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Zara Nelsova

Raphael Wallfisch

Zara Nelsova was born Sara Katznelson in Winnipeg in 1918, and died in New York in 2002. The family was of Jewish-Russian descent.

Nelsova was one of the greatest cellists of our time. Her extraordinarily beautiful and intense sound, her fabulous stage presence, her supreme mastery of the cello and profound musicianship all combined to make a Nelsova performance a very special occasion. For me, at the early age of 14, Zara Nelsova's playing was a true revelation. That first occasion was an 'Invitation Concert' at the BBC studios in Maida Vale. Nelsova was playing the Brahms Double Concerto with Ida Haendel and the BBC Symphony with Sir Adrian Boult conducting. I was totally bowled over by the playing, and of course by the incredible music, and for me it was a turning point in my life from which I never looked back.

Nelsova was a child prodigy, first performing at the age of five in Winnipeg. She eventually moved with her family to London, where she studied at the London Cello School with its principal, Herbert Walenn. She was known for a while as Sarah Nelson, before changing her name to the far more dramatic Zara Nelsova. Sir John Barbirolli heard her during this time, and introduced her to Casals from whom she received additional lessons. In 1932, still only 13 years old, she gave a London debut recital and appeared as soloist with Sir Malcolm Sargent and the LSO. She also made some recordings in her early teens for London Records of Moór's *Prelude Op. 123* and de Falla's *Ritual Fire Dance* (available on YouTube). Both these performances are immense in stature, Nelsova's sound incandescent and a masterclass in musical focus.

During World War 2, Nelsova was principal cellist of the Toronto Symphony, making her solo debut recital in New York in 1942. Gradually her fame spread and after the war she regularly toured the world as a soloist, including to the USSR.

I was lucky enough to meet Zara many times when I was a student and regularly after that. Eleanor Warren, who had been a fellow student of Walenn's at the London Cello School, often hosted her old friend at her apartment in London. Eleanor, a fine cellist herself





and a friend of my parents, allowed me to practise in her apartment—a short walk from the Royal Academy of Music, where I was studying—whenever I needed. On one occasion, I arrived to find Zara busy practising. When I tentatively knocked on the door, she welcomed me in and immediately asked me to play her something. From that day we became friends, and I had several impromptu lessons with her over the years. I would also never miss an opportunity to hear her frequent London concerts both in recital and with orchestra.

Of her many recordings and televised performances, I would like to mention some very special ones. In 1965, Zara recorded the Samuel Barber Concerto with the composer conducting the New Symphony Orchestra of London on the label Ace of Clubs. This incredible performance was also the occasion of a strange practical joke that haunted Zara all her life. The sessions were held in London's Kingsway Hall, and one of the cellists in the orchestra, who was admittedly knocked out by her amazing playing, decided to bring a cheap cello to one of the sessions, and after one take smashed the cello against a column in the building, shouting, 'I can never play again after hearing such wonderful

playing!' He thought it was a tribute, but in fact it was hard to see the humour, and Zara still shuddered when she recalled the incident many years later.

The one composer with whom Zara Nelsova is most associated is of course Ernest Bloch. Her playing of Bloch's *Schelomo* was in a class of its own. The highly charged romanticism and the Hebraic intensity of the music suited her cello sound perfectly, and Bloch loved her interpretation, affectionately calling her "Madame Schelomo". Bloch went on to dedicate three solo suites to her, and he can be heard accompanying her both at the piano and as conductor in recordings of *Three Pieces From Jewish Life* and *Schelomo* with the LPO.

