges with the music world's Beethoven-at-250 tributes—and at the same time underscores the Miró's own artistic evolution. Since its debut release in 2005, an account of Beethoven's Op. 18 quartets, the ensemble has gradually worked its way through the composer's complete quartet cycle. Its most recent additions came in 2018, and on November 15, Pentatone will issue a comprehensive box set that includes three quartets the ensemble is releasing for the first time (Ops. 127, 132, and 135).

The ensemble's second initiative, the Miró Quartet Archive Project, is an ambitious ode to the American performance history of the string quartet itself as a medium. It involves recreations of historical programs played by three legendary quartets during the first half of the 20th century.

Secret of Longevity

So how did the Mirós arrive at this milestone? Violist John Largess gave up his job as principal violist with the Charleston Symphony—his second out of music school—when he was invited to join the ensemble in 1997 (replacing Cathy Basrak, who took on the position of assistant principal violist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra). He remembers that at the 1998 Aspen Festival, "we were constantly having arguments. A lot of our mentors talked about what being malleable in a quartet means. You need to be curious about what your colleagues are doing, but you also have to be true to yourself as an individual."

They took a kind of homeopathic approach. "We learned that if we do really want to get along, we have to practice not getting along. And then we developed a lot of tools to get along," Largess says. They also learned from one group of mentors—the Juilliard Quartet, with whom they did a residency at the end of the Robert Mann era—to dial down the pressure by questioning whether "there really is 'a right way' to play a piece. We got good at doing different peoples' ideas and discovering new ways over different performances. You just had to be super-passionate about playing it."

> **"How do you bring someone's vanished life back to the present? That is what I loved about archeology."**
>
> *—John Largess*

"We decided to pay attention to what was keeping us from playing. And we discovered that being flexible around everyone's needs personally and musically was the key to longevity and success," explains Gindele. "To this day, we are more focused on peoples' happiness and allowing time for family, children, personal well-being. If that means we have to play a little less repertory or take a little more time off than other quartets choose to, we do that."

Their method has resulted in a remarkable degree of stability, with just three changes of personnel since the Mirós started out. Early on, Sandy Yamamoto replaced Jennifer Choi as second violinist, and after Largess came onboard in 1997, the lineup remained unchanged until Yamamoto—who is married to Daniel Ching—decided to retire from the ensemble in 2011 to focus on raising the couple's children. William Fedkenheuer was chosen to take her place following a rigorous, nine-month search.

Such consistency, Gindele asserts, results from "the culture we have cultivated in the group. Our guiding principle is that if we are passionate about something and love it, we will do it."

But the initial imperative was to establish their credentials. For their first five years or so, the Mirós focused on mastering the repertoire dictated by the competition circuit. Those efforts earned them one resounding success after another: first prizes at Banff (1998) and Naumburg (2000) and an Avery Fisher Career Grant in 2005 (the first chamber-music ensemble to be so awarded).

In 2003, on an invitation from former Eastman dean Robert Freeman, the Miró Quartet inaugurated its ongoing tenure as faculty string quartet-in-residence at the Sarah and Ernest Butler School of Music at the University of Texas at Austin. "We've found Austin an incredible place to live. The institution has been incredibly supportive," Gindele says. "It allows us to enjoy our family lives and teach. And the pace is a little slower than it is on either of the coasts"—which makes for a good grounding after touring.

The fact that the Mirós still exude a remarkably youthful aura is likely attributable at least in part to their regular interaction with students. "We're doing this because we love it," says Gindele. "We want to bring all our voices and curiosity to these pieces. You can be assured that if you hear us play a piece twice, it won't be the same. Our relationship to art and to each other is shifting and alive."

Synchronicity of Anniversaries: Beethoven's Quartets

The Mirós' interaction with Beethoven offers an ideal frame in which to observe this aesthetic of malleability in action. Early in their career, the ensemble decided to record all of Beethoven's quartets at roughly the same age as the composer when he wrote them. The Op. 18 quartets (with Sandy Yamamoto on second violin—William Fedkenheuer plays on all of the other quartets) served as the vehicle

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Miró Quartet in 2001: Daniel Ching, left, John Largess, Sandy Yamamoto, and Joshua Gindele

CHRISTIAN STEINER

for their debut release in 2005, after which the musicians waited until 2012 to record the middle-period Razumovsky Quartets, Op. 59.

Explains Gindele: "We thought maybe we could capture some of the energy of the early quartets by recording them while in our late 20s, the age Beethoven was when he composed them." By the same token, he's convinced that it would have been a mistake to record the late quartets so young—especially without "the luxury of being able to record the whole cycle twice, like the Guarneri or Tokyo. I think at the time we lacked a rooted knowledge of Beethoven's writing."

If you look back at Rob Cowan's *Gramophone* review of their first release (the Op. 18 quartets), he discerningly predicted this process of unfolding: "Whichever way you react to this or that passing detail, one thing's for sure: They never sound studio-bound or stilted. The Mirós' approach to these epoch-making masterpieces is consistently animated and imaginative, often keenly driven though, nearly always dispatched with a light touch . . . . [T]heir playing suggests huge potential. All that's needed is a little time to settle."

Since the middle quartets, the Mirós have allowed for some time compression and followed a pattern of interspersing the later Beethoven quartets with recordings of Schubert. Still, the entire odyssey has ended up spanning 14 years up through the release of the completed set this November. In more recent years, the ensemble has recorded in Bastyr University Chapel—just north of Seattle, a space with acoustics that have become popular for film soundtracks. The earlier recordings have been remastered for the Pentatone box set.

The greatest benefit of this prolonged process, according to Gindele, is that it feeds off the musicians' persistent curiosity. "Every time we come back to a piece, we devote a lot of time to re-exploring it. We give ourselves time to relearn quartets, like Op. 127 and 132, that we've played in live performance. Time and experience bring different perspectives. Not necessarily better, but it allows us to discover new things in the quartets and to approach them with flexibility."

When performing the complete cycle—as they are doing over the course of this season in Portland, Seattle, and elsewhere—the Mirós also prefer the chronological approach (which takes into account the order of their composition, not publication number).

Largess points out that this has the advantage of emphasizing the role of the quartets in Beethoven's personal life. "So much about the quartets is personal and contains these authentic emotions. It might not be narrative, but it is so personal in the way it relates to different times of his life. So you find him trying to show off his charming, virtuosic wit at the Op. 18 age, when he was not at all the person he was in the late quartets, frustrated with his relationships. Beethoven was sick a lot in the two years at the end of his life. He didn't necessarily know death was looming, but there's a lot more awareness of the mystical, transcendent, and sorrowful in these late pieces."

The Miró Quartet Archive Project

The prospect of reaching the quarter-century milestone inspired the Mirós to reflect on how they got started and became such a success. That meant thinking of "our debts of gratitude," Gindele says, "and of


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Kneisel Quartet

the lineage of mentorship for classical music in America—especially for the touring string quartet—stretching back two generations ago, to around the turn of the century, when our teachers' teachers were pursuing their careers."

The musicians developed the Miró Quartet Archive Project as a way to celebrate not just their own past but their sense of connectedness to formative mentors and to the rich history of the string-quartet medium itself. "Live chamber music is a tradition that has passed from one generation to another," observes Largess. He mentions the pivotal roles played by the Juilliard and Cleveland quartets, as well as invaluable lessons learned from the Emersons, Orions, Leon Fleisher, and Isaac Stern. "You can't really learn it from reading a book or watching a video or listening to a recording. We want to pay tribute to this concept of mentorship and the unbroken tradition."

In his case, during his youth in Boston, Largess had the opportunity to study with Eugene Lehner, one of the violists of the Kolisch Quartet, who created the viola part of Bartók's String Quartet No. 5 for its world premiere at the Library of Congress in April 1935. That historic performance is one of three programs covered by the Archive Project—each representing a different, historically important string quartet—that the Mirós are "re-enacting" at different venues throughout this season (see sidebar).

"Lehner was very articulate, a great gentleman," recalls the violist. "He challenged us and had such specific ideas of what the music should sound like. But I was so young and callow then, I didn't have anything to compare it to. As we've been thinking about our 25th anniversary, it really energized the quartet to talk about this long-living tradition. Most people remember the great quartets of the 1950s and '60s. But what about their teachers, before the Second World War? We started thinking about how that was important to us and how we could create something in a concert setting that could give us a chance to explore that."

As a student of classical archeology at Yale, Largess developed a keen appreciation of what can be gained by digging into the musical past. He believes that the musician's task goes well beyond revealing "the notes on the page or even the emotions in the music. How do you bring someone's vanished life back to the present? That is what I loved about archeology."

The Archive Project comprises three characteristic programs. The earliest (1910) is from the Boston-based Kneisel Quartet (1885–1917), friends of Dvořák who were the first professional touring American string quartet. Next (1929) is a program from the

THE ARCHIVE PROJECT HISTORICAL PROGRAMS

Kneisel Quartet (January 28, 1910, at the Schubert Club in St. Paul, Minnesota)
Mozart: Quartet in B-flat major, K. 458 ("Hunt")
Glière: Quartet in A major, Op. 2; III. Andante con variazioni
Franck: String Quartet in D major; II. Scherzo: Vivace
Servais: *Fantasie sur deux Airs Russes,* Op. 13
Schubert: Quartet in D minor, D. 810 ("Death and the Maiden")

Flonzaley Quartet (April 7, 1929, Coleman Chamber Music Association in Pasadena, California)
Mozart: Quartet in D major, K. 575
Bloch: String Quartet No. 1; III. Pastorale
Smetana: Quartet No. 1 in E minor, "From My Life"
Encores
Traditional (arr. Pochon): "Deep River"
Dohnányi: Scherzo
Traditional (arr. Pochon): "Irish Cradle Song"

Kolisch Quartet (April 8, 1935, at the Coolidge Auditorium of the Library of Congress in Washington, DC)
Beethoven: Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 130, with Grosse Fuge, Op. 133
Berg: Lyric Suite
Bartók: Quartet No. 5 (world premiere)

Flonzaley Quartet (1902–29), a privately funded ensemble that became the first American quartet to record in the 1920s. "They were the first classical musicians to be heard on American radio along with the Metropolitan Opera," Largess says.

The third program (1935) contains the above-mentioned Bartók premiere by the Kolisch Quartet (1921–44), which originated in Vienna and emigrated to the US after Hitler's rise to power. Closer in aesthetic to current programming styles, the Kolisch specialized in "a 'modern' presentation of the Beethoven quartets," according to the Mirós, by being "one of the first quartets to play Beethoven's metronome markings and to perform the *Grosse Fuge* in concert."

Anne MacLean, senior producer for concerts and special projects at the Library of Congress, says that the Library's Coolidge Auditorium, where the Kolisch concert took place, is "one of the oldest chamber series in the country [begun in 1925] and one of the most famous in the world for chamber music. [The auditorium was] built with string chamber music in mind and—what was extremely unusual at the time—involved professional acousticians."

On December 18, the Mirós will perform in the Library of Congress' annual Antonio Stradivari Memorial concert. MacLean explains that in the mid-1930s, the Library was gifted with a set of Stradivari instruments—three violins, a viola, and a cello—"which became the nucleus of a major string collection here. In those days, it was rare to have such instruments available to play for visiting artists." For this performance, the Mirós will play the bouquet-like Kneisel program of 1910, which they also presented in October at Carnegie Hall.

One of the most intriguing discoveries of the Archive Project is how programming models have changed. This is most evident in the 1910 Kneisel program. "They were not shy about cherry picking little vignettes they loved and putting them on programs," says Gindele, referring to single-movement excerpts they knew would delight audiences, such as the selections from Glière and Franck. The Kneisel would regularly give a spotlight to cellist Alwin Schroeder, a German-American celebrity player of the era from the Boston Symphony. Gindele explains that in the first half of their programs, the Kneisel would send Schroeder out to play a solo "or something with him and a pianist. When we did this program in Austin over the summer, I had to swallow a lump in my throat and come out to play a virtuoso solo showpiece—*Fantasie sur Deux Airs Russes*—by the Belgian composer Adrien-François Servais that they liked to include."

Looking back over this tradition, says Largess, "re-sensitized us to how rigid and unimaginative chamber programming has become. The reality is there are a million ways to do programming. In fact, for most of the last 200 years, it was different from what we're used to. That makes us appreciate what a wonderful time we live in for the string quartet, when programming philosophies are again being questioned and changing today with the call for more diverse voices." ■

CHANGE THE WORLD

BLACK VIOLIN LAUNCHES A NEW
A WORLDWIDE TOUR, AND ONE V

BY DAVID TEMPLETON

ALBUM,
ERY BIG MESSAGE

Black Violin: Violist Wil B, left, and violinist Kev Marcus

COLIN BRENNAN

"We can play songs that make you move, and we can play songs that make you cry, and all of that is great," says violinist Kev Marcus (the stage name of Kevin Sylvester) of the acclaimed, Florida-based classical/hip-hop/jazz duo Black Violin. "But if we can make you think," he adds, "well, that's even better."

Along with violist Wil B (aka Wilner Baptiste), Black Violin—named for the 1972 album by legendary musician Stuff Smith—was officially born in 2004, originally playing popular hip-hop tunes on the violin and viola. The two friends had initially met in 1996, introduced on the first day of orchestra class at Dillard High School for the Performing Arts. Later, in college—Florida International University for Marcus, Florida State for Wil B—the duo began perfecting their sound, an energizing blend of musical styles that showcased the players' classical training while expanding into an array of other popular styles. Performances alongside Alicia Keys and the Wu Tang Klan helped propel the duo into the public consciousness, further fueled by collaborations with such artists as Kanye West, Aerosmith, Tom Petty, and others. Their first album, *Black Violin*, was released in 2006, and was followed by *Classically Trained* in 2012 and *Stereotypes* in 2015.

Black Violin's newest album, *Take the Stairs*, available November 1, comes after months of rising anticipation spurred, in part, by the summertime release of a video for spectacular instrumental "Showoff." In the attention-grabbing video, Marcus and Wil B definitely do show off, masterfully, scorching their way through the electrifying composition between shots of other folks showing off in equally breathtaking ways. A man in a wheelchair does power pull-ups, chair and all. A very pregnant ballet dancer does dizzying pirouettes. A woman does a blinding-fast dance routine with what appears to be a light saber. A shirtless man does gravity-defying cartwheels at neck-breaking speed on a lawn while another guy does a running backflip through a series of hoops suspended above the ground, and lands on his hands. A bunch of kids strut their stuff on the drums, the guitar, and yes, the violin. There's even a man with a basketball pulling off a slam-dunk after being catapulted through the air . . . by an elephant.

"Some of that on the video is just mind-blowing," says Wil B with a laugh. "I mean, I can play the viola, but those people . . . it's amazing what some people are capable of, which, to be honest, has always been a big part of our message."

