

BARTOK AND THE LOST MINE TRAIL

by Jane Carlberg

Several months ago, I had the good fortune to be in Texas for a week of hiking with my husband in the Big Bend National Park. The following weekend I was in Maine with some musical colleagues working on a Bartok string quartet. At first glance, these two experiences would seem to have little in common: one is mostly physical, the other intellectual; one deals with nature, the other with art; one fairly concrete, the other abstract. However, as I reflect on both, I begin to see that they are related in many more ways than one would expect.

For our last morning in Big Bend, we chose to hike the Lost Mine Trail. The park rangers and other hikers told us that we would find spectacular views all the way to the top. Waking up to fog was normal in these mountains, and this morning was no different. "It will blow off," we reassured each other. Getting out of the car at the trailhead we assessed the situation, which was windy, cold and damp, and decided to take all the clothes we had brought. We could see clouds rolling to the top of the mountains and more clouds rising up from the valley below. "Great views indeed," I thought. For a moment or two, I considered giving up the whole idea, but decided to give it a try. As we began to climb and got into the interior of the trail, it was more comfortable. However, the promised views were not to be had, so our attention turned to the things close by.

In Big Bend, along the borders of the Rio Grande, the Chisos Mountains rise up out of the Chihuahuan desert, creating a wealth of botanical and geological diversity. Being in a transitional area we began to notice unusual combinations: prickly pear cactus under piñon pine, lechiquilla among the grasses, agave next to an oak. As the trail made a sharp turn we found ourselves on a

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View from the Lost Mine Trail
Jane Carlberg photo

PREPARING FOR A MUSICAL PERFORMANCE:

FLYING SOLO

by Odile Leclerc

In October 2003, I decided to give a solo recital. Having mastered Vivaldi's *Summer* and what would be my encore, Massenet's *Meditation of Thaïs*, I still had to learn two sonatas and the third movement of the Mendelssohn violin concerto, along with a few other pieces. Knowing I could do it was enough for me to feel confident about the upcoming recital. But it takes more than knowing the music well to prepare for a solo performance.

It was my teacher who planted the idea of "flying solo" in a somewhat near future.

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One-half hour to go!

second violin, but you have the important rhythm in that spot, and the rest need to hear you. Play it out!" And in another place: "Please notice the pianissimo marking at measure whatever," says he, "You need to play softly enough here to get a real contrast later." "Second violin and viola, you are together there. Look at each other and the rest of you back off so they can be heard." There were occasional breakdowns and we did take time, of course, to go back and repair the damage, finding out quickly where we had erred and moving on. But I began to realize that our coach had great respect for our ability to take care of the details ourselves, and he was going for the big picture. Slowly, the phrases began to take shape, the dissonant harmonic writing started to reveal itself and the structure of the piece began to come through. Like our hike on the Lost Mine Trail, the Bartok was allowing itself to be seen and the fog was slowly but gradually lifting. After lunch, as we revisited the material, it started to feel more familiar and our view of the piece became more panoramic as had the downward trip on our hike.

Later, after dinner, we decided to play some Haydn again to relax after our day's efforts. Most of us were sight-reading this particular quartet, but were now in familiar waters. Our fingers knew these scales, and even the wonderful surprise cadences and modulations that Haydn loved were in our musical vocabulary. The phrase structure was straightforward and expected. But this time, our listening skills honed to a new sharpness from the difficulty of hearing the Bartok and our confidence in each other having grown to a new level, we entered into a four-sided conversation, instinctively stepping out when we had something to say, politely retreating to hear the response, joining in perfect balance when we were speaking together and echoing each other's subtle nuances. We came to the end of the slow movement and sat in silence and awe as we realized what had taken place. We had gone farther than anticipated with the Bartok, but beyond that we had achieved something even greater as a group.

Like leaving the summit of the Lost Mine Trail, it was difficult to tear ourselves away the next day, but we left with a richer understanding of the intimacies of quartet playing, a new appreciation of each other, both musically and personally, and warm memories of having shared this magical and mystical experience.

For me, the two events are entwined, melody and countermelody, each reinforcing the other in their lessons: the accomplishments that come from perseverance, the importance of attention to detail while keeping the big picture in mind, the magic that comes from engaging in something so much greater than yourself, and perhaps most of all, the joys of sharing these rewards with others.

Jane Carlberg, violinist, lives on Long Island with her husband, Francis Bonner, chemist and violist. Retired from teaching, she and her husband enjoy playing chamber music with friends, attending concerts in New York, and hiking.

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I jumped at the idea, risk taker that I am: "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." But before embarking on the solo performance bandwagon, it was essential to know why I wanted to do this. Clearly stating the reasons helped to keep focus when the going got tough during preparation. Learning new repertoire, sticking to a deadline, and ceasing to play music for my ears only, are great motivational tools.

When my recital was over, I had achieved all my goals. And as a bonus, I proved that I could support an hour and a half of music without collapsing. It was so exhilarating that all I could think of was: "I want to do it again. Soon." Through the journey, I discovered that soloing is an extraordinary way to grow as a musician.

To increase your odds of success, here are some guidelines to prepare in depth for a solo musical performance.

Before entering the practice room

Choosing the program is the most exciting part of putting a recital together. Remember that your pleasure and the enjoyment of others are of the utmost importance. The idea is not to show uncertain virtuosity or tire the audience with music they can't associate with. It is better to select pieces that you love, inspire you, and do not contain difficult technique that could shake your confidence. At first, don't restrain yourself. Simply list any piece that comes to mind. Then, determine how long you want the recital to last and pick pieces accordingly. At this point, don't worry about the order, since you can make changes up until the last minute.

Now, decide where and when you'd like the event to take place. In a friend's living room or in a 350-seat theater? Whatever your choice, make the necessary arrangements immediately and give yourself enough time to prepare (3 to 4 months is reasonable), even if you already have some mastered repertoire under your belt.

Finally, jot down a realistic time frame for things that also need to be done (if applicable): piano tuning, rehearsing with accompanist, replacing strings, rehairing the bow, designing and printing the programs, advertising, mailing the invitations, and the like. Sticking to this plan will help reduce stress.

Music preparation

Of course, knowing the music thoroughly is essential.