Nelsova went on to make several recordings of *Schelomo*, and one of Bloch's other great concertante work, *Voice in the Wilderness*. These recordings, with Ansermet and the Suisse Romande, and Abravanel and the Utah Symphony, are all still available and unsurpassed, in my opinion. There is also a slightly abridged version of *Schelomo* on YouTube, with Nelsova playing with Leonard Bernstein at a live concert from Carnegie Hall. The DVD box set 'Nelsova, Grand Dame Du



'Violoncelle' contains some of Nelsova's filmed performances, including a marvellous performance of the first Kabalevsky Concerto. She made many recordings for Decca and CBC — chamber music with her husband, the pianist Grant Johannesen, and several solo sonatas and concertos. There is also a big collection, 'Milestones of a Cello Queen', with several albums, including interestingly, three of the Bach Suites, the Kodály Sonata Op. 8, Beethoven Sonatas, concerti by Dvořák, Schumann, Saint Saëns and Lalo, and much else. It is a pity that Nelsova never recorded the Elgar or Walton Concerti, both of which I heard her play live. She championed the Elgar well before Du Pré, and her playing had a great nobility.

Zara Nelsova was a dedicated teacher, teaching for many years in New York, and giving masterclasses all over the world, including at the Royal Academy of Music, who loaned her the 'Marquis of Corberon' Strad (1726), which she played for many years. When I was teaching in Zürich, I was able to invite Zara to give a masterclass to my students. Naturally, several of them played *Schelomo* for

her, and received wonderful insights.

Zara had a great sense of humour. When I asked her about a slightly unclear marking in the cello part, where Bloch indicates a quarter tone to be played between two notes, I thought that now, at last, I would learn from the best source which way it should be played! Her answer to me was, 'Honey, life is just too short to worry about it!'

I count myself incredibly lucky to have encountered Zara Nelsova, and to have known her as a very supportive and encouraging friend. The memory and inspiration of her artistry will live on forever.

Of Special Interest

con spirito • Penny Driver

A few years ago, I took a month off to walk the Grande Randonnée 5 from Lake Geneva to Nice across the Alps with my husband. The gruelling ascent and descent each day lent itself to much reflection and discussion on life so far... and what might come next! Many of my career highs as a cellist have involved chamber music, and chamber coaching was already a fulfilling part of my work alongside cello teaching at Wells Cathedral School and the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. I decided the time had come to set up a chamber

music programme closer to home (well, in my home and studio) in Finsbury Park.

I was lucky to meet a like-minded colleague, pianist Tamar Andrusier, whose experience and creative ideas about teaching chamber music complemented my own, and we spent long hours sharing thoughts, defining the ethos we wanted to create, choosing a name, commissioning a logo and, eventually, "**con**

spirito chamber music Sundays" was born! **con spirito** is for string players, pianists and wind players aged 10-18 and Grade 5 level upwards. Children are carefully matched into groups which meet together weekly in 80-minute sessions. A violinist or violist from a small pool of young professionals or Masters students works alongside us each week — a valuable experience for them. Each group works consistently at a piece or a movement for half of the academic year and we hold concerts in February and July.

What are the ingredients that make up **con spirito**? We prioritise giving time for developing the expressive and interactive skills of good chamber music playing and not just preparing for a performance. Exploring a musical interpretation is a shared process and in each session we make sure that every child in the group is contributing to the discussion. Many young musicians need coaxing out of their obsession with 'getting it right'; by shifting the focus onto being expressive. By allowing time for discussion about how the music should go, they learn skills of collaboration, and to be respectful of each other's ideas, as well as patience when someone else is finding something hard. We also find that children can gain confidence through creative or improvised music-making. Taking inspiration from a poem, a picture, or even 'what did you do in the holidays?', we get ideas flowing in chat first and then there is often a child who is quick to turn an idea into a musical figure. We then help others to join in with their own version or to add new layers of sound. This music creation develops skills of listening, imitating, balancing, blending sound, keeping pulse, and is liberating in so many ways.

We are always looking for the sweet spot between being demanding of a high level musically, but at the same time creating a fun and sociable atmosphere. Right from the start, homemade cake felt like a vital ingredient for our Sunday afternoon sessions and students come in eagerly glancing at what is on the table for the mid-session 'cake-break'. We also want to create a sense that music is a force for good in all our lives. Until Covid struck we ran a project in a care home for the elderly, where our students would not only perform their pieces but also create music to illustrate the residents' stories and memories — all this followed by tea, cake, and inter-generational chat. Our two concerts a year for family and friends raise money for a charity which the children choose themselves. We hope to instil a love of listening too and we take everyone on occasional concert outings — it's so much more fun for them attending a concert in a big group. We have built a relationship with