From the beginning, Black Violin has adopted a strategy that combines touring and performing (about 200 shows a year) with educational work, tirelessly teaming up with schools and performing-arts centers wherever they appear. It's a natural fit, since parents have been pointing to Black Violin as inspiration for their kids ever since the duo's very first appearance with Keys on the 2004 Billboard Awards.

"We just came from the Kennedy Center," says Wil B, describing a typical day of performing a concert for a roomful of kids, followed by practice sessions with young musicians, culminating in an evening performance where those players join Black Violin onstage. "We get together with them, and we perform in front of a crowd, and the crowd is cheering them on, people are crying, there's nothing better than that. There is literally nothing in the world that is better than that.

"As tough as it is sometimes," he goes on, "travelling and waking up early to go perform for kids and all that, it's incredibly rewarding. The rewards of doing that are so much bigger than the tough parts are tough, you know what I mean? The positive parts are so big that I, personally, will continue to do it as long as I'm breathing."

Parents of kids who are learning a stringed instrument are, it turns out, among of the greatest champions of Black Violin.

"Because we are classically trained, and we have a fairly large fan base, a lot of parents gravitate to us as examples to their violin-playing kids," confirms Marcus. "Maybe the kid hasn't been practicing as much as they used to, or they want to quit the orchestra, and the parents go, 'No, hey . . . look at Black Violin! Look what they're doing! Maybe you can do that!' So parents bring their kids to our shows for those kinds of reasons, for inspiration to keep playing the violin, or the cello, or the viola."

But the truth is, scandalous as it might seem to some, Marcus and Baptiste don't really care what instrument a young musician plays—or what style of music he or she plays with it. They just want more kids to play music.

Or paint pictures. Or write stories. Or make movies.

"Our approach," continues Marcus, "is more about, 'Look what we did with this violin that people just didn't believe could be done. What can you do, with the thing that you love, that no one else has ever seen before?' That's more of our message than just to encourage kids to work hard. That's part of it as well, obviously, but to us, it's about blending the thing you love with your commitment to becoming awesome at that thing."

That, in a nutshell, is the message Black Violin hopes to deliver to the world. That if a couple of kids from Florida could make something

LISA LEONE

original and beautiful and amazing with a violin and a viola, using their combined love of hip-hop *and* of Shostakovich—and could then somehow make the world notice—then others can do the same thing. A kid in his bedroom somewhere, a kid who's figured out a way to do something original and beautiful on Instagram, or another kid who just realized he has a vocal style that's like nothing ever seen on *American Idol*, perhaps those kids will be inspired enough to keep at it until people notice them, too.

"That's a more important message, to us, than just, 'Practice your violin every day,'" says Marcus. "Teachers are already going to tell you that. And that's cool. They're right. But we have a broader message, and our message is, 'Find that thing you were meant to do, and do it.' Our message is, 'Change the world.'"

And that, very intentionally, is the message of the upcoming album, *Take the Stairs*. It's definitely the thought behind the single "Showoff."

"Definitely. It's all about, 'Show off your talents, everybody, whatever that is,'" says Wil B." Just find it and do it and let the world see it."

> **"Our message is, 'Find that thing you were meant to do, and do it.' Our message is, 'Change the world.'"**
>
> ***—Kev Marcus***

According to Marcus, *Take the Stairs* is a natural evolution in their sound and their purposefully positive message.

"*Stereotypes* was about changing expectations, challenging people to do things no one expects them to do, but with this album, we really want to just spread hope to the planet," says Marcus. "Seriously. When we started this, the word we put on the studio wall, in big letters, was 'Hope.' We wanted to make music that was hopeful, but not preachy, you know? We wanted to create an album that people would want to listen to every few weeks to just reset the mechanism and jumpstart the engine."

Marcus mentions one song on the album, titled, "Impossible Is Possible."

"That's what it's all about," he says. "And that's a message for adults as well as for kids. We wanted this to be an album that, when someone listens to it, they are ready to run through a brick wall to chase what they want in life. And I think we did it. This is an album that's super hopeful, and very entertaining, and very inspiring—and you can dance to it, too." ■

GOING IT ALONE

FOR ENSEMBLE PLAYERS, A SOLO OR SIDE PROJECT CAN BE CHALLENGING BUT REWARDING

By Greg Cahill

Sooner or later, adventurous chamber players get an itch to work on a solo project or to collaborate with others on a side project. Making that move—breaking free of the comfort zone that comes from a longstanding role in an established ensemble—can be daunting, but the artistic rewards can be great.

"I welcome opportunities to collaborate with musicians other than those I'm used to working with," says violinist Evan Price of the Hot Club of San Francisco, who made his solo debut with 2017's *Dialogues* (Azica). "There is comfort in the familiar, of course, and I feel fortunate to have had the chance to grow with several ensembles over periods of years. But being jolted out of that comfort zone once in a while is a valuable opportunity to discover a new way of working, or perhaps help me better understand and appreciate the people I have around me day-to-day. Invariably, when I return to my 'normal' life, my friends notice something fresh in my playing that I picked up along the way."

To explore the benefits and pitfalls of going it alone, *Strings* asked five players about their own experiences with solo and side projects.

SARA CASWELL

JAZZ VIOLINIST, FIDDLER, EDUCATOR

Member of the New York Pops Orchestra, Esperanza Spalding's Chamber Music Society, Mark O'Connor's American String Celebration, and Darol Anger's Four Generations of Jazz Violin; on faculty at Berklee College of Music and Manhattan School of Music; 2018 Grammy nominee: Best Improvised Jazz Solo

Side Projects

Has played or recorded with Bruce Springsteen, Regina Carter, Jenny Scheinman, Bucky Pizzarelli, and 9 Horses, among others

Solo Projects

First Song *(Double-Time Records) and* But Beautiful *(Arbors Records)*

"I love learning about other musical languages and the ways in which artists have woven those dialects, along with their own unique voice, into the art they create. This exposure to compositional, musical, harmonic, rhythmic, and technical concepts reaching beyond what I either know or typically do nurtures experimentation and growth that not only fuels the music I perform as a sideman, but also my own narrative as a soloist—in short, I view that soloist/sideman relationship as symbiotic.

"As a bandleader, I find the most challenging issue to be the different hats I wear at any given moment: musical director, chamber musician, booking agent, tour manager, publicist, sound technician . . . luckily, my band is comprised of folk who themselves are bandleaders and therefore understand this juggling act and what they might do to assist.

"I'm currently working on my third solo album, my first since moving to New York City 15 years ago. The album features my band of

Sara Caswell

EMMA MEAD

ten years: Jesse Lewis, guitar; Ike Sturm, bass; Jared Schonig, drums; and special guests Chris Dingman, vibes, and my sister Rachel Caswell, voice. The album will hopefully be released in the spring of 2020. Several other people or bands with whom I regularly collaborate, including composer and arranger Chuck Owen and the trio 9 Horses, have projects in development as well.

"I firmly believe that every gig is a learning experience, be it musical, social, and everything in between. All these factors feed into how each member of an ensemble performs, how we interact as a unit, and how we best support and challenge each other in our artistic venture. That said, my favorite collaborations have been those that are truly cooperative—where as a group, we work together to explore and refine a piece. It's amazing what can happen when you get a crew of stellar musicians with humble natures and a common goal in the same room.

"At a fundamental level, my process of musically preparing for a recording project is the same no matter who's in charge since my goal is to do the best I can realizing the bandleader's music. Differences surface in the logistical preparations—as the soloist, I'm responsible for compiling charts, scheduling rehearsals, booking the studio/engineer/producer/musicians/photographer, et cetera. But once in the studio, I'm putting forth the same energy, focus, and commitment to the music, musicians, and moment as I do for every session."

> "I love learning about other musical languages and the ways in which artists have woven those dialects, along with their own unique voice, into the art they create."
>
> —*Sara Caswell*

JOHNNY GANDELSMAN

VIOLINIST, PRODUCER

Member of Brooklyn Rider and the Silk Road Ensemble; former member of the Knights chamber orchestra

Side Projects

Kayhan Kahlor's Silent City; *Yo-Yo Ma's* Sing Me Home; *Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's* The Vietnam War *PBS-TV documentary soundtrack with the Silk Road Ensemble*

Solo Project

J.S. Bach: Complete Sonatas and Partitas for Violin *(In a Circle)*

"At this point in my life, the difference between what are the main and what are side projects is mostly a question of time commitment and availability. Fifteen years ago, I was equally invested in Silk Road, the Knights chamber orchestra, and Brooklyn Rider. Every single day of playing in those groups has informed my identity as a musician, and I'm grateful for all of it. However, these days I have to prioritize. I stopped playing in the Knights about five years ago. Silk Road is going through a structural transition. So for the moment, my main priorities are [Brooklyn Rider] and solo work. I am also paying more attention to my own label, In a Circle Records.

Johnny Gandelsman

"Until quite recently, Silk Road's lineup has also been quite consistent. Working on music for this [PBS-TV] documentary was a fun and rewarding experience. Ken Burns' team wanted some improvised music, to describe certain moods or scenes in the film. They also identified some popular and folk music they wanted us to re-imagine. I volunteered to produce the project. I've known each player in the group for many years, so I knew whom to approach about arranging music, what to say to a group of improvisers to get close to what the film producers wanted, and so on. Working with Ken and Lynn's team was a total joy, because of the importance they place on music in their films. Mutual respect was palpable, which made the experience that much more satisfying for all.

"Playing with musicians like American banjo master Bela Fleck, Irish fiddle magician Martin Hayes, or Iranian kemancheh virtuoso Kayhan Kalhor has opened my eyes and ears to things like ornamentation, improvisation, groove, and, most importantly, imagination. Each one of these fine gentlemen is an innovator, tirelessly searching for new layers of meaning and possibilities, both for their instruments and their traditions. I think Bach was exactly the same, constantly extending and expanding the range of possibilities for violin, cello, organ, keyboard, and so on.

"In my experience, collaborations work best when in addition to deep mutual respect, there is built-in time for a project to grow and for trust to develop. That has been the case for Brooklyn Rider's projects with Bela, Kayhan, Martin, as well as the great Swedish singer Anne Sofie Van Otter, just to name a few.

"I'm currently working on a new solo album—recording the complete Bach Cello Suites, to be released on my label in early 2020. Another solo album will follow, which will feature new solo works written for me this past year. There is also another project with Ken Burns in the works.

"Lots of stuff to do."

EVAN PRICE

JAZZ VIOLINIST, COMPOSER, ARRANGER

Member of the Hot Club of San Francisco; former member of the Grammy Award–winning Turtle Island Quartet and Quartet San Francisco; US Scottish Fiddling Champion; the Kentucky State Fiddle Champion; Canadian Junior Fiddle Champion; and Canadian Novelty Fiddling Champion

Side Projects

Composer and arranger for the New Century Chamber Orchestra, Chanticleer, the San Francisco Girls Chorus, Stevie Wonder, and Jimmy Page

Solo Project

Dialogues *(Azica)*

"First, there's a big difference between being a sideman or member of an ensemble and being the leader of a project. Since most of my career has been spent as an ensemble member—*aka* a team player—I find the challenges associated with leading my own group or producing my own album to be potentially quite distracting. I'm speaking of the pressure of having to make all the decisions, from choosing or creating music to play to getting everybody into the same room at the same time. But to focus on the artistic side, working in a group is like solving an equation in a small number of variables, whereas designing the scope of the project itself involves many more variables and questions to be answered. You really have to know what you want to do and have confidence in your vision.

Evan Price

"Composing and performing my own concerto with the San Francisco Chamber Orchestra really pushed me artistically. Although I've spent my life around strings—playing violin, arranging for string ensembles, composing small-scale works—I had never taken on such an ambitious project. And I set my own challenges, too. I wanted to write a piece that would look and feel like a traditional violin concerto and would allow me to show off my individual technique and skills as an improviser, preserving my identity as a jazz musician while letting the orchestra do what it does. In the end, I think I moved further in their direction than I asked them to come to me, probably because I was responding to my own lifelong preconceptions about what a concerto soloist should sound like—how I should project and rise above the orchestra.

"This year I participated in the creation of an eponymous debut CD by the Proteus Trio, a cross-genre piano trio full of composers and improvisers. I will also have the pleasure of playing on my friend Greg Ruby's new recording of the music of Oscar Aleman. I'm hoping to do some duo concerts with cellist Mike Block. And I've been in conversation with mandolin power duo Mike Marshall and Caterina Lichtenberg about composing a double mandolin concerto for them—now *that* will be a challenge given what a mediocre mandolinist I am!

> **"Being my own boss is a revealing, soul-searching affair that has me groping between the couch cushions in search of the musical identity I always assumed I would have when I needed it.**
>
> —*Evan Price*

"Working with an ongoing group is nice because as you become familiar with the way a group works best, many questions are answered, and many variables are, in effect, solved. A solo project presents you with many more unanswered questions and no one to answer them but you! Naturally, that situation can be a blessing and a curse. For me, being my own boss is a revealing, soul-searching affair that has me groping between the couch cushions in search of the musical identity I always assumed I would have when I needed it. It's extremely healthy to do, but exhausting."

Nathan Schram

VIOLIST, COMPOSER, ARRANGER, ACTIVIST

Member of the Attacca Quartet and the Affiliate Ensemble of Carnegie Hall; founder of Musicambia, a non-profit that brings musical-instrument curricula to inmates in jails and prisons

Side Projects

Collaborated with Joshua Bell, Simon Rattle, Itzhak Perlman, David Byrne, Björk, Sting, David Crosby, Becca Stevens, Trey Anastasio, and others

Solo Project

Oak & the Ghost *(New Amsterdam)*

"As for how my solo project has differed from ensemble projects, the differences are fairly broad. I find that with any ensemble project the key ingredient for a successful project is about

Nathan Schram

balancing collaboration and vision. Taking for granted that everyone in the ensemble is equally invested, the next step is to be sure that everyone's artistic goals are satisfied. This can mean extensive conversations about repertoire, album, outside collaborators, mic placement, studio choice, tour schedule, and so on. Always making sure everyone is heard, yet the product and vision stays focused and clear.

"This may mean sacrificing something you are hoping for in the mic placement or perhaps including repertoire that you personally don't feel is the ideal choice. Or maybe even recording in a style that you don't prefer. This is where collaboration has its greatest strength and weakness. On one hand, getting someone's outside perspective takes into account a number of different ideas and situations you haven't considered, therefore making it a stronger product. On the other hand, when personalities are not balanced, someone's specific requests can overbalance the others and create a loss of artistic investment from the group.

"In my experience with solo projects, the goals are the same, but the process is fairly different. When I was embarking on recording my compositions for [2019's] *Oak & the Ghost*, I was able to ask myself a very exciting question, 'If I could record this music in any way I would like, how would I do it?' This opened up a new world of experimentation. Instead of considering the 'best' way forward, I was able to take great risks from a number of different angles.

