

MUSIC FOR THE LOVE OF IT

MARCH 2008

Virtuoso by Biana Kovic

I once heard that most people die “with music in their heart.” On hearing this statement I felt a strong urge to do something. Being a cello instructor in New York City who specializes in teaching adult students, I witness every day the amazing progress possible in older age and its advantages over youth. The reasons for that are the strong focus, openness and eagerness to learn which adult students bring to lessons and practice. I also strongly believe that once we allow ourselves to be immersed in the learning process and not worry about the outcome, fulfilling the music in our heart comes more easily. The process, in my opinion, is the end product, which is constantly evolving and naturally bringing progress.

So in November, 2004, I decided to make a documentary film in which I would teach an older woman with no prior musical education to begin to play the cello. The participant was to receive the cello, bow, music stand, music and one month of intensive cello lessons for free. In return she would allow me to film the process. I hoped that the film would encourage other adults to learn something new. Immediately I started my search for a volunteer who would be interested in my project, which I named *Virtuoso—It’s Never Too Late For Cello*. It took me one year and four months to find my participant. Her name is Matty Kahn. Her age is 89.

Matty Kahn is a very unusual 89-year-old. A self taught painter and sculptor, she is still very active and passionate in pursuing

her art. She takes pride in being able to live on her own in a beautiful sunny studio located on the Upper East Side in Manhattan, and still do things such as drive a car, wash and clean, and get around the city by herself. When she volunteered, she said that she wanted to prove to herself and her family that she is still capable of learning new things. She also always favored string instruments and she wanted to go through the experience of learning to play one. I liked her truthfulness and openness. Right away we set up a lesson and shooting schedule that would begin in less than a week, in March 2006.

Our first lesson together was the first day of the shoot. Matty and I were very excited. We started the lesson with something that she was already comfortable with: drawing. I gave her an assignment to draw the cello. Once the drawing was completed, we moved right into learning two important aspects of cello hold: sitting properly and placing the instrument.

As a cello player who has spent a lot of hours playing, I am extremely conscious of creating good sitting habits in my students, making them aware of their body center, sit bones and lower back—three important components of good posture. For Matty, learning to maintain a proper posture was a challenge. When I asked her how it felt to suddenly pay so much attention to her posture, she responded excitedly that she finally had a reason to sit “tall”! On the other hand, *placing the cello* came intuitively to her. She picked up the instrument and moved it around until it felt comfortable. It was very impressive to watch her adjust the instrument to her own liking as she naturally created a good balance between having it rest against her left breastbone and supporting it with her knees. As we came close to lunchtime, our wrap-up for the day, my director of photography asked me if Matty

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Matty Kahn learning to hold her bow

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When her last stroke ended, she proudly stood up and took a long bow.



Learning music notation

could play a short tune. I turned to Matty and asked her if I could teach her one more thing. She agreed and in less than an hour, the crew and I listened to Matty's very first composition, one that she created by plucking open strings. As we were saying goodbye to her, she gave us a huge grin to signal her victory.

On the second shoot day, a week later, Matty looked nervous. She acknowledged that the restlessness was coming from wanting to repeat the success that she had the previous week. She knew that I was going to introduce her to two new techniques: *note reading* and *bow hold*. She worried about having enough vitality in her mind and body to do them correctly. I reminded her that she was doing great and that we were interested in the learning process and not the end product. She quietly listened and very soon we began our lesson. We sat at her kitchen table as she began to learn the notes. Once we felt that we had practiced enough, we took a short break and then moved on to learning how to hold the bow. Throughout the morning I watched Matty undergo a transformation as she willingly worked on allowing her mind and body to let go of constant expectations.

By doing so, she was able to immerse herself in the learning process, which naturally brought progress.