Wigmore Hall Learning, and a huge highlight for us was taking everyone to actually play in the Wigmore Hall. Admittedly the hall was empty at the time, but the thrill of being on that famous stage and performing to each other was unforgettable. Naturally there are always challenges. Planning our groups at the beginning of September each year is an intricate task, getting the right level of stretching and playability for each child, picturing what the dynamic will feel like in the group. There is currently an abundance of talented young cellists, which is great, but can make choosing repertoire more tricky! Of course Covid has been the biggest challenge of all. During the first lockdown we asked our students to send in their performances from home and we created a series of online **con spirito** Concerts for Care Homes.

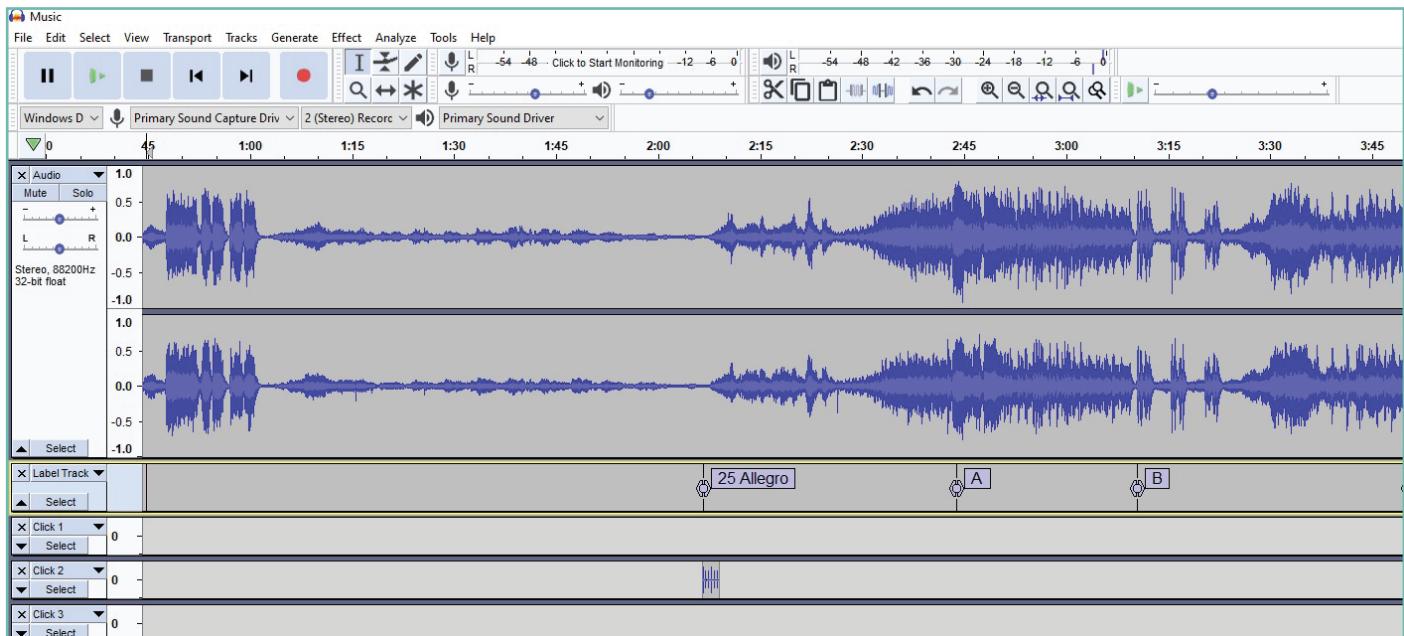
Having started live sessions once more in April this year after so many months of isolation, the meaning and value of chamber music for young musicians has never been more evident. It is a hugely rewarding experience for us to see these young people develop as expressive and collaborative musicians and to hear those touching moments in performance, when a group finds a collective sound and truly manages to put across their musical intention together.