> **"Risk taking and experimentation seem to have fewer hurdles on your own."**
>
> —*Nathan Schram*

"For example, even though many of the works are for string quartet, why did it need to be recorded in a live setting? Why couldn't we record each line separately? And if things are recorded separately, why couldn't we add aspects of studio sound design to individual lines after the performance? And what if we were able to create a musical project that was not, in fact, a representation of a live performance but something that could only exist in a studio setting? The list goes on.

"Now, it's easy for me to personally take these risks as the project will be released under my name and through my own funding sources. However, if this were a collaborative project, taking these risks with other people's money, and artistic branding, it would go through an extensive editing phase.

"What I ended up realizing through *Oak & the Ghost* is how much potential there is for experimentation. And that is not to say that it isn't possible in a collaborative setting, but that risk taking and experimentation seem to have fewer hurdles on your own. As for the approach with the most successful product, that is for the listener alone to decide.

"I've always thought of the Renaissance musicians of the past as the gold standard for musicians of the future: performers, improvisers, composers, organizers. I feel I am only expressing a part of myself when I play classical music on viola. The world of music is so deeply infinite that I'll always feel the need to incorporate other aspects of musical life.

"Working with other collaborators is always a highlight of my year. After years with the Attacca Quartet, we have evolved into thinking as if we are one brain. It

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Keiko Tokunaga

makes for amazingly quick decision making and spur-of-the-moment musical inspiration. As well as minimal talking during rehearsal, the playing says it all. However, it means that when collaborating with others my brain is shocked into overstimulation of other approaches. It ends up being a slower process in which more talking and explanation may be necessary but a more colorful approach blooms. The pleasant musical surprises are many."

Keiko Tokunaga

VIOLINIST, EDUCATOR

Former member of the Attacca Quartet (for 14 years); on faculty at the Juilliard School Pre-College Division; violin instructor, Fordham University

Side Projects

Caroline Shaw's Orange; *actress and performer on the* A Late Quartet *soundtrack (and violin coach to Philip Seymour Hoffman)*

"As a violinist, I firmly believe that one needs to be versatile. Keeping up with solo repertoire challenges me to stay in my best technical shape, as well as approaching music in a way that is significantly different from that of a supportive role I was playing in the Attacca Quartet. Playing the same music with the same people for an extended period of time has its benefits and demerits. It is great because you know everything about each other's playing, and there is a certain comfort in that. However, it can get stagnant if you are not bringing something new to it. Side projects helped me 'stay fresh' mentally and musically.

"I personally work better—and harder—when there is pressure, so I tend to get more work done when others are involved. It is harder for me to complete a personal project for this reason. Working with others could be challenging depending on who is involved, but that can be said about any group, whether it is a permanent group or a one-time thing. When I played with people who had vastly different ideas from me, it was difficult at first because they seemed to hear and feel everything in a way that was foreign to me. But then I remembered the first thing Earl Carlyss taught me during the first year at the Juilliard School: A true chamber musician is someone who can execute others' opinions as if they were their own. I tried to think about, feel, and hear the music from my colleagues' point of view, and after a while, we were able to make truly wonderful music together. It was fascinating to immerse myself into someone else's interpretation. It taught me a lot, and I felt that I was able to add a new language to my musical vocabulary.

"Because quartet rehearsals were the priority at the time, finding time to practice was one of the biggest challenges. Also, in quartet rehearsals, there is always someone who can give you honest feedback, so I needed to get used to recording myself and giving myself feedback. I learned a lot about my own playing!

"I am interested in working with a Japanese koto/shamisen player at the moment. I have not yet started anything—see, I tend to slack off on my own—but what I envision is a collaboration between instruments from the East and West, celebrating music from both parts of the world. I was born and raised in Japan, but I spent all of my adult life in the United States. So I feel that I am part of the American culture, but I still have strong connection to my Japanese roots. I see this project as a way to redefine myself as a person." ■


"I love this cello."
Yo-Yo Ma,
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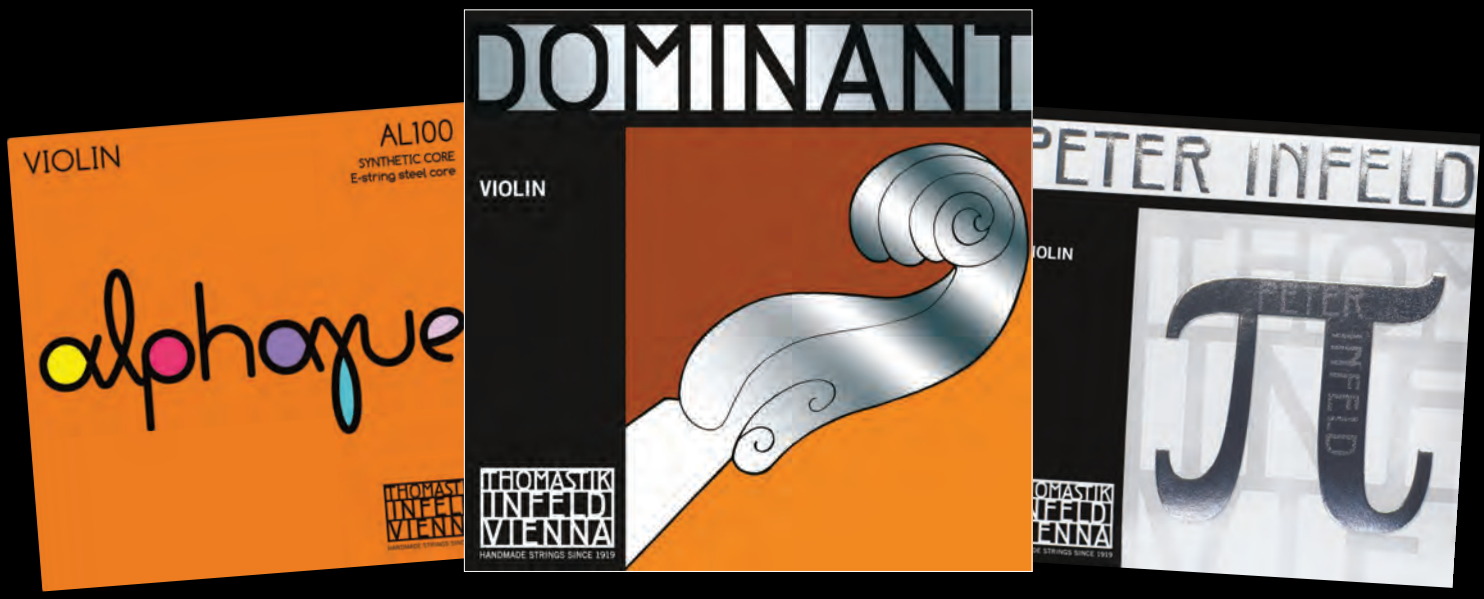

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Arch Rivals

There's a famous tale that everyone in the world of violins eventually learns. This tale involves the competition for the design of the violin. Cremona and Brescia were in hot competition, until warfare in the late 1620s spread plague around the Po Valley. In Brescia, the plague killed every violin maker, while in Cremona it killed all but one: Nicolo Amati. And of this was borne the ultimate triumph of the Cremona violin as the world standard. Or so one would believe.

The truth is of course far more complicated. Not every *liutaio* in either town perished, but the Amatis had been singularly successful in their craft and design, and Nicolo's ascendancy sealed the Amati concept as the dominant one—and with it the supremacy of Cremona—for years to come. But this did not mean that Cremona was oblivious to what had been done just 50 kilometers away on the other side of the Oglio River, nor would Cremona be perpetually resistant to the Brescian idea.

For indeed the Brescian concept was elemental, efficient, and almost intuitive—yang to Cremona's yin—and remains as such to this day. And in the work of no maker does this concept manifest itself more forcefully than in Brescia's great master Gasparo Bertolotti, known to all by the name of his birthplace, Salò.

I admit that I have never been a huge fan of the Brescian makers, but I understand what people love about Gasparo's instruments. His violas especially have been hugely successful, even though their oversized proportions represent a significant physical challenge. Their popularity endures because they tend to have a very dark but clear sound that verges on perfection. They also lack nothing where power is concerned. There is every indication that his instruments had a strong fan base around Europe at the time (there are documents indicating that the Brescians had significant export trade to France and Flanders). This can even be observed in some of the early works of these schools, works that echo Gasparo in their proportions and especially F and scroll models, as well as some of the more decorative purfling displayed by these schools and the English of the 17th century.

The violins have similar qualities, although their large proportions are more problematic for violinists in this modern era of standardized measurements. Whereas the Cremonese (such as Stradivari and Guarneri) have tended to stick to a body size of roughly 14" give or take, Brescian violins are often as large as 14½", making an easy transfer of technique from one instrument to another a far less intuitive process.

This has meant that violinists have more proscribed ideas about what a violin should be than do violists. Violinists prize brilliance, which is hardly the word that comes to mind when describing Brescian violins. However, violists, whose mission statement has

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1721 “Lady Blunt” Stradivari violin, left; c. 1590 “Harshman, Sandeman” Gasparo da Salò viola

The work of Gasparo da Salò illustrates a style of making that stood in contrast to the nearby Cremonese

By Philip J. Kass

changed dramatically over the centuries, have been faced with violas ranging in body length from 14 ¾" to 18", and the scarcity of old classic violas in general has meant that they have learned to deal with the discomforts of “wrong” sizes. And they love dark sound color, at which Gasparos excel.

There are specific ways in which Gasparo’s instruments achieved their power and clarity. First and foremost comes the arching shape. Contrary to the hills and valleys of the classic Amati arching, Gasparo’s archings tend to rise straight up from the edges, forming a long barrel vault from end to end in all directions. Observant makers the world over, and more than a few amateurs, have followed this prescription because, besides being highly effective tonally, it is the simplest way to carve out an arching. When it comes to violas, this also serves as an advantage, because this shape of arching is much easier to work around in both reducing and enlarging old instruments to bring them to whatever are the most popular sizes of the moment.

Secondly, he tended to leave his thicknesses moderately full. By not thinning them around the flanks, the plates remain firmer and more resistant, which for us today translates as a more assertive sound. It is a truism that it is easier to remove wood than to add it back, but these instruments often suffered less from the harebrained theories of later restorers to “improve” the sound by thinning the plates. Had his methods not worked as well as they did, his works might not have been spared.

Visually, the differences between Gasparo and his neighbors in Cremona could not be more apparent. The layman can easily distinguish the dusky hues of Brescian varnishes from the golds (and later reds) of the Cremonese. Look closer, though, and more evidence meets the eye. The Cremonese, for the most part, follow a method that seems highly refined—almost engineered. The degree of finish is striking: the surfaces are carefully smoothed, the purfling neatly inserted, the scrolls crafted according to a sophisticated pattern based on classical geometry. If they were an auto, they’d be a Mercedes.

Gasparo, by contrast, simply couldn’t be bothered to use two bolts when one will do well enough. His instruments have a rough-and-ready, spontaneous style of making, which probably helped him in quickly fulfilling orders. Scars from scrapers and gouges, imperfections in purfling, and random saw cuts were often left in place, particularly in the channels along the volutes. These were mostly to be hidden under their lush dark-brown varnishes. If his instruments were an auto, they’d be more like the classic three-wheel Morgan sports car: popular and famously efficient.

His instruments also have a distinctive personality of style that is the mark of a maker freed from the burden of meeting our modern expectations. I may have written about this here before, but the 19th-century makers were as burdened with living up to their predecessors as Brahms was in living up to Beethoven. The more pressure, the less spontaneity, and what we remember about the older makers is exactly their spontaneity, making something personal and free.

And the Cremonese, triumphant in their own method, never following the Brescians? Yeah, right. When G.B. Rogeri left Amati's workshop for Brescia, he soon adopted the look of the Brescians in a body of work that draws from both traditions. Girolamo Amati II and the later Cremonese gravitated toward an arching that had much more in common with the Brescians. Even Stradivari, in the 1690s, seems to have created something that was a refined, Cremonese interpretation of the Brescians in his "Long Pattern," a large body with arching that reflects the barrel-vault shape from up north. With Strad, this was a transitional approach, which he gave up at the end of the decade in favor of something that took the best tonal qualities of the Brescians and merged them with his own ideas about what should constitute a classic violin. And in later generations, well, the flatness of the arching shape in the flanks of most works of Guarneri "del Gesù" owes more than a bit to the Brescian tradition.

It is in violas, though, that Gasparo and his colleagues have never left us. In the centuries since his death in 1609, the rich tone of his violas has spoken to generations of violists. Violists rarely were expected to display the type of virtuosity that violinists show off all the time, and so were far less burdened by their large size. Plus, when cut down to smaller proportions, they still worked.

> "Gasparo simply couldn't be bothered to use two bolts when one will do well enough."

Modern players and craftsmen alike have seen the value in creating violas based on these models. Throughout the 20th century, luthiers have repeatedly been drawn to his model, seeking a way of bringing harmony to the Brescian-Cremonese split. And, to a great extent, they have succeeded. Modern makers who follow Guarneri and Strad for violin forms frequently turn to Gasparo for their viola forms, but using proportions that suit the modern age of virtuoso solo playing. Such instruments can be found in ensembles everywhere. Sacconi created his own 16 ½" variant, patterns for which he presented to the school in Cremona. These have informed several generations of luthiers over there, including a generation of modern Brescian makers who have embraced their city's violin-making heritage.

So, perhaps that old rivalry isn't over after all. ■

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Vanishing Act

If there's any question in your mind as to whether a violin is as much a work of art as a musical instrument, consider this: Even though the scroll plays absolutely no role in the sound of the instrument, it represents up to 20 percent of the value. So when the neck wears out through constant use, it's cut off, and the original scroll grafted onto a new one. A replacement neck has no effect at all on the value—not only is a replacement neck expected to be seen on even the most valuable vintage instruments, it's rare that you find an original one.

It's been more years than I can remember since I did a neck graft, or any restoration work for that matter, so I thought I'd stop by Carriage House Violins, in Newton Upper Falls, Massachusetts, to talk to In Kyu Hwang, their head restorer, about the complexities of making and setting a neck, and the exacting process of bringing an antique instrument back to life. When I arrived, there were various parts of an Antonio II Gagliano (1791–1860) violin on the bench in front of him, ready to be reassembled. He showed me a Tomaso Eberle (1725–c. 1792) cello on which he had just finished extensive restoration, including a neck graft.

In Kyu has the easy going and affable manner of someone who is doing exactly what he always wanted to do—which, in his case, is the literal truth. As a middle-school student in Gwangju, a small city southwest of Seoul, he saw a documentary about the violin-making school in Mittenwald, Germany, and—even though he didn't play the violin—fell in love with the craft. That dream lasted through high school, and then a stint in a local shop making a violin, and then his mandatory military service. He persevered, and eventually made it to the school.