On the third and fourth shooting days, which were also a week apart, we focused on learning new concepts, integrating the ones that she already knew and allowing both, old and new to point us in the direction that we needed to go. We came to the conclusion that her right wrist was weak and that we needed to change the size of the bow, from full to quarter size. We became aware of how much the position of her head, which was slightly angled towards her right shoulder, affected her sitting. We were pleasantly surprised with the strength and the precision with which her left arm and fingers handled the strings. Matty realized that consistent practice, even if it is only for five minutes, is more effective than a longer irregular one. She discovered that the cello, like a person, responds to both neglect and support that occur through touch and hold. Together we concentrated on trusting the process and being aware of the pressure that comes with wanting to attain a certain goal. She said this helped her to focus more on her internal experience, which she found pleasurable.

Since we had already done most of the shooting in her apartment, I asked Matty where she would like to do the final scene. She suggested her house in Yonkers from where she had moved five years ago when her husband passed away. Upon our arrival, Matty began to reminisce and we spent a few hours learning about her life. As a final act, I asked her to play the first three

lines of a very short piece that we were working on. When her last stroke ended, she proudly stood up and took a long bow.

In her final interview, I asked Matty to share some of her thoughts on two subjects that interest me the most: learning and aging. Her response was that learning keeps her going. It is the only companionship she has, especially at times when she feels lonely remembering that most of the people that she has known and loved have passed away.

This remarkable experience served to confirm my strong belief that aging and learning can be companions to a long life and that the learning process brings "music in our heart" into reality.

Biana Kovic is a founder of It's Never 2 Late Inc. — Cello Studio for Adults in New York. In her studio, Biana uses an accelerated learning technique which makes learning fun and easy for people at any age and any stage of their lives. The video she describes making is available from her web site at www.virtuosodocufilm.com.

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To my surprise, I could play it faster and more cleanly doing it my way. My way, not the “right way.”

Never too Late:

The Right Way by Ruth Cazden

I confess: I’m the type who follows printed instructions. So it’s no surprise that I tend to play what’s written. If the editor marks something “up-bow,” I do it. If nine notes are slurred, that’s what I play, or at least attempt to play. If the editor shows a shift to fifth position, I practice until I can make the shift, even though the phrase can be played perfectly well in first position.

Having started violin and viola at age 45, I naturally assume that the editor has played since he or she was four and has a fancy conservatory degree. Surely such a person knows the correct way to bow, phrase and finger.

My first music workshop, however, provided a big hint that there isn’t necessarily one right way to play music. We had one coach for the morning and a different one for the afternoon. The morning coach spent a good deal of time getting us to play a series of staccatos off the string. I was quite shaken when the afternoon coach came in and told us to play them on the string. Both coaches were professional musicians and both played superbly. But their ideas about the “right way” to play those staccatos were completely opposite.

A few months ago the issue was fingering a Rode *Caprice* originally composed for violin but transcribed for viola. The editor had indicated second position fingering for the first three bars. This made the bowing relatively easy, but the fingering quite awkward. I compared it to my edition for violin and found that the editor had fingered it in first position, reversing the result. Totally confused, I checked my viola teacher’s edition. That editor had used second position at the beginning of the caprice and first position when the

same passage came up in the recap. A subversive thought began popping up. Perhaps these “correct” fingerings and bowings represent some crazy editor’s inspiration and not the “right way” to play the music.

The widely used Peters editions of the Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven string quartets were edited by Andreas Moser (Hugo Becker did the cello parts). Just who the heck was Mr. Moser? Moser (1859-1925) was a student and assistant of the renowned violinist, Joseph Joachim. Moser’s violin career never got off the ground because of a bow arm injury. Why should those of us who play Mozart slavishly follow the bowings and fingerings of an impaired violinist born 68 years after Mozart’s death?

Near the end of the last movement of Mozart’s *G Minor Viola Quintet* (K.#516), the first violin plays a 3-bar, 3-octave ascending G major arpeggio. Mr. Moser has the violinist bowing the passage backwards, with the downbeats on an up-bow. I can’t hear any musical advantage. After practicing with Mr. Moser’s bowing for several days I tried the more conventional pattern. To my surprise, I could play it faster and more cleanly doing it my way. My way, not the “right way.”