<https://www.conspirito.co.uk/>



Cello Talk

Orchestra Rehearsals Before And After Covid Struck • Martin Bloomfield



Before Covid struck, attending orchestra rehearsals was a simple and routine matter: jump on a bus just outside our house and in eight minutes — assuming there are no road works which, in this area, is a stupid thing to assume — arrive at the large church hall. Being an early arrival, there is time to pop round to M&S and get stimulating coffee. My cello case, made of fibreglass in the early sixties, is uniquely designed so that the contours of the neck can hold a substantial reusable empty plastic cup, which can be wedged just behind the finger board of my 1810 Matthew Furber cello, a tremendous insight by the case designer, who must have anticipated these lidded plastic cups some decades before they were actually invented.

Volunteering to get coffee for other early birds, who are usually wind players for some unknown reason, I remove cup from case and enjoy the walk to the coffee counter. The rehearsal, for one of three concerts that the orchestra gives per year, lasts from 9.15am until 12.30.

After Covid struck all orchestral meetings were, of course, cancelled, and Zoom was used. It is quite extraordinary how Zoom seems to have suddenly manifested in this world at this particular time to meet head-on the virus situation, overcoming the problem of having to mix physically. Zoom seems the best answer to the question of how to meet as an orchestra without actually meeting. But this took some setting up. Fortunately, our orchestra

treasurer has an aptitude not only for the flute but also for computer technical stuff and, with a bit of research, alighted on something called Audacity. Audacity is a recording facility which I had never heard of, clearly due to being of a certain age. It works wonders! All you have to do is to import a piece of music into it and it can then play back that music at varying speeds without a change of pitch. Reasonably, one might expect the pitch to be lower if the music was played slower, and vice versa. But no: the pitch remains the same. Not only that, but this facility has the means of showing two tracks indicating visually the music in stereo and the volume of the music at any particular point in the score, so that nil volume may indicate the end of a movement, signifying a good place to start or stop. Also, a label track can be added allowing bar numbers or letters to be superimposed at the usual obvious points. This allows the monitor to select a point in the track from which the conductor may want to start, without having to go back to the beginning.

Another amazing facility of this modern technology is the provision of a track which provides a metronome which can be aligned to the music recorded, thus allowing the speed to be indicated for a few bars before the music is played.

So, the rehearsal: get out the cello, bow and suitable chair. Switch on the computer. Find the

music which has been emailed to each player in A4 size; today it's two overtures, the Egmont and Don Giovanni. Make the coffee, adjust the webcam, close the doors and greet others as they emerge onto the screen. Ten o'clock arrives, as does the Chairman who, after a warm welcome, outlines the latest Covid restrictions and details the future rehearsal schedule.

He hands the meeting over to the Conductor, who negotiates with the Treasurer controlling the technical aspects and the speed at which the first piece is to be played; those not so familiar with the work or not so adept with their fingers are hoping for a speed not as fast as others may wish for. And off we go! Absolutely no point in recording or assembling individual contributions into one performance as the variables are too

gross. But it's a good discipline to play along with the music and familiarise oneself with the difficulties.

Then might follow a break (drink some coffee quickly) where comments on bowing may be made by the Leader, following which there are often break-out rooms. In our cello room the leader will look at the elements of the music she thinks needs attention, and demonstrate the best bowing/fingering.

The advantage of Zoom is that it makes it possible to meet, to regularly keep in touch, which is a good thing. The breakout rooms for sectionals are also very useful indeed, but it would be good to get back to the real thing!

In Memoriam Marianne Gottfeldt 1939-2021 • Stephen Gottfeldt, Helen Gottfeldt

Marianne Gottfeldt (née Hoegh-Guldberg Hoff) was born in Copenhagen in 1939. Her mother was a concert pianist and passed down her musicality to all her children. Marianne's initial love was for singing but at the age of 10 she began the cello with German/Danish teacher Hans Erik Deckert, who would later visit the Oxford Cello School (OCS) several times in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While living in Geneva in the later 1950s, Marianne studied with Pierre Fournier. She moved to the United Kingdom in the 1960s and studied music at Westminster College in Oxford, whilst studying cello with Helen Just in London. In 1976 she became a peripatetic cello teacher for the Oxfordshire County Music Service (OCMS) where she discovered her passion for teaching. At her most prolific she was teaching some 40 students a week at around 20 schools across the county, not including her private tuition, which added many more.