After graduation, there came years of long hours in top violin shops in Berlin and Los Angeles, seeing and working on instruments by some of the finest makers. When Carriage House Violins was looking for a restorer for its high-end instruments a few years ago, he and his family packed up and made the move across the country.

What follows is our conversation about the complexities and challenges of restoration, and why it became his passion.

When an instrument comes in that needs restoration, what is your goal?

As a restorer my main goal is to make the instrument structurally sound. A beautiful restoration that falls apart in a couple years doesn't mean anything. Before I start, I think about what the original maker had in mind and wanted to do. The fun part, and the challenge, is copying his original plan. Why he used this kind of wood, that arching, the ground and varnish. I want to match the look of the old master, to make any damage invisible. The very first step, if you have to add new wood, is also the most important—finding the right piece. It can

PHOTO COURTESY OF CARRIAGE HOUSE VIOLINS/IN KYU HWANG

In Kyu Hwang touches up a neck repair

The characteristic of a great restorer's work is invisibility

By James N. McKean

take a lot of time, going through boxes of old wood to get the grain and the character right, but when you find exactly the right piece, it's incredibly satisfying.

Matching the varnish must be a real challenge.

Matching the ground is the biggest challenge. What varnish the maker used actually doesn't matter so much because by now the instrument has so much wear and so many layers with dirt and dust and retouching. The objective is to have an aesthetically well-blended look. You want to recreate the original texture of the varnish, but you also have to look at the whole picture—everything that has happened over the hundreds of years.

What role does setting the neck play in the restoration?

Setting a neck is very complicated. It involves much more than the neck itself. The most important part of setting a neck is having a stable upper block and button (the small semi-circular extension of the back)—they carry the weight of all the string tension. So if I'm doing a graft or resetting a neck, the first thing I do is check the upper block area. The Eberle cello, for example, had a very small upper block. But the top on a high-arched instrument like this is more flexible, so it needs a large upper block. It has a very steep rise from the neck to the central flat part of the arch—what we call the crown. That can lead to cracks or let the neck collapse downward, so sometimes you need to reinforce that area with a patch. The button was detached, but it wasn't original anyway, so I made a partial cast and fitted a new piece of wood with a tongue extending under the block.

When I glued the box back together it was now structurally sound and the neck would be stable.

Once the body is back together, what decisions do you have to make about setting the neck?

Each antique instrument is so individual. You start from the basic numbers, but you need to vary it in each specific case, based on experience and intuition. You don't want to create too much tension, which reduces the vibration and makes the instrument unstable. You can change the overstand (the distance from the top of the edge to the fingerboard) and the projection (the height at the bridge). Since the Eberle has a high arch, I made the overstand higher and lowered the projection, and that reduced the overall tension. But the neck reset doesn't change the character of the arch or the set of the f-holes. When you restore an instrument, or set the neck, you're getting it back to the maker's original idea. Once it's done, then I can adjust the sound with its setup—the soundpost and bridge, the afterlength of the tailpiece and so on. I start with a

standard setup and then work with the player, as you would with any instrument.

What about the sound of the instrument? How does restoration affect that?

When the instrument has recovered its original shape and structural integrity, so will the sound. I don't need to try to make the sound better than it was before. An antique instrument has already been played through so many centuries by great players that it's settled into that sound. I intentionally try not to modify it. If I have had to put in a patch, I go by my experience in "thicknessing" it to make it structurally strong but also respect the maker's idea for that instrument.

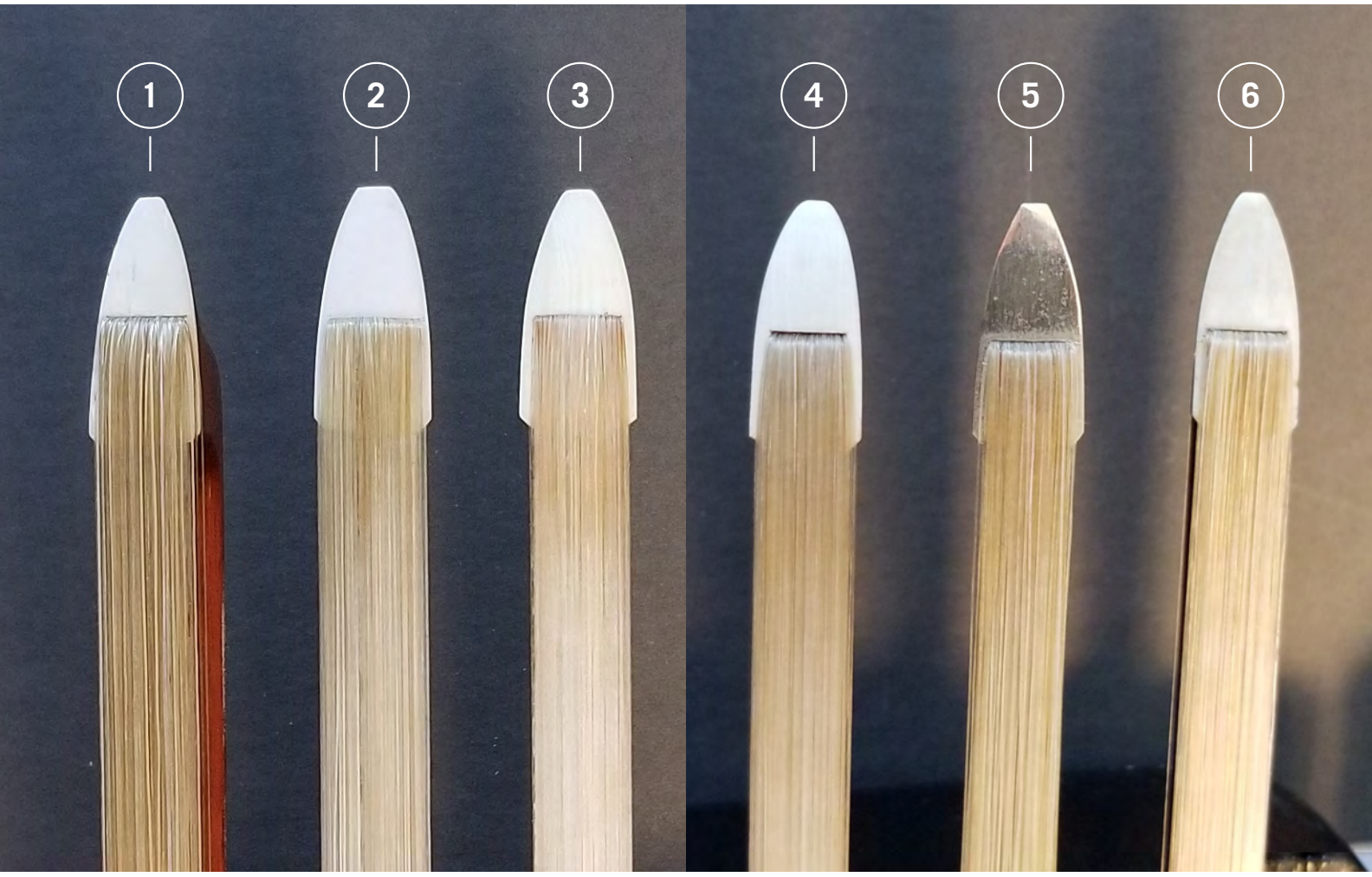
What is it you find so compelling about restoration?

It's endlessly fascinating. You're dealing with instruments that have been built two or three hundred years ago by someone who was really talented and a great craftsman, who had a great idea of sound and beauty. It's like shaking hands with this person who lived hundreds of years ago. And then when you take the instrument apart, you see all those details of how he worked—how he carved and in which direction and what kind of tool marks he left. Just touching the wood is so thrilling. It's an amazing feeling. Making violins was interesting, but I found it limiting—it was just my ideas of shape, beauty, and sound. For me it doesn't compare to that feeling of a direct connection with the old masters that comes from working on their instruments.

> "You want to recreate the original texture of the varnish, but you also have to look at the whole picture—everything that has happened over the hundreds of years."
>
> —*In Kyu Hwang*

What is your greatest satisfaction in restoring an instrument?

[He gives me a huge smile.] When it's done, if you show it to people and ask if they can guess where it was damaged previously, and they say no and cannot find it—well, then I've reached my goal. We're dealing with art. This is the work of masters, who had a great idea and aesthetic, and if I can bring that back to life—that's the best. ■



The Bow-Tip Dilemma

Traveling internationally with African ivory–tipped bows has become a source of stress for many musicians over the last decade. Thus, when the ivory tip of an antique bow cracks, its replacement material is often a more complicated choice than it was in the past. To travel with ivory on one's bow means applying for a Musical Instrument Certificate from the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and still facing uncertainty at border crossings about required documentation. So, many players have turned to purchasing "travel bows," which they may or may not find as satisfying, or replacing the ivory tip on their existing bow with something else—removing an original fingerprint of the maker.

African ivory found in the tips of antique bows is included in the "de minimis exception" to the ivory ban that went into effect on June 6, 2016. This important exception helped to clarify that bows ought not to be targeted at customs as long as the ivory was removed from the wild prior to February 26, 1976; is a fixed component of a handcrafted item; makes up less than 50 percent of the item; and less than 200 grams in weight.

Nonetheless mammoth ivory has become a popular replacement material, but unfortunately, smugglers began mislabeling their illegal ivory as mammoth to subvert the rules. As a result, certain US states have now banned the sale of all ivory (California, Hawaii, Illinois, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, and New York), and many others are scheduled to do so. These state laws do not differentiate between living ivory and fossilized mammoth, nor do they include the de minimis exception. This has radically changed the options for restorers and makers in those states.

With all this in mind, I asked makers and restorers across the US and in Europe for their favorite tip materials and their process. I found that they are using a variety of materials to conform with environmental demands while doing their utmost to protect the historic nature of valuable, old bows.

COURTESY OF MOUNT AIRY VIOLINS & BOWS

Two views of six bows: 1. Bone (Sousa Bows) 2. Faux ivory (Sousa Bows) 3. Tip Armor (Eben Bodach-Turner) 4. Mammoth (Eric Gagne) 5. Silver (Elizabeth Shaak) 6. Ivory (Eugene Sartory)

What is it like for bow makers to work with alternative materials on vintage bows as elephant ivory continues to vex players who travel?

By Elizabeth Vander Veer Shaak

Here is an alphabetical list of commonly used materials:

Bone: Antelope bone

Casein: A polymer, often called faux ivory, used mainly for less-expensive bows

Ebony: Ebony plywood and other plywoods

Elforyn: A German composite ivory substitute

Fossilized ivory (mammoth): Tip blanks are light tan in color and used most often in new making and restoration in states where it is not prohibited.

Ivory: Not in general use anymore; used only for restoration where the restorer has a record of purchase pre-1976

Precious metals: Silver, gold

Tip Armor: Polymer composite AMW-814; recently developed and formulated for strength and flexibility, engineered to be worked using standard bow-making tools

John Aniano (New Jersey, New York)
Before the ban, his favorite material was elephant ivory, then fossil ivory. Not having much choice, says Aniano, he now uses Tip Armor. He finds it somewhat hard to work and somewhat porous in nature (precluding a high polish). He says, "Anecdotally, I've heard that the tip-tip on a finished Tip Armor tip can be somewhat weak and can be split off. I've not experienced that, however."

Aniano also makes up his own black silk and epoxy 'micarta' for the tip liner material, which he finds stronger than ebony. Unless he can save the original ebony, he uses it for all tip replacements.

Tim Baker (Oxford, England)
Baker uses mammoth with normal

woodworker's (Titebond) glue. He is also using metal tip plates more frequently.

Jon Crumrine (Massachusetts)
Crumrine uses mammoth most often, but metal tips are becoming his favorite substitute as long as the tip isn't too thin and pointy. He thinks they work well for weight and balance, and don't need pins. He uses casein resin for less expensive bows because of the look and ease of shaping, however, he doesn't think they are a long-term fix. He doesn't care for Tip Armor. For gluing he uses fresh, thick cyanoacrylate (CA), primes the surfaces with baking soda, uses little glue (spread with a toothpick), and clamps with his fingers.

Anna Huthmaker (Georgia)
Huthmaker once used ivory, but no longer. She now uses bone, but most often casein because of the ease of use and looks.

> "To travel with ivory on one's bow means applying for a Musical Instrument Certificate from the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and still facing uncertainty at border crossings about required documentation."

Jacob Mitas (Oregon)
"I think thin silver with thicker ebony using shock-resistant gel super glue is the greatest. I use mammoth ivory on historic bows. I like casein tips that come fused with fiber backing for less valuable bows. Casein is pretty flimsy without the right glue, but with a fiber backing and a thicker gel super glue, it becomes very durable. I don't touch the Tip Armor: for all the extra work, and unattractive look, I've seen too many tips break off. My new favorite tip design, especially for bass bows, is custom three-layer ebony plywood. It looks awesome and is really strong, easy to work, and inexpensive."

Rodney Mohr (Ohio)
"My favorite tip material is mammoth. It's a bit easier to work than elephant ivory. And much easier to bend. Tip Armor is hard to work and is hard on tools. Its biggest problem is the point is a little tender."

David Orlin (Michigan)
"My favorite material is probably mammoth, but I use it very little anymore. For several years, I went to metal only." This is Orlin's preference because of the precedent set by FX Tourte: It has no travel issues, and can be glued without pins. It also has the advantage of a "negligible weight change, about .2–.3 gm more than a similar ivory tip." (This is less than variations in re-hair weight from different shops.) "I use mammoth occasionally, for restorations where the original appearance is important," but only for states where it's legal. He doesn't like anything artificial so far, but likes the idea of black or dark red/brown cross-grained laminates.

Jerry Pasewicz (North Carolina)
"I prefer mastodon/mammoth ivory; it looks great and I am used to it. It also makes for a wonderful story to tell the kids and adults alike to promote respect for the bows."

Isaac Salchow (New York)
"Silver or gold is best." Salchow likes them because they are the best at maintaining the integrity of the original bow. He points out that when he sees a historic bow such as a FX Tourte with a metal tip, the frog can be broken in many ways, but the head will still be intact. Even bad re-hairs don't destroy the head. Contrast that with a bow whose ivory tip has broken and been replaced. There can be damage to the nose or sides of the head. Salchow uses pins but is careful to make them cylindrical with a flat end so as not to split the wood. He uses hide glue to adhere the tip pieces because of its reversible nature.

Elizabeth Vander Veer Shaak is a bow maker, restorer, and owner of Mount Airy Violins & Bows, LLC in Philadelphia. She once used ivory, but now uses ebony, mammoth, or silver for fine bow tips and casein for less-expensive bows.