When I began to play viola, a friend gave me her old copy of the Bach Suites transcribed for viola. This was a well-worn, dog-eared Schirmer publication edited by Samuel Lifschey, former principal violist of the Philadelphia Orchestra. I had a good time fooling around with the *G Major Suite* on my own, and then began to study it seriously in my lessons. My teacher insisted that I work from the

Watson Forbes edition, published by Chester Music. Forbes’ bowings for the *Allemande* are not terribly difficult: many detached notes and few long or unpredictable slurs.

A few years later, I decided to revisit the *G Major Suite*. Although Meg, my current teacher, had studied with Lillian Fuchs who did the very first viola transcription of the Suites, she reluctantly agreed that I could use my Forbes edition. On listening to my rendition of the *Allemande*, Meg commented that it sounded disjointed, lacking the flowing character of the movement. More practice helped, but Meg still wanted the line to be more flowing.

In desperation I went home and pulled out that old, dog-eared Lifschey edition which has longer slurs and fewer disconnected notes. This worked better, but at my next lesson Meg asked me to try the Lillian Fuchs bowings. Although they are somewhat awkward and considerably harder, I preferred their musicality and they helped me to achieve that flowing line. However, I really disliked Fuchs’ bowings in the last two bars. Her two-note slurs sounded silly to my untrained ear, more like Mozart than Bach. Looking at the Forbes and Lifschey editions, I realized that I didn’t quite like their endings either.

Progressing from subversion to rebellion, I created my own bowing for those two measures, taking what I liked from each of those “correct” editions and adding my own twist. The result was a musical ending that really pleased me. For me, it was the right way.

Ruth Cazden is an insurance consultant in El Cerrito, California.

Beethoven Variations

by Elizabeth Morrison



Beethoven, Quartet,
Opus 18 #5: "with our feet
barely touching the floor"



Beethoven's Quartet, Opus 18 #5:
the cello steps out

The movements I usually like best are variations. This is a little bit of a guilty secret, though. I've been told that variations are a lesser form. They lack the formal structure of a sonata movement; they tell anecdotes rather than proper stories. Even so, I always look forward to playing or hearing them.

Variations start, as life does, with a theme. Often it is quite simple, as life often is between the occasional great highs or lows. As the Buddhist monks say, "Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water; after enlightenment, chop wood, carry water." But if the daily round isn't boring, and it isn't, it's because there is an endless variety to the way water can be carried and wood chopped. Variations are the musical expression to this sweet paradox.

I love many composers' variations, but my very favorites are Beethoven's. They say that Beethoven could improvise endlessly at the piano, and I always feel that his variation movements must express this quicksilver quality. The first of one I fell in love with was the *Andante* of his *Quartet, Opus 18 #5*, which I was assigned at Humboldt in 1986. The theme caught me first, so amazing in its simplicity and purity. We four players seemed to be a courtly procession, or moving through the opening steps of a dance. From the 16th notes in the second strain I caught an implication that we would not always be dancing so decorously, or with the person who brought us, yet we finished the theme an octave higher with our feet barely touching the floor (see above, center).

Then came the first variation. A dancer stepped out of the elegant line, and to my surprise it was me! I think it was Tom Stauffer who said that we cellists are usually the ones holding up the ballerina as she dances in the spotlight, yet here I was with a little dotted figure and an elegant set of grace notes, taking a solo of my own.

I was completely hooked from that moment on. The very best part comes at the end, where we play the theme joyfully, overlaid with a harmonious accompaniment figure, and then *poco adagio*, as if this little dance was the most significant thing in the world (see above, right).

I found this movement so delightful that I went home determined to play every Beethoven quartet variation. But the next variation movement I fell in love with was very far from that of Opus 18. It was in Opus 125—the slow movement of the Ninth Symphony, which I played for the first time in the Santa Monica College Orchestra.