Marianne's energetic, passionate, humorous and somewhat cheeky teaching style made her a hit with her pupils, one remembering '*I have so much to be thankful to her for...I can't start to think of the number of lives she will have had a lasting impact on. So many memories: she was always the naughtiest one in the class; the Villa Lobos cello ensemble being played by all the teachers sitting in a big circle in the school hall; the beautiful*

three-quarter size cello that she lent me...' She also cared deeply about the standard of music tuition generally at OCMS, and in equal measure about the development of young teachers newly entering into the profession. Cellist Spike Wilson from Oxford remembers: '*I owe my whole teaching career to her — when I graduated and was looking for work I was given her name and got in touch. She immediately told me to get off my backside (her exact words, so often used!) and go on her teaching round with her, and if I was any good she would recommend me to people. The rest is history. She was always so generous (such as selling me [her daughter] Helen's cello for an incredibly advantageous price because she knew that I loved it and would keep it always — and she was absolutely right, as it is still my beloved instrument) and knew exactly what people should do: though it was often hard to agree with her, she was usually right!*'

Marianne's daughter Helen, also a cellist, studied at the Royal College of Music in the mid 1980s and it was during this time that Marianne developed lasting friendships (and some rivalries!) with Helen's teachers, Christopher Bunting, Joan Dickson and Anna Shuttleworth, all of whom visited OCS. Ten years previous a young Helen had attended residential cello courses run by local cellist Jeanne Fry, her teacher at the time. Those courses



Marianne Gottfeldt

inspired Marianne to run a summer event for her own students in July 1980 at St. Nicolas primary school in Abingdon. In terms of facilities, it was a basic affair, with students bringing sleeping bags and inflatable mattresses to sleep on the classroom floors. However, it was a wonderfully collaborative experience, with several local OCMS teachers coming to develop their teaching skills with professor Wolfgang Drechsler from Geneva Conservatoire, one of Marianne's teachers from her days in Switzerland. Other local musicians, and luthiers new to the area also took the opportunity to develop new connections. And so began a gradual progression over the years (although proper beds weren't to become a firm fixture until 1989!), until after five different venues across the county, OCS finally secured the wonderful premises of St. Helen's School in Abingdon, its first true home.

Over the course of the following seven summers OCS developed considerably, formulating what would be the blueprint for the present-day courses at Radley College. The timetable evolved, morphing into a much fuller day as new ideas were introduced, such as the cello orchestra (at the time

almost unique), the importance of choral training, video feedback sessions, and commissioning local composers to write and arrange works specifically for cello orchestra: notably, Barrington Pheloung was kind enough to arrange his wonderfully moving *Inspector Morse* theme tune.

The aim of OCS was and is simply to showcase the stunning versatility of the cello, inspiring students and teachers, helping them have the most magical week of their summer and establishing lifelong friendships. OCS staff grew from local to national and international teachers, the student intake reflecting this

trend, with overseas students beginning to arrive in the early nineties. Nowadays students from abroad represent some 20% of the intake, travelling from all over the world.

Running with school-aged pupils until 1997, OCS gradually began to receive more enquiries from adults, ranging from late beginners to more advanced students keen to re-kindle their passion for the instrument they once so loved. In 1998, OCS began specific courses for adult cellists, and now runs three levels for around 60 adult students per year, in addition to the 80 or so children.

In 2006 Marianne retired from OCMS, continuing with OCS until 2019. She passed away on 1st January 2021, leaving her children Helen and Stephen, grandson Oscar, and OCS as her lasting legacy.

• **From Timothy Kraemer**

MoodSwings & MoreMoodSwings for Cello

For cello teachers, students or keen amateurs, two volumes in contemporary and popular style with jazzy and pop rhythms. The piano part is integral so there is a CD to go with both.

Originally composed for violin, several of these are on the ABRSM violin syllabus.