MAMMOTH REDUX

This August, there was a new development that may relieve the burden of strict state laws affecting musicians and their bows. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) deemed that mammoth, or fossilized ivory, cannot be subjected to permit requirements because regulating an extinct species was beyond their scope, and a strong case was made that mammoth ivory can be distinguished from elephant ivory. If restorers and makers specifically state in their sales receipt that mammoth was used, this could satisfy international customs.

HOLIDAY GIFT IDEAS

Your list may be long, but we're here to help

BY MEGAN WESTBERG

How many of you started working your way through your holiday lists, dutifully, in October? I see the precious few of you, raising your hands (trying not to look smug). For everyone else (scrambling to avoid my gaze), it's going to be OK. One way or another, you'll get there, too, and experience the satisfaction of a fully realized list, even if it is scrawled across the back of an old receipt that you found in a moment of enlightened panic (it's November what?!). There are, no doubt, holiday gift gestures of various commitment levels on that list. How much is too much? How much is too little? Unfortunately, you'll have to make those kinds of choices on your own, but here are a few ideas for the string players in your life that just might make this time of year a little easier to manage.

PRACTICAL

We all have things around the house that were given to us, but were it not for the guilt, we'd rather be immediately rid of. Don't spend the holidays adding to a loved one's burden of these items. If you don't have an inventive, wildly thoughtful treasure in mind for someone, be practical. Even if you don't get a dreamy "Oooohhhhh!" you will at least get an emphatic "Yes!"

Reading Material

With limitless options available, the challenge here is to pick something that your giftee would enjoy, and doesn't already own. It could be something light and interesting for every day (like Clemency Burton-Hill's *Year of Wonder: Classical Music to Enjoy Day by Day*) or a deep dive into a particular composer's life or work (like Jerome Carrington's *Trills in the Bach Cello Suites*). But don't ignore string-related historical fiction, memoir (*Violin Dreams* by Arnold Steinhardt of the Guarneri String Quartet might fit the bill), or violin-making history. The perfect book is out there: Part of the gift is sifting through it all to find just the right thing.

Headphones

String players listen to music—and sometimes to themselves as they practice or review their own recordings. Thus, an investment in a quality set of headphones is both thoughtful and practical. Great headphones can range from hundreds of dollars up into the thousands, so make sure you evaluate your giftee's needs, and your budget, before you head to the store.

String Supplies

Playing a stringed instrument requires a certain amount of gear, and a lot of it is a matter of particular preference. So, while it is always fun to throw a few things out there for the sake of experimentation, if you want to be the most practical of gift givers, find out what your gift recipient uses, and get more of that. It isn't that he

won't appreciate an afternoon or two tooling around on gut strings, but if Pirastro Evah Pirazzi is his thing, he'd probably rather have his next set of those.

Tote Bags

There's still a lot to carry in this world. Music, books, groceries, e-devices . . . Why not make the experience of hauling around one's things string-related with an attractive tote bag? Etsy offers a variety of styles, some of which you can personalize. *Strings* magazine, ahem, also offers its own tote, in addition to an eye-catching bag decorated with a wild-haired Beethoven. Which, given that we're headed into his 250th-birthday year, might be an especially appropriate accessory.

THROWBACK

It would seem, in this electronic world where everything is near instantaneous, there exists a distinct longing for a slower, less complicated past (even if watching a movie required a trip *outside* the house). For the people on your list who indulge with relish in the #throwbackthursday phenomenon, there are just so many options at varying levels of gift-giving investment.

String-Related Thank You Notes

There are people who would never consider whipping out a phone and tapping out a quick "U r the best. Thx!" over text. They find a pen and a seated position. Possibly a warm beverage. And then they proceed to write a thank-you note on an actual card. Old school? Possibly. But there's still no better way to make someone feel appreciated than an attractive card and a flowing hand. So, for this person, a box of cards with a beautiful, string-related design would be much appreciated.

The Modern Mix Tape

Great music has never been so accessible, and it's never been so easy to buy *exactly* the piece you're looking for. Whereas in times past, you might have had to buy entire albums or record music you *requested by calling into a radio station* in order to compile a thoughtful mix of music you believed a fellow human might enjoy, now you can hop on the internet and select a personalized bouquet of tracks with very little hassle. Really feeling the throwback thing? Burn it onto a CD.

Mechanical Metronome

You're entirely correct: There are metronome apps for your phone. Also digital metronomes. All highly effective, modern, and desirable, and perfect for the tech lover in your life. But there's no denying that a mechanical metronome packs a solid throwback punch. How does it work? It's all right there. This handsome musical item reveals its secrets as it tips side to side in a steady, somewhat mesmerizing motion. Wittner offers a variety of style and choices (mahogany? walnut?) if you feel ready to take your favorite string player's time keeping to the next level.

Vinyl

There's nothing more throwback than vinyl—and quite a few labels and artists are getting back into this game. For a big gesture, you could invest in a starter collection of modern and vintage vinyl, and a turntable to play it on. Go on, be a hero.

DIY

You're all over that modern mixed tape idea, but want to do more. You want an astonished "Wow!" and are ready to invest the time and effort to earn it. We salute your dedication. If you pull off any of the following ideas, you are truly the most earnest of gift givers.

Organize a Musical Dinner Party

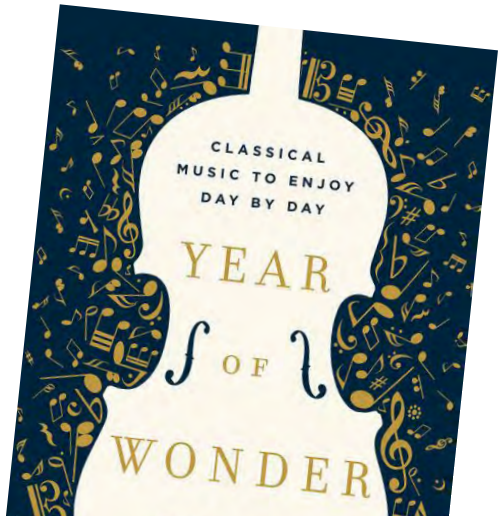
Dinner parties can be a treacherous business. You must choose the music. You must plan a menu and execute it properly. And you must know your giftee well enough to know his or her friends—which ones would appreciate being involved in such an evening, and would also blend together into a seamless, affable crowd. And if that all weren't enough, to really make this evening awe inspiring, you really should arrange a house concert. But not to worry: There are people who can help with this particular element. Check out Groupmuse: It's a service that can help you book the right professional chamber ensemble for your event and venue.

Make a Violin (from a Kit)

There is something a touch presumptuous about this, of course. Most string players are rather fond of the instruments they have, and are reluctant to just take what they're handed. But if you think your loved one would appreciate an instrument made with your own hands just for him or her, and you have some woodworking knowledge, you can undertake the ultimate DIY initiative and make an instrument yourself as a gift. There are kits available to help you, but you may need to pick up some specialty tools along the way. In 2006, then–associate editor Heather K. Scott decided to make her own instrument from a kit, and wrote about it in a piece called "Patience and Band-Aids." You can find it on StringsMagazine.com if you're interested in hearing her take on the process. Best of luck!

Organize a Listening Club

This can operate like a book club, where everyone involved listens to the same album or playlist and gathers to discuss it (with drinks and snacks) on a regular schedule. How it works, exactly, is up to you, the organizer. How often do you meet? Do all the members take turns selecting an album or playlist to discuss? Is it only for new recordings? Vintage recordings? Albums or playlists of multiple interpretations of the same work, or themed playlists? Do members take turns hosting? There are a lot of decisions to make, but forming a new musical community inspired by the interests of the string player in your life may just be the most thoughtful gift of all. ■



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COURTESY OF THOMASTIK-INFELD

THE WORLD ON A STRING

Thomastik-Infeld celebrates a century of innovation in the stringed-instrument industry

By Greg Cahill

Thomastik-Infeld is marking its 100th anniversary as an industry leader in the manufacture of instrument strings. But its story really began five years before its founding, in 1914, when Viennese luthier Franz Thomastik, who held a doctorate in philosophy, filed Austrian patent No. 69060, which described the flat-wire winding he planned to wrap around a steel core for use on a stringed instrument.

That patent revolutionized the string-making industry.

In 1919, shortly after the end of World War I, Thomastik teamed up with engineer Otto Infeld to manufacture the first

steel-core strings. At first, the men headed separate companies that worked in tandem on research and development looking for ways to make steel a suitable substitute for gut strings. After two years, they combined their resources to create the company that is now known as Thomastik-Infeld, a family-owned and operated firm still based in Vienna, Austria. Over the years, that two-man shop has grown to almost 200 employees worldwide, and management has changed several times, but the founders' commitment to quality has been carried down through the years.

"Generation to generation, each family member involved in the company has had the same passion for music, innovation, and product development. Each has embraced the same idea of sound and of craftsmanship. It is literally a DNA thing," says Nina Haberlehner, director of marketing at Thomastik-Infeld for the past four years. "What I discovered [when I began working here] is that Thomastik-Infeld is not only family owned, it *is* a family. CEO and owner Zdenka Infeld calls the company her family. And that is reflected in the personality of the company.

"That's also what musicians who come to visit us here in Vienna feel. They often say, 'It doesn't feel like we're visiting a company, it feels like we're visiting friends and family.' That feeling also draws people to work here; often our employees stay right through to retirement, which is a really rare thing in the business world. It's the atmosphere—everyone is trying to create new ideas and to improve our products and that's something you feel when you come into this place."

During the past century, the company has revolutionized the string market and changed the game repeatedly with the introduction of steel-core, spiral-core, and hex-core strings. Today, Thomastik-Infeld holds 80 patents for unique technologies, more than any other string company, and manufactures strings for violin, viola, cello, and bass, as well as six-string and electric bass guitar, oud, and erhu. It has sales in 86 countries on all five continents. Among its most enduring products are Dominants, a violin string with a synthetic core and flat-wire winding. Margaretha Infeld, the late wife of the company co-founder, was responsible for the naming of the Dominant string and played an integral part in bringing this product line to international fame. As violin students, Itzhak Perlman and Pinchas Zukerman were among the early users of Dominants.

But while quality assurance and consistency are hallmarks of Thomastik-Infeld, the company has weathered its share of changes. By the beginning of the 1930s, the company exported 50 percent of its string production—Great Britain and the United States were the most important markets. Those exports stopped with the outbreak of World War II and the Nazi occupation of Vienna in 1938. The subsequent Allied bombing of Nazi-occupied Austria, throughout World War II, leveled the company's offices and production facilities. The company rebuilt and reopened in 1946, one year after the end of the war. Thomastik-Infeld attained pre-war production levels in 1950.

> "Generation to generation, each family member involved in the company has had the same passion for music, innovation, and product development."

The following year, it underwent restructuring after the death of Dr. Thomastik. At that time, Otto Infeld acquired the whole company. Magaretha Infeld and her son Peter assumed control in 1965 after the death of her husband. They eventually moved the company to its current location in the Margareten district of Vienna and built on the company's reputation for innovation, earning the Golden Order of Merit for services rendered to the Republic of Austria. Upon Peter's death in 2009, Zdenka Infeld acquired ownership and became CEO.

Today, the company is meeting a number of challenges, including the proliferation of inferior counterfeit strings manufactured in China and packaged to resemble the Thomastik-Infeld brand. But the company is staying abreast of its competition, using the centennial to create a higher profile online, staging a four-month exhibit at the prestigious House of Music in Vienna, and expanding its artist-relations program.

"To stay current with the needs of musicians, the company works closely with professional string players to develop new product lines," Haberlehner says. "One thing we do is to educate players about what strings can do for their playing. So, we teach them the tricks of the trade. Many musicians learn to play an instrument at a conservatory or at a university, but they don't get much instruction about what the strings themselves can do for their sound, even though strings make up a large proportion of the instrument's sound. So, this year, because we want to play a big part in the education of musicians, we decided to put online the information they should know."

Recently, Thomastik-Infeld introduced the complete Versum Solo line for cello, which, Haberlehner says, is designed for power, response, and optimal projection. "Product development is a part of our future, since we are always trying to find new ways to meet the demands of the musicians," she says, adding that getting the word out about the company's efforts brings considerable personal rewards. "Every single time we have musicians come in to talk to our technical development team, to try out new strings and to see what they can improve through little tricks, the players come in with a very serious look, but leave with a bright smile—that's something I enjoy the most.

"This is a brand that is 100 years old and yet there is so much potential within those halls that has not been communicated to the outside world. To be able to tell those stories is something that I find very rewarding." ■

RISING FROM THE ASHES

Warchal delivers eco-conscious set of recycled strings with Phoenix line

By Stephanie Powell

In an effort to save and reuse raw materials, like the silver that's often found in violin strings, **Warchal** has launched **Phoenix**, a new line of recycled strings. Once a player has finished with a set of strings, the silver and other metals involved oftentimes end up in landfills and incinerators. For this line, the company collects used Warchal strings from customers and breathes new life into them, repurposing sets that have already resonated throughout concert halls or in practice rooms. The Phoenix line is limited-edition and available on Warchal's website as of October. ■

WARCHAL PHOENIX

- Sets available for violin
- €100 including VAT

warchalshop.com

PLAYER Hee-Young Lim

TITLE OF WORK BEING STUDIED Six Suites, BWV 1007–12

COMPOSER Johann Sebastian Bach

DATE COMPOSED It is likely Bach composed his suites for cellos when he served as the Kapellmeister (or musical director) for Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen at the court of Köthen from 1717–23.

NAME OF EDITION STUDIED Edition Reinhardt München/ Basel

BOB STUDIO

FOREVER & ALWAYS

Cellist Hee-Young Lim shares why she will never stop studying Bach's Cello Suites

Bach's Cello Suites have been essential to me since I was a child. Currently I'm preparing for my two Bach Suite cycles in Beijing and at the Zhuhai Festival. Starting when I was 11, every morning on my way to school I listened to recordings of these monumental works from Anner Bylsma, Pierre Fournier, Maurice Gendron, and Pablo Casals. When I was 12, Anner Bylsma came to Seoul to play a Bach Suites recital at the Seoul Arts Center. I was in awe. I still remember this concert vividly and I've dreamed of playing this cycle like him ever since I saw his performance.

Bach has been an unending source of inspiration to countless artists. The six Cello Suites are the most inspiring and spiritual works to me. The fact that it is polyphonic music in a single musical instrument is fascinating. It's full of imagination; being able to play this wonderful work fulfills me as an artist. At the end of the day or when I go through emotional turmoil or am mentally exhausted, playing the Bach Suites gives me positive strength, fills me with compassion, and purifies my spirit.

> "The fact that [the cello suites are] polyphonic music in a single musical instrument is fascinating."