As a listener I had always waited a little impatiently through the slow movement, looking forward to the *Ode to Joy*. I'm not sure I even knew that the *Adagio* was a set of variations. The great thing about orchestra rehearsals, though, is that you get to have an intimate, chamber-music-like experience of music written for a hundred people. As we practiced, I realized that it is indeed a set of variations, but most unusual ones. The theme, very expansive in a slow 4/4 time, does not actually change in character, except to receive more and more embellishments. The tune is always at the same tempo, almost always in B-flat major (except for a

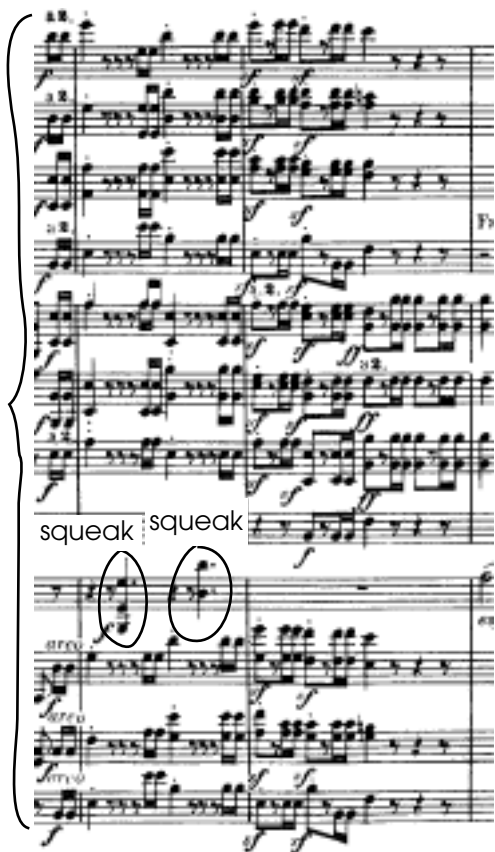
brief interlude in E-flat), and almost always played in the violins.

What there are, instead, are *interruptions*. After the statement of the theme, instead of the first variation there is a completely different theme, played *andante* rather than *adagio*, in D major, from the violas. Beethoven then returns to B-flat for the first variation. Then the *andante* theme returns in G major, this time from the woodwinds. It is not heard again. But as we make our way through increasingly elaborate versions of the B-flat theme, there are two more huge interruptions, enormous brass-led fanfares, followed by dark passages in d-flat minor. What were these interruptions and how did they relate to the variations?

I found the answer in a remark by the great conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, who said that when he conducted this movement he felt that Beethoven was explicitly describing his own life and death. This made sense of the movement for me, without taking the least bit away from its mystery. Here's how I read the story. In the B-flat theme, Beethoven is describing his creative life—the endless springs of music that are his genius. In its perfection no change is possible—that's why the variations all have the same character. The elaborations are perhaps only changes of scale, as when you look more closely at a flower and see, not a different flower, but more deeply into the same one.

The *andante* theme, on the other hand, is on a human not heavenly scale. Instead of the ethereal violins, Beethoven speaks in the violas, the middle voice, the voice of everyman. For these measures he steps out of his

fanfare



Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, Opus 125, Third Movement: fanfare and squeak



Final variation from Beethoven's "Archduke" Trio: the joy of music and life

After the first fanfare, though, Beethoven does not die. There is a sad measure, but the theme comes back like health returning after an illness. A few bars later, though, death comes again. This fanfare is even more majestic, and again his soul faints, but this time, the music shows us that death does overtake him. Then come four measures (at letter B, if you're following) where Beethoven allows us the actual experience of his death.

These measures seem endless. The tempo has by now settled into 12/8, and you feel every beat. The cello section holds a low D-flat, always, in Beethoven, a sign of great spiritual significance. It is quiet and very, very dark. And then, at the final beat of the fourth bar, quite simply this time, the theme comes back. I can cry just thinking about it. It is the strongest argument for the survival of the soul I can imagine. Death has done its worst, and he is still Beethoven.