I play from two editions given to me by my teachers, Philippe Muller and Wolfgang Boettcher. These are from manuscripts handwritten by A. Magdalena Bach, J. Peter Kellner, and two different authors. Since each copy has different articulations and slurs, the interpretations of these works have always been varied. The choice of bowing and articulation is a source of endless debate for any cellist. Next year I will publish my own edition of these wonderful works; it's a dream come true for me. I am always studying them, and plan to always do so.

I also like comparing manuscript copies. For example, the lute version of the Suite No. 5, Pieces pour la luth à Monsieur Schouster, BWV 995, is such a treasure. It gives me a lot of hints on how to play it. The two editions from A. Magdalena Bach and Kellner inspire a lot of thoughts on how to interpret Bach's music.

As for advice, I suggest studying the manuscript as well as immersing oneself in the performance practice of the Baroque era to build a better understanding of this music and authentic Baroque playing. For me, the challenges have been finding the most suitable articulations. Sometimes the copies of manuscript seem to be unclear. But then, I have to take account that during the Baroque period, it was common that the composers trusted performers and left it to them to play proper slurs. Modern players have to be fluent in these customs in order to properly interpret this music. I also strongly recommend listening to Bach's other works such as the St. Matthew Passion and the Goldberg Variations. ■

Benjamin Whitcomb

Mark Summer

COURTESY OF BENJAMIN WHITCOMB, BILL REITZEL

MEASURE BY MEASURE

A detailed guide to practicing Mark Summer's *Julie-O*

By Benjamin Whitcomb

Julie-O (available arranged for solo cello, cello duo, solo violin, violin and cello duo, and double bass), along with Summer's other compositions, can be found at marksummer.net/store.

To listen to Summer play *Julie-O* as you read along, watch his TedxMarin Talk performance on YouTube.

The repertoire for cello is vast, and contains many single-movement works that are suitable as encores. One of the most distinctive is *Julie-O* by Mark Summer, a fabulous cellist and one of the founding members of the Turtle Island Quartet. It is a delight to perform and, when well played, is not only a real crowd-pleaser, but it can also appeal to some audiences that are less affected by most of the cello repertoire.

However, the piece certainly does not "play itself," as the expression goes. For one thing, even in the 21st century, many string players still play in a way that reveals a strong favoritism for simple duple meters with rhythms that move on the beat—*Julie-O* is not cut from such cloth.

For another thing, *Julie-O* is meant to sound improvised. While string players these days are much more likely to have been exposed to improvisation than they were a few decades ago, many still struggle to sound convincing in improvisatory styles. With a little guidance, however, a cellist may identify the piece's fundamental techniques and work on them diligently, avoid some common pitfalls, and save time in learning the piece well.

7 Steps to Take Before Tackling the Actual Work

Before you get started working on the piece in earnest, there are some useful things you can do first.

1. Listen to various recordings—preferably at least three. Be sure to include a recording of Summer playing the piece.

2. Think about what the piece means. Can you turn it into a story, or even add specific words to certain passages? The more you can do these things, the more likely you will perform the piece in a way that is meaningful for you and your audiences.

3. Practice your D-major scales and arpeggios thoroughly. Try practicing in double-stop sixths and thirds as well!

4. Sing the piece. I know this is a difficult proposition for some passages, but do your best. Singing is perhaps the best shortcut to your musical soul, and it can quickly reveal where things are clear or not clear conceptually.

5. Work on finger slides—they do not come naturally to everyone. My favorite exercises for these are the sort developed by Dounis—something like **Ex. 1**.

6. Spend some time each day improvising in D major in the style of the various passages in *Julie-O*.

7. Practice in front of a mirror, not only to help you monitor your technique, but because your facial expression and body language can have a significant effect on your success performing this piece.

Taking on the Piece: Break It Down

Measure 1
This is probably the most important measure of the entire piece! Getting it just right effectively sets the mood and context for everything that follows.

As with several passages in this piece, experimentation is the name of the game. Be willing to try this measure in many different ways—not just the way that you are used to hearing it.

Tune this passage very carefully. Nothing spoils a performance more quickly than playing the beginning out of tune. The key to the intonation of the chords is to place the fingers to create a truly perfect fifth. If this gives you trouble, experiment with different heights of the left elbow.

Do not play the passage too quietly—listeners want to hear the string ring and to be struck by the beauty of the sound of pizzicato on the cello.

Be careful not to roll the first two chords too slowly: listeners still need to hear the melody created by the pitches on the A string.

It is important that the triplet be heard clearly. The fourth finger needs to hit the string clearly and cleanly, and then release the string with a bit of left-hand pizzicato. Feel free to supinate the hand (i.e. roll it away from you) if this helps.

Do not move too quickly from m. 1 to m. 2. Listeners need time to think about the beauty of that first measure.

Measures 2–7
This is a wonderful passage, but deceptively difficult. You may want to bracket it for extra practice.

Keep the meter at 7/8! It is easy to distort a duration enough that it starts to sound like 6/16 or 8/16, neither of which creates the same mood. Try clapping eighth notes (as slowly as necessary at first, but eventually at a tempo of 192) while speaking the rhythm.

This passage can be started extremely quietly to good effect.

Try playing the open A as though it is a pick-up to the next figure.

As with the first measure, intonation is critical! Practice the three thirds and the three sixths as double-stops, both arco and pizzicato, until they are always in tune and comfortable. (See **Ex. 2** and **3**)

Mark Summer himself says he likes to practice passages like **Ex. 4** with the following bowing, which he says is "an excellent bowing for jazz phrasing and instantly makes a player sound jazzier."

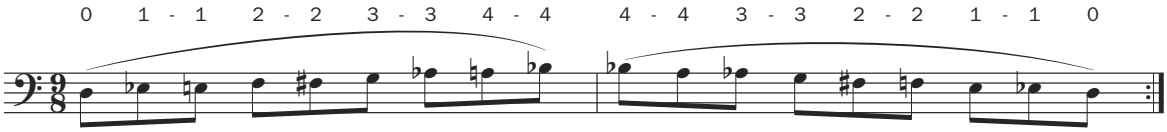
You may wish to experiment with using two or more fingers to pluck the string in this passage. Such a technique takes a bit of getting used to, but some people prefer it.

Measures 8–11
The meter changes here, so establish a new "groove" right away. It is another good passage for clapping eighth notes while saying the rhythms. Even if you eventually take some license with some of the rhythms, it is always a good idea to at least *start* with the rhythms that the composer wrote!

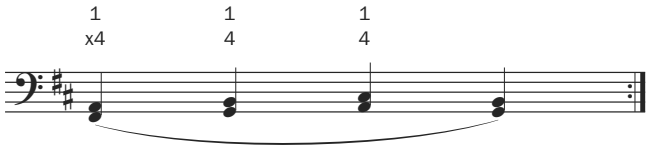
Do not rush the three 16th notes at the end of mm. 8 and 10, nor the left-hand pizz at the end of m. 9.

Do not make a big deal out of picking up and putting down the bow. Do it as naturally as switching utensils when you eat.

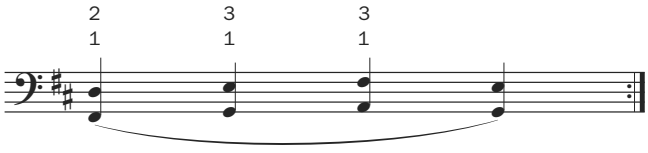
Ex. 1



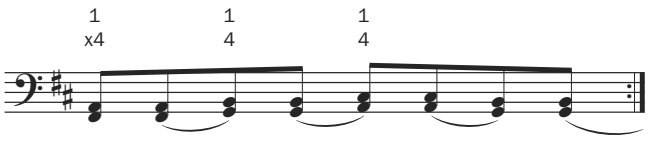
Ex. 2



Ex. 3



Ex. 4



While this may seem like a small point, the little things add up.

Measures 12–18
Here is the foremost melody of the piece. It is essentially a jazzy folk song, and it should have a comfortable, affable feel to it.

Sing it often. Do you play it as naturally as you sing it?

The composer's notes include a caution against too much vibrato. This is one of the best passages for illustrating his point. If you use a traditional, classical vibrato, the mood will sound artificial.

Try playing this and other passages further out in the bow than you are used to.

The second half of m. 15 particularly needs to sound like you made it up on the spot.

It is easy for the pitch D4 (in mm. 12, 14, 16, and 18) to arrive early—guard against this tendency.

Do not let the downbeat of mm. 14 or 18 arrive early.

Try adding a bit of diminuendo in mm. 13 and 17.

Measures 19–20
Don't play ponticello half-heartedly, or it may just sound like your tone suffered for a moment. Really go for that metallic sound close to the bridge.

This passage, too, can start extremely quietly to good effect.

Measures 21–28
Take care not to let this attractive melody sound stiff or like an étude.

For example, beat 2 of mm. 21 and 23 is really just a written-out turn figure. Try to make it sound like you came up with this particular rhythm by yourself.

Sing the rhythms, especially those found in mm. 22, 24, and 26.

If the coordination of the fingers in these bars (mm. 22, 24, and 26) gives you difficulty, separate the double-stops into two separate melodic lines first.

The ghost notes in these three measures can be played very quietly and with very little bow.

Be careful not to let the downbeat of m. 23 arrive early.

> "Singing is perhaps the best shortcut to your musical soul, and it can quickly reveal where things are clear or not clear conceptually."

Feel the trajectory of the energy through the rest in m. 28—don't just play beat three and stop as though the piece could end there.

Measures 29–32
Again, try playing these measures very softly but with lots of energy.

Although there are no accents marked, it can be effective to bring out the groupings of three vs. two 16th notes.

Think about how you want to segue from m. 32 into m. 33—perhaps a slight broadening, or perhaps an even bigger crescendo here. The point is for it to sound natural and convincing.

Measures 33–36
This passage is one last consequent phrase to the melody that started in m. 21. As such, m. 37 should sound like more of an arrival than m. 28.

Play this passage a bit freer. The rhythmic and metrical changes here foreshadow the *very* free passage that begins at m. 54.

Measures 37–38
This short passage can be in a new tempo, as it serves to set up the new section that starts in m. 39. Do not feel like you have to race to put your bow down.

On the other hand, m. 38 must end in a tempo that sets up m. 39 perfectly, which requires practice and a willingness to experiment.

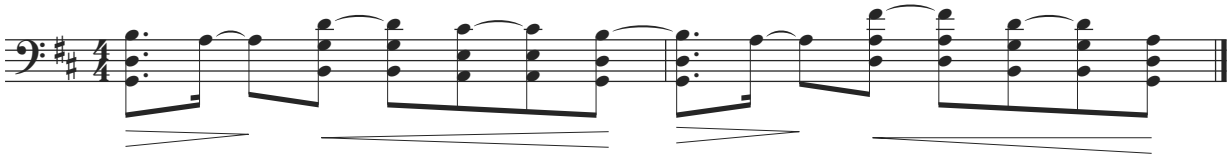
Measure 38 is an excellent candidate for slow practice. How slowly? Slowly enough that you do not feel anything rushed or spastic about any of your motions. This and the following pizzicato passages take considerable coordination, so please do be patient with yourself if this coordination takes a while (i.e. longer than you wish it would!) to develop.

Measures 39–42
Place a premium on intonation. Every chord needs to be spot on.

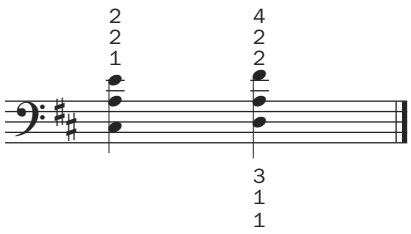
The penultimate chord in m. 42 may need the most work in this regard. It is really best if you can play the chord with fourth finger across all three strings. Supination of the hand may help, as can experimenting with the angle of the elbow.

Rhythm is extremely important in this passage as well. As with previous passages, sing the rhythm first while clapping the quarter-note beat.

Ex. 5



Ex. 6



Possibly the most dangerous notes, rhythmically speaking, are the left-hand pizz notes, which can tend to be a little early.

It really helps if you truly *feel* the missing beats. In this style, moving your body to the beat would not be inappropriate!

Try leading into each downbeat with a slight crescendo, like in **Ex. 5**.

Measures 43–49

As with the previous passage, carefully tune this passage. Be particularly cautious going from third to fourth position. (See **Ex. 6**)

Rhythm is also critical here. Do not let the figures rush.

Use slow practice at first in m. 46. As you increase the speed, keep in mind that the fingers of the left hand should move crisply and with energy. This measure is truly fun to play—make sure it sounds like it!

Measures 50–53

Measure 50 should sound like a significant arrival, as this will help to define the form of the piece.

For best results with the pizzicato notes in m. 53, lift the left-hand finger immediately after plucking the string.

Measures 54–64

Do not be in a hurry to start this section. The passage should sound intimate and personal.

Be willing to experiment considerably with the timing. For example, as an exercise, try playing each of the many fermatas with a different length. Vary these lengths at least 8–10 different ways. After an exercise like this, hopefully you will discover some timings that sound entirely natural and organic to the piece.

Experiment with dynamics, too. The tone needs to be resonant and expressive, but not so loud that it sounds public or impersonal.

Sing the passage. Ideally, you should try singing this passage with words. Make some up. It does not have to be anything brilliant to be effective. I suggest you use words like "love," "she," and of course "Julie-O" and words that rhyme, like "so," "know," and "ago." You may be surprised how much an exercise like this can help you to play this passage more effectively.

If you do decide to improvise in m. 62, good for you, but do not go on for too long or you will break the trajectory of the line as a whole.

Measures 65–72

After the lengthy introspective passage, mm. 65–68 should change mood and character in order to help set up the ending.

Mm. 69–72 make up another fun and effective passage. The most important thing is that *they be entirely in tune*! This may mean that you have to use a different fingering than the one suggested by the composer.

For the intonation of mm. 69–70, practice these thirds in double-stops, just as you did in mm. 3–7.

I recommend that mm. 69–72 actually be played to sound like they are in 6/8 and not in 3/16.

In mm. 71–72, consider how you will end the piece well—with flair! If you haven't yet fully conveyed how fun it is to play this piece, now is your chance. I sometime delay the crescendo and add a ritard, but Summer says he prefers to accelerando to the end.

Have fun with the last chord. Save bow on the C and G strings. Consider ending with a slight stinger. ■

Jeremy Kittel

COURTESY OF YONAS MEDIA

HOW TO AMPLIFY A STRINGED INSTRUMENT

The pros discuss the best ways to capture a pure acoustic sound

By Greg Cahill

"The timeless, beautiful sound of an acoustic violin or fiddle is what drew so many of us to play the instrument," says Jeremy Kittel, a Grammy-nominated violinist and violist whose styles range from classical to Celtic to bluegrass to jazz. "It's often a challenge in each unique situation to figure out how to best preserve and amplify and express that true sound."