This is the music I want playing at my own death. Also, and I know I'm not the only one who has done this, I have given thought to the music I want at my funeral. It should be some variations, and in fact variations movements are often played at memorials. The scale may differ, but all of them tell this piece of the story of the Ninth Symphony: that whatever may have happened, there is always a different way to understand it.

I felt this very strongly two summers ago at Humboldt, when the variations movement of the "Archduke" Trio was played as a memorial for the friends we lost that year. The theme, marked *andante cantabile*, is perfect: at that mid-point between hymn and dance, with each phrase ending with a sigh from

the two strings. These are real variations; the first has triplets, the second is lively and dancing, the third is *agitato*, the fourth solemn.

In the fifth and final variation Beethoven (quoted above) turns the theme into a question. The cello, *pianissimo* and with a lowered third, asks if we know how sad life is. The violin answers yes, only too well. Once again, for the first time since the opening statement, the strings sigh. They ask the piano, but find no answers there either. All three wait and mourn. Bar after bar goes by in *pianissimo*, without crescendo, and the B-flat of d minor appears over and over in the piano. Then, just when we can hardly bear any more, the lucky cello holds the E on the A string, our most beautiful note, through a whole measure, gradually adding vibrato and sound, until at last, in a beautiful triplet, she brings back D major and with it the joy of music and of life.

After this moment of enlightenment, *pace* the Buddhist monks, we are not quite back to chopping wood and carrying water. The movement finishes with a poignant turning figure we have not heard before; the sadness is not wished away, but it is somehow put into context, and we see the way forward (to the *attaca* last movement, as it happens.) And so it is with Beethoven's variations. Clear-eyed and sympathetic, knowing so much yet somehow remaining hopeful, they are different every time we play them. I hope to continue learning from them for the rest of my life.

Cellist Elizabeth Morrison lives in Pacifica, California. A longer version of this article first appeared in *The Chamber Musician*, the CMNC Newsletter.



Encounter with an Esraj

by Casey Drury

"I teach dilruba." These words were the product of a multi-week search. On a working

vacation in India, I wanted lessons in a traditional Indian instrument.

Something like a cross between a sitar and a miniature cello, the dilruba is a bowed instrument with a low, throaty tone from its top set of four strings and a delightfully Eastern glissando from seventeen sympathetic strings. Also, it's half the size of the popular sitar, so getting a dilruba home would be much easier.

Unfortunately, the dilruba also proved to be half as popular as the sitar. Not even half; a third; a tenth. The small town of Rishikesh, a popular tourist destination in the Himalayas, boasted multiple music teachers. I tried them all. Each time, I was rebuffed; "Dilruba, no." Finally, I had found my teacher, Babu, in the basement of a Rishikesh hotel. "I teach dilruba." He smiled from beneath a thick mustache, then ventured, "But not dilruba."

"Not dilruba?" I echoed, wearily.

"Dilruba, no. Esraj I teach. Esraj same." I brightened; Babu was right. The Indian instruments dilruba and esraj are so similar that a player of one can play the other. I could learn on an esraj and buy a dilruba to take home.

Our lesson began with a disheartening revelation; to play the esraj (or dilruba) the musician folds his legs into a flat cross-leg. Babu sat; his legs melted effortlessly open, his knees touching the ground. I sat and, with considerable effort, my knees remained a stubborn four inches off the floor. Babu recommended I stack books on my knees to practice. In the meantime, I used a chair. After propping the esraj on my lap, he showed me an overhanded grip of the bow; it felt awkward and heavy. My teacher

air-bowed a stroke or two then gestured for me to begin.

A person's first time with a bowed instrument is not music. It is painful, caterwauling, awful noise. I almost couldn't blame Babu when he walked out of the room.

Almost.