So what's the *best* way to amplify an acoustic stringed instrument?

Professional players and equipment experts agree there's no single solution for those seeking to reproduce a pure acoustic sound. You just need to find the one that suits you best. Familiarize yourself with the options: pickups vs. microphones, the use of pre-amps and amplifiers, as well as whether you should plug into a house PA system. And look into special effects, such as reverb and digital delay. Don't hesitate to ask your local violin shop to explain the technology and weigh the options.

Duncan Monserud, an instrument specialist at the Electric Violin Shop in Durham, North Carolina, poses three questions and offers the following advice to customers who are investigating the ideal solution.

Do you need a pickup that can be easily installed and removed in order to go back and forth between amplified and acoustic playing?

"If the answer is 'yes' then there are a number of good options, such as the Kremona, Fishman, MiSi, the Realist SoundClip, and Schertler pickups," Monserud says. "For a permanent pickup solution, look into bridge-replacement pickups such as the LR Baggs, Fishman, Schatten, or ISI Aceto/Violect Deluxe pickups. ISI pickups by Eric Aceto are highly regarded by professionals for their amplified tone, but are also ideal systems for crossover performers as their thin, high-quality bridge design has no measurable impact on acoustic tone."

Will you be playing in a setting or style that requires (a) as close as possible acoustic tonal reproduction (b) maximum feedback resistance or (c) a compromise between the two?

"Microphones, though they also color tone somewhat, tend to reproduce the violin's tone in its 'purest' form, but can be difficult to optimize in terms of placement and direction, and are also considerably more prone to feedback and picking up ambient noise than a piezo-pickup system," Monserud notes. "Many of the removable and permanent piezo-pickup systems are relatively more feedback resistant compared to microphones—though not as feedback resistant as a solid-body electric violin—and offer varying degrees of tonal complexity. The placement of the pickup element or elements— for example, in the bridge to one side; both sides or the center; beneath the bridge between the feet and violin top; or adhered to the body, as in the case of a contact mic—will affect the quality and balance of tone. The physical properties of the piezoelectric, or electrostatic elements, in the case of the Schertler STAT system, also factor into tonal quality."

How will you amplify and in what settings will you be playing?

"By this we mean, will you play in small, medium, or larger performance venues?" he says. "Solo or with a band? If with a band, how loud and what other instruments will

be involved? Will you rely on an amplifier for all of your sound, or will you run through a PA system? Once we determine these things, we can recommend the size and power of amplifier you will need. Most players are successful using Fishman Loudbox Mini or Fishman Artist model amplifiers with pickups. Kustom's Sienna series acoustic amps are great for smaller performance applications on a tighter budget. For more demanding professional applications, we carry higher-end solutions, such as Acoustic Image and Acus amps, as well as Fishman and Bose personal PA systems."

What Do the Pros Use?

Jeremy Kittel plays a violin by Walter Stopka, of Chicago, which he found on consignment in Nashville in 2010. "Most of my work the last several years has been acoustic, and in settings quiet enough that I can usually use a mic of some kind, as opposed to a pickup. I actually have a lot of people ask me what pickup they should get, when really in their situation what they want is some kind of microphone. If I have to, I'll definitely use a pickup, but a microphone almost always gets you much closer to the violin's natural, beautiful sound right off the bat, of course. But even then, each situation is different.

"For recording, and for some live shows, I'll use an old Neumann KM84, on a stand mic, about 6–12 inches from the fiddle, which gets my favorite acoustic sound, just beautiful. However, most of the time, for live shows, I'll use a DPA 4099 lapel mic, as it's far less prone to feedback, since the transducer is just inches from the instrument body, and still can sound pretty great, especially with some EQ-ing. The other advantage of the DPA 4099 is that you can move around a bit if you need to, since the mic lapel is attached to the body of the violin. An alternative to the DPA 4099 that's also very good, and much more affordable, is the Bartlett Fiddle Mic, which we were all using in Turtle Island for a while.

"For EQ-ing the signal from the DPA/Bartlett mic before going to the PA, I often use a Headway EDB-2 preamp. It's got enough options for EQ to fix some of the distortions you'll usually get from miking so close to the instrument. For example, I find it often needs a boost around 700–900 hz, and I cut right around 7K—I often find lots of undesirable nails-on-chalkboard bow noise right around there, which you're also getting more of from having to mic the instrument so close to the body.

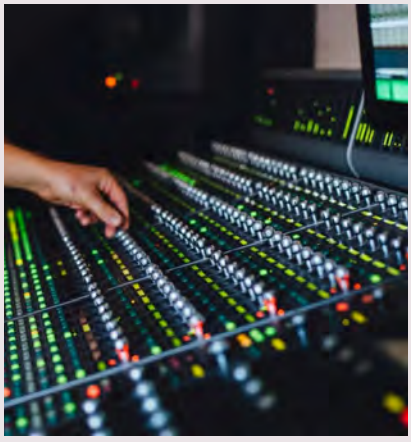
"That's the gist of my miking game. However, in loud situations, most situations with drums, even a close lapel mic won't cut it; you'll just get too much feedback. For those settings, I usually switch to a London-model violin by Acoustic Electric Strings. That violin is a five-string—the C string is really useful—and it also has a brilliant pickup, built internally, that comes with the instrument. I prefer that pickup's sound over the LR Baggs pickup, which I also have on a different old fiddle. From the dry pickup signal, I go through a preamp, just a simple Fishman preamp usually, and perhaps some effects pedals

depending on the situation. I also have a little ZT Lunchbox amp that sounds good and is light enough to easily carry around New York City for amplified gigs.

"With Kittel & Co., we've also been starting to use a Midas M32 Live Mixer, which lets us take our custom reverb, EQ, spatial effects, subtle compression, and so on, with us into each venue. I find that adding a spatial quality to the sound is really important—to me even a great fiddle doesn't sound that great in a completely dry room; a beautiful violin sounds best to me in a beautiful reverberant room, too, and so finding a way to add that back artificially, most obviously with reverb, is really important."

Evan Price of the Hot Club of San Francisco plays a 1999 Strad copy by Andrew Ryan in Providence, Rhode Island. "For concerts with the Hot Club, I play into an Audio-Technica 4033, placed at chest height on a mic stand about a foot or so in front of my violin's C-bout. Being a large diaphragm condenser mic, the 4033 captures the full frequency range of the violin, but slightly favors the warm tones. And placing the mic slightly below the level of the instrument enhances that effect by allowing some of the sizzling high frequencies—those that are typically over-amplified when close-miking—to soar over the top of the mic.

"In less formal settings, such as venues with ambient noise like a club or a dance, I use an Audio-Technica PRO 35, a clip-on mic with a goose neck that I position ¾-inch above the top of the violin, slightly to the left and behind the G side of the bridge. Placement is important! Too close to the f-hole and the sound



PRO TIP

"When amplifying an acoustic instrument," Evan Price says, "I find it helpful to know what my top three trouble frequencies will be, so I can either make EQ adjustments on my own amp, if I'm using one, or politely ask the sound engineer to make the adjustments. For example, I happen to know that middle C vibrates just above 250hz, so if my sound is too boxy, I can turn down the low-mids or ask the engineer to watch out for that frequency. If my sound happens to be too nasal, I would look for 2khz. If there's too much bow noise, I could cut the highs at 4khz and up."

would be too boxy around middle C, the resonant frequency of my violin. Too far away and I would risk feedback from the nearest amplifier or PA speaker. Most often, I plug my PRO 35 directly into a Bose L1 Compact PA and adjust the high, mid, and low knobs to around 11 o'clock. Occasionally, I plug directly into my Schertler David amp and make similar EQ adjustments. If you know how to use three-band EQ strategically, you can often get away without a pre-amp."

Grammy-nominated jazz violinist Sara Caswell plays one of two violins, depending on the ensemble, instrumentation, setting, and repertoire: "For near-acoustic concerts requiring minimal amplification, I use a gorgeous 1908 Stefano Scarampella on loan to me since 1998 combined with a DPA 4099V instrument microphone—I've found no other clip mic to so cleanly and effortlessly capture the heart of my tone. When performing with a rhythm section or larger jazz ensemble, I use a 1905 Joseph Collingwood violin that has a LR Baggs bridge installed and route it through an LR Baggs Para Acoustic DI into the venue's sound system. Because my desired EQ is already set on my DI, I'm making efficient use of my band's allotted sound-check slot and avoid the challenges that sometimes occur between a violinist and sound technician regarding how to best EQ the violin.

"When amplification is necessary, but no house sound system is available, I use my Collingwood violin with the Baggs bridge and route it through an AER Compact 60 amplifier. Popular among guitarists, violinists, vocalists, and countless musicians seeking a clean and powerful enhancement of their natural tone, the AER is an incredible amp that also happens to be one of the most portable, NYC subway–friendly rigs around."

For Illinois fiddle teacher Georgia Rae, the Realist violin pickup, made by New York luthier David Gage, gets the job done. "It is mounted under the bridge," she says. "I have tried a few different pickups over the years and the Realist definitely captures the true tone of my five-string fiddle. I go into a Red-Eye Twin DI box that has a built-in preamp, through a looper, delay, wah-wah, and octave pedal before going out of a Fishman Loudbox mini amp. Even though I like to use effects and loop pedals, I still like my fiddle to sound acoustic, so over years of testing out different combos, this is the best yet." ■

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Mark Holloway, left, Austin Hartman, Sharon Isbin, Simin Ganatra, and Brandon Vamos

COURTESY OF CEDILLE RECORDS

ROMANCING THE MEDITERRANEAN

Pacifica Quartet & Sharon Isbin celebrate Italian and Spanish composers

By Pat Moran

Spain and Italy have much more in common than shared Latin-derived languages and sun dappled beaches on the azure Mediterranean Sea. Cellist Brandon Vamos contends that the music from both cultures is compatible. "They work so well together," he says. Vamos, who founded the Pacifica Quartet with his wife violinist Simin Ganatra in 1994, puts his thesis to the test with *Souvenirs of Spain & Italy*. Drawing from a time span encompassing the Baroque era to the present day, the Cedille release features compositions from Spaniard Joaquín Turina, plus Spanish-influenced pieces by a trio of Italians—Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Antonio Vivaldi, and Luigi Boccherini.

Although the quartet, comprised of second violinist Austin Hartman and violist Mark Holloway along with Vamos and Ganatra, essay an anxious and introspective version of Turino's "La oración del torero," they are joined on the remaining compositions by multiple-Grammy-award-winning guitarist Sharon Isbin.

Performing as a guitar quintet, Pacifica and Isbin recorded *Souvenirs* at Auer Hall at Indiana

SOUVENIRS OF SPAIN & ITALY
Sharon Isbin | Pacifica Quartet

University's Jacobs School of Music in Bloomington, where the ensemble serves as quartet-in-residence and full-time faculty.

"I think these works are under-recorded and they deserve attention," Vamos says. "It's music full of melody, color, and virtuosity."

COURTESY OF SHARON ISBIN/YOUTUBE

Souvenirs of Spain & Italy is the first joint recording by the quartet and Sharon Isbin. How did it come together?

Three or four summers ago we got an email from the Aspen Music Festival saying Sharon Isbin was interested in doing repertoire with us. We've all known about Sharon for years. I remember hearing her when I was a teenager in Indianapolis. She's a great musician, so we were excited to collaborate. We had been playing adaptations of [some of these songs] for years. We got together to play some of the stuff that's on the CD and other things, and she contributed several solos. We hit it off right away. There are not a lot of people performing guitar quintet. It's so interesting and fun to play with the amplified guitar. It adds such a different texture.

After that summer we said that we wanted to play together. Then we approached our manager about doing some concerts with Sharon and over the next couple of years we started playing songs, like the Tedesco, the Boccherini, and the concerto. We put together a program that centers on Italy and Spain. It's such a good program. The audience loves how it flows. We were getting more and more comfortable playing together and playing this repertoire, so the next plausible step was recording these pieces. They haven't been recorded a lot and we put so much time and effort into performing them that we thought it made sense to record them.

I called our wonderful label Cedille Records, Judy Sherman, our [Grammy-winning] producer and our [Grammy-nominated] engineer Bill Maylone. They all got behind the project.

Why do you focus on these particular Italian and Spanish composers?

A lot of it came about naturally as part of our repertoire. Boccherini was an Italian who lived most of his life in Spain, so the Fandango has this Spanish flair. We thought the Tedesco would be a strong effort and fun to play. We decided to pair those two [because] the programming has this connection: The Italian composer Boccherini has the Spanish Fandango. The Italian Tedesco includes "Souvenirs of Spain" in his piece.

Then Sharon mentioned that she had played the [Vivaldi] string quartet with the Pujol arrangement [for guitar, violin, viola, and cello]. It's a beautiful piece that has the same connection in terms of the two countries. Then, to keep the theme going, we decided to play the Turina, which is of Spanish origin.

You've praised Isbin's attention to detail, subtlety, nuance, rubato, and timing. How was her interplay with the quartet?

She has a real freedom yet it's within bounds. She can be free within a bar where the tempos remain the same. It doesn't feel at all cumbersome. Nothing ever feels square in her hands. It's organic, [and] that affects the way we respond together. So much of the music, especially the Tedesco, is conversation and how you respond off each other.

Boccherini, a cellist, included virtuosic parts for the instrument in his quintet. How did you approach this piece?

It's incredibly challenging for the cellist. I think all three movements, but especially the second movement, have big moments for the cellist. Boccherini throws the cellist into the extreme high-end registers of the instrument, where usually the first violin would play. When you get very high on the instrument there's very little room for error with intonation. Everything is so close together. To be able to play it cleanly, clearly, and with proper intonation takes a ton of practice. It's very challenging because as a quartet cellist, I've spent a lot of my time in the middle range of the instrument. And there's these light harmonic parts that pop out where the slightest contraction of your fingers affects how the sound comes out, whether it speaks or not.

Do you have a favorite piece on the album?

The slow movement of the Tedesco is a really beautiful moment, very reflective. It's a picture of Spain and Spanish life. But then I would not shortchange the Fandango movement [in Boccherini]. It's incredibly fun and lively and it has different textures. I also love the Turina with the bullfighter's prayer in the chapel before entering the arena.

What cello do you play on the album?

It's a Gasparo da Salò, an Italian cello in keeping with the [album's] theme. It was made in the 1580s, one of only two Gasparo cellos that I know of in existence. It's very dark in sound and tone. The fingering is strikingly different on this cello, so when I switch to another it really affects how I get around the instrument. It's one of the earliest modern-day cellos that is still being played today. ■

THE BUTTERFLY
Martin Hayes
& Brooklyn Rider
(In a Circle Records)

MASH UP

Fiddler Martin Hayes & Brooklyn Rider team up for a blend of Irish fiddling and classical

By Miranda Wilson

Two related but markedly different string-playing traditions, Irish fiddling and the classical string quartet, come together in seamless fusion on this album by the Irish master fiddler Martin Hayes and New York ensemble Brooklyn Rider. Ten arrangements of traditional Irish tunes are juxtaposed with two original compositions, one by Hayes himself.

Brooklyn Rider's chameleonic ability to adapt their classical string technique to the demands of radically different music traditions is well known. In *Butterfly*, they do it again. With Hayes as the figurehead, the ensemble produces interpretations of Irish jigs and reels that are at once toe-tapping and profoundly serious. An arrangement by Kyle Sanna of Hayes' Maghera creates an overlap between the fiddling style and classical minimalism, while the signature tune The Butterfly brings together artificial harmonics and other extended classical techniques with a brilliant improvisatory fiddle solo by Hayes. The highly ornamented modal melodies of Port na Bpúcaí, the longest and most substantial track on the disc, seem to blur and merge between the instruments, creating an effect of almost unbearable melancholy. P Joe's Reel, a tribute to Hayes' father, has a frenetic energy that builds spectacularly in speed and energy. After such a feat, it makes sense to end the album with the slower pace of Hole in the Hedge, bringing this virtuoso collection to an emotionally moving conclusion.

STRAUSS: DON QUIXOTE
Daniel Müller-Schott, cello; Herbert Schuch, piano; Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Sir Andrew Davis, cond. (Orfeo)

When we listen to Richard Strauss' early cello sonata side-by-side with the symphonic poem *Don Quixote*, it's hard to believe they're by the same composer. When Strauss composed the sonata at the ripe old age of 19, he hadn't yet found his compositional voice. But while it clearly looks back to the earlier 19th-century style of Mendelssohn, it is still an important work in Strauss' career trajectory. *Don Quixote*, by contrast, is a titanic work from the height of the composer's maturity.

In this disc, cellist Daniel Müller-Schott ambitiously brings the two works together, with transcriptions of two middle-period lieder as a kind of bridge. Together with pianist Herbert Schuch, he presents an elegant interpretation of the sonata, with long phrases and frequent portamento that are consistent with the performance practices of the era. This is a piano-heavy score, and because of this there appears to have been a deliberate decision to place the microphones in a way that favors the cello.

It's a testament to Müller-Schott's musicianship that he is equally convincing as the tragicomic anti-hero of *Don Quixote*. Violist Christopher Moore is the perfect foil in the role of Sancho Panza, while the Melbourne Symphony brings Strauss' unconventional sound effects brilliantly to life under the direction of Sir Andrew Davis.

The two transcriptions, *Zueignung* and *Ich trage meine Minne*, are cleverly done. The arranger, unacknowledged in the liner notes, makes optimal use of the cello's range by transposing certain passages down an octave, while reserving the original high pitches for moments of emotional emphasis. —*MW*

SOMOS
Villalobos Brothers (Villalobos Brothers)

With *Somos*, the Villalobos Brothers balance virtuosity and ambition with playfulness and compassion. One on hand, the three violinist siblings plus childhood friend and guitarist Humberto Flores continue to mix classical chops with a cornucopia of traditional folk forms including son jarocho, trova, and son huasteco. On the other, these sons of Xalapa, Mexico, also embrace American rock idioms, jazz dissonance, and effervescent pop on their new collection. The title alone, which means we are, catapults past the moniker of their 2012 set, *Aliens of Extraordinary Ability,* taken from a designation once stamped on their U.S. entry visas.

Somos is both a declaration of identity and a musical travelogue that traces how brothers Ernesto, Albert, and Luis have become citizens of the world. As such, they add political awareness to their potent multicultural cocktail. Hombres de Arcilla, which commemorates 43 missing students abducted from a rural college by state police, plays like the overture of a Broadway show—if that production incorporated anxious cinematic underscores, down-tempo jazz, and whiplash violins scrawling vapor trails across the sky.

On Xalapa Bang, tangled violins that mimic pirouetting dust devils and shrieking siroccos are crisscrossed by guest

Arturo O'Farrill's atonal tumbling jazz piano. The music is bracing and upbeat, but the Spanish lyrics, sung by the brothers, laments a peaceful protest crushed by the iron fist of an oppressive state.

In contrast, Destino hews closer to the quartet's rural Mexican roots. Riding swaying three-part cantina violin, an a cappella corrido chorus sings of international travelers still emotionally tethered to home.

On *Somos*' title track, the Villalobos Brothers' activism and humanity conjoin. As ascending scythes of violin wheel overhead, the brothers decry freedom that welcomes bloodshed and progress that leaves children starving in its wake. The tune turns triumphant when the singing siblings counter that Mexicans, Colombians, Cubans, and Uruguayans are all brothers.

At a time when democracies have gotten increasingly cornered into culs de sac of bitter infighting, the Villalobos Brothers turn to courage, humanity, and an infections *joie de vivre* to find a way forward. —*Pat Moran*

FIREWEED
Natalie Padilla, fiddle
(Natalie Padilla)

With an exacting attention to detail that betrays her classical training and an infectious energy drawn from her study of Texas-style fiddle under the tutelage of her award-winning fiddle-playing mother Nancy, Natalie Padilla serves up 15 waltzes, barn-burners, and laments on *Fireweed*. It's a tribute to Padilla's dedication to authenticity that each of these originals could easily pass for old-time fiddle tunes found on field recordings.

The collection's title track builds upon its one-part clawhammer banjo melody with shuddering fiddle switchbacks that shadow Padilla's vocal about blossoming fireweed giving way to approaching winter's unmistakable signs.

Padilla turns to old-time tuning cross-A on Goose, which takes its title from a friend's boisterous terrier. Here restless scrawls of fiddle arc skyward like ascending coils of woodsmoke. Padilla's bowing winds whiplash curves over clog dance–mimicking percussion on the Celtic-flavored Tetonia.

On the Texas-style Janet's Waltz, harmonized fiddles chatter, dropping double-stops, as they sashay out onto the dance floor. Over the Clouds, a funky F-major ditty, suggests dual fiddles swaying on a fulcrum before descending on spinning-jenny bowing.

Padilla's whippet-swift fiddle spins like a flywheel on Peasant and Prince, while her feathered vocals contrast sharply with lyrics about winter winds scouring a frozen wasteland. Similarly, on Ron and Lavone her wheeling and weaving fiddle whines like a whirlwind finding a chink in a cabin's wall.

Even the humorous mea culpa Piggy Piggy Pie houses a sting. As Padilla's elastic bowing snaps to attention with seesawing tremolo, her repetitive good-time vocal can't conceal her guilty apology to cute little piglets for continuing to eat pork.

With virtuosity, authenticity, and humor, Padilla celebrates the hand-crafted front-porch tunes that continue to inspire her, capturing the music's campfire singalong spontaneity. At the same time, she never loses sight of roots music's hard-scrabble origins, where the bucolic can turn brutal with a simple shift in the wind. —*PM*

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION (Required by 39 USC 3685)

(1) Title of Publication: Strings (2) Publication No.: 0888-3106 (3) Date of Filing: October 1, 2019 (4) Frequency of Issue: Bi-monthly (5) No. of Issues Published Annually: 6 (6) Annual Subscription Price: $30.00 (7) Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: 941 Marina Way South, Suite E, Richmond CA 94804-3768 (8) Complete Mailing Address of the Headquarters of General Business Offices of the Publisher: 941 Marina Way South, Suite E, Richmond CA 94804-3768 (9) Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher: David A. Lusterman, 941 Marina Way South, Suite E, Richmond CA 94804-3768 Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Editor: Megan Westberg, 941 Marina Way South, Suite E, Richmond CA 94804-3768 Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Managing Editor: Stephanie Powell, 941 Marina Way South, Suite E, Richmond CA 94804-3768 (10) Owner: String Letter Publishing, Inc., 941 Marina Way South, Suite E, Richmond CA 94804-3768 Owner: David A. Lusterman, (11) Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities: None (12) N/A (13) Publication Title: Strings (14) Issue Date for Circulation Data Below: September/October 2019 (15) Extent and Nature of Circulation:

	Average Copies Each Issue Preceding 12 Months	Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
15 a. Total Number of Copies (Net press run)	8,594	8,331
15 b. Paid Circulation		
(1) Paid Mail Subscriptions through USPS	4,251	4,107
(3) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales	68	58
(3) Paid distribution outside USPS, foreign subs	404	386
Subtotal (3)	472	444
15 c. Total Paid Circulation (Sum of 15b(1) and 15b(3))	4,723	4,551
15 d. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution		
(1) Free or Nominal Rate Mail Subscriptions	2,900	3,105
(4) Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail	435	0
15 e. Total Free Distribution (Sum of 15d(1) and 15d(4)	3,335	3,105
15 f. Total Distribution (Sum of 15c and 15e)	8,058	7,656
15 g. Copies Not Distributed	536	675
15 h. Total (Sum of 15f and 15g)	8,594	8,331
15 i. Percent Paid (15c and divided 15f times 100)	59%	59%
16 a. Paid Electronic Copy Circulation	4,670	4,409
16 b. Total Paid Print Copies (Sum of 15c and 16a)	9,393	8,960
16 c. Total Print Distribution and Paid Electronic Copies (Sum of 15f and 16a)	12,728	12,065
16 d. Percent Paid (Both Print & Electronic Copies) (16b divided by 16c)	74%	74%

Signed, David Lusterman, Publisher

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Which historical violin maker's work is closest to your heart and why?

CONRAD ERB

I wish that I could come up with a surprise answer on this, but I can't. Antonio Stradivari is the man and that's that! Stradivari was as dominant in his field as Beethoven, Bach, or the Beatles were in music. He was the Michael Jordan of violin making with the genius of Einstein added in. Stradivari's instruments are always superbly crafted, displaying his masterful technique, which never wavered—even during an eight-decades-long career.

No detail of a Stradivari instrument is accidental. He sweated the details and it shows. The carving of the wood—whether it's the beautiful, flowing arching, f-holes, splendidly sculpted edgework, purfling, or scroll—there is always an artistic unity and beauty beyond words. He is one historical figure that I would most like to meet. Judging by the uncompromising character of his work, he was probably all business and not much fun to be around at times!

In addition, Strad was an innovator and was always experimenting with a slightly different model or design idea, without compromising his artistic identity. Even after his death in 1737, his legacy continues to inspire both makers and musicians around the world to seek the very best in their craft and art.

—Christopher Germain, luthier

Strings (ISSN – 0888-3106, USPS - 1127) is published bi-monthly by String Letter Publishing, Inc., 941 Marina Way S., Suite E, Richmond, CA 94804. Periodical postage paid at Richmond, CA 94804 and additional mailing offices. Printed in USA. Canada Post: Publications mail Agreement #40612608. Canada Returns to be sent to Imex Global Solutions, PO Box 32229, Hartford, CT 06150-2229. **POSTMASTER**: Please send address changes to *Strings*, String Letter Publishing, Inc., PO Box 91149, Long Beach, CA 90809-1149.


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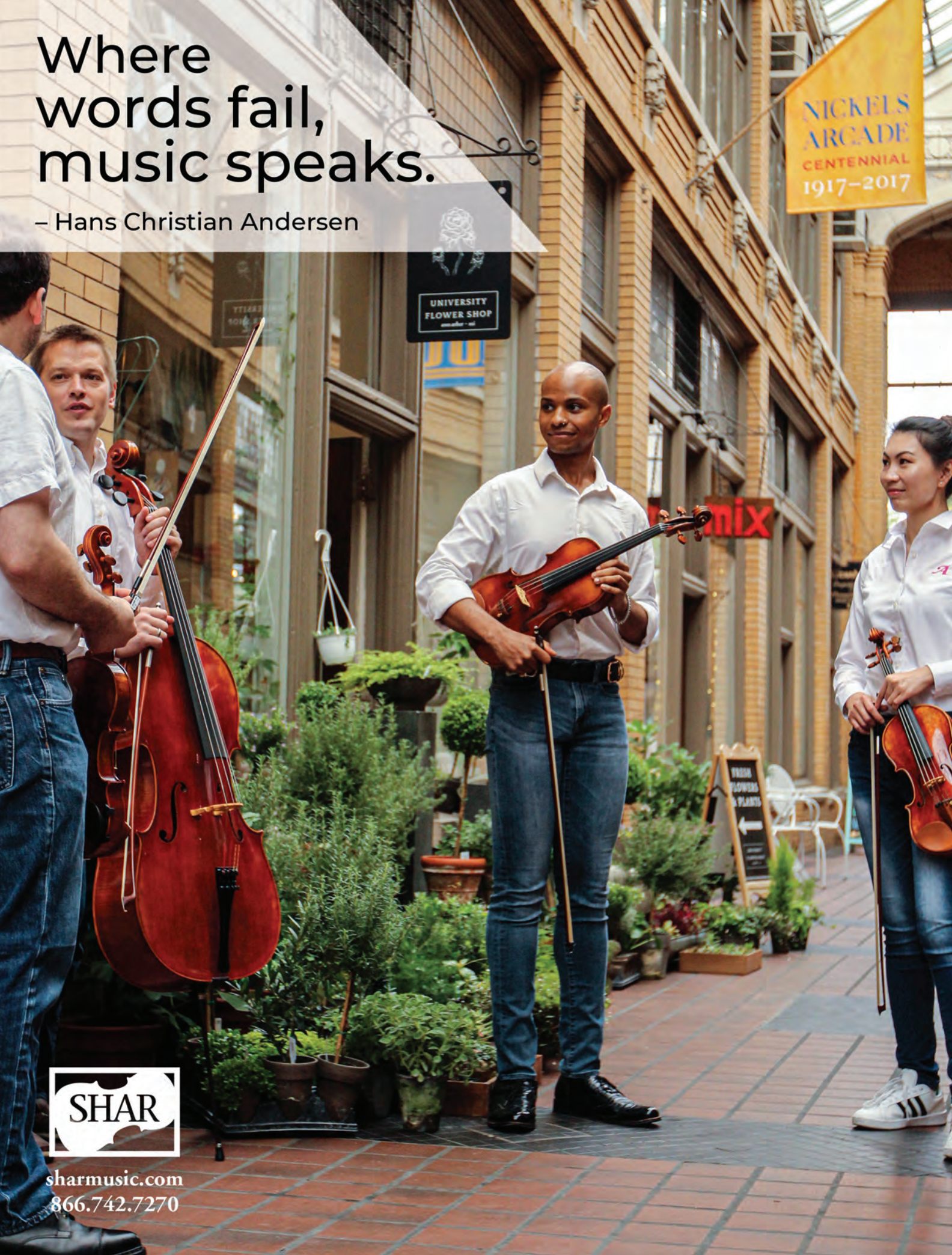
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