He didn't come back until twenty minutes later. By then, I could squeak out a passable C scale with few screeches, but my finger was aching and my bowing wrist was stiff and painful. I asked my teacher if he could play something for me. Babu's face crumpled, "I sitar player. I no play esraj professional." That was fine, I assured him, I simply wanted to hear how the notes were supposed to sound. Reluctantly, he took the esraj. He placed the bow against the strings and pulled; the sound was horrendous. The bow protested loudly, scraping across the strings. Babu lowered the bow. "I no play esraj. I teach esraj, can teach, but no play." Perhaps spurred by the doubt in my face, he laid down the bow and proceeded to play the esraj like a sitar; plucking the strings and sliding between notes in the sultry, casual style of Indian *ragas* (devotional songs). He paused and asked, "Why no learn sitar? Sitar very good."

I borrowed the esraj and found an online music school's video, "How to Hold a Dilruba Bow." The correct position is underhanded – and much more natural than Babu's awkward wrist position. Working from grainy videos, though, is a far cry from interacting with a competent teacher, and in the end, I decided to set aside the esraj and return to another stringed instrument I'd been neglecting: my guitar. My neighbors are pleased.

To hear the esraj, go to <http://www.radiosrichinmoy.org/radio/96> or buy "Soul of the Esraj" by Benjy Wertheimer.

Casey Drury is a writer, photographer and musician. She lives in Athens, TN.

The In Box

THREE REALLY GOOD NEW BOOKS ABOUT MUSIC AND LIFE

We have just read these books and hope to review them in a future issue. *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* by Oliver Sacks, Alfred A. Knopf & Co., 2007. Neurologist Oliver Sacks writes with wonderful clarity and compassion about the role of music in the functioning, development and healing of the human brain, illuminated by his experience in treating people with brain injuries or abnormalities. The title refers to a patient who suddenly feels driven to compose and perform music, and does so at a high level, after surviving a lightning strike. Can Sacks top this one? Read on!

Morgy's Musical Summer by Maggie Lewis, illustrated by Michael Chesworth, Houghton Mifflin Children's Book Dept., Boston, 2008. Just done with fourth grade, Morgie has received a Promising Beginner trumpet scholarship to a music camp in northern New England. His adventures there are exciting and believable.

Rosindust: Teaching, Learning and Life from a Cellist's Perspective by Cornelia Watkins, Rosindust Publishing, Houston, 2008. Much of what Cornelia Watkins writes on playing the cello applies with equal depth and validity to any instrument. She knows music, the body and the learning process, and connects them beautifully.

SING YOUR WAY TO BETTER HEALTH, STUDY SUGGESTS

Victoria Meredith, a University of Western Ontario professor studied four choirs, whose members varied in age from 18 to 84, for the past two years. She concluded that performing in a choir "can keep you younger and healthier longer" pointing to similar studies that found people who sing on a regular basis require fewer doctors' visits, are less prone to falls, don't need as much medication and are less likely to be depressed. Forwarded by Nora Mular-Richards from Canwest News Services, National Post, January 5, 2008.

NEW WORKSHOP LISTINGS

CAMMAC (Canadian Amateur Musicians/Musiciens amateurs du Canada) offers a bilingual chamber music weekend in the Canadian Springtime on May 16-19, 2008. Professional teachers of violin, piano, flute and cello work closely with participants. CAMMAC is located one and one-half hours from Montreal on the shores of Lake MacDonald. For more details, please check the CAMMAC website at www.cammac.ca or phone us at 1-819-687-3938, ext. 1. I hope to see you at our weekend.

Harry Qualman
Board President, CAMMAC

The Canford Summer School of Music, with weekly sessions July 27-August 17, 2008 at the Sherbourne School in Dorset, England, for musicians of all levels and ages, offers courses in string quartet playing, wind chamber music, orchestra, jazz, choral singing, piano accompaniment, composition, conducting and music technology. Total fees are £485.50 and up. Canford Summer School of Music, P.O.Box 629, Godstone, RH9 8WQ, UK. phone: +44 020 660 4766, fax: +44 020 668 5273, canfordsummersch@aol.com.

For a complete workshop update see www.musicfortheLoveofit.com/mwg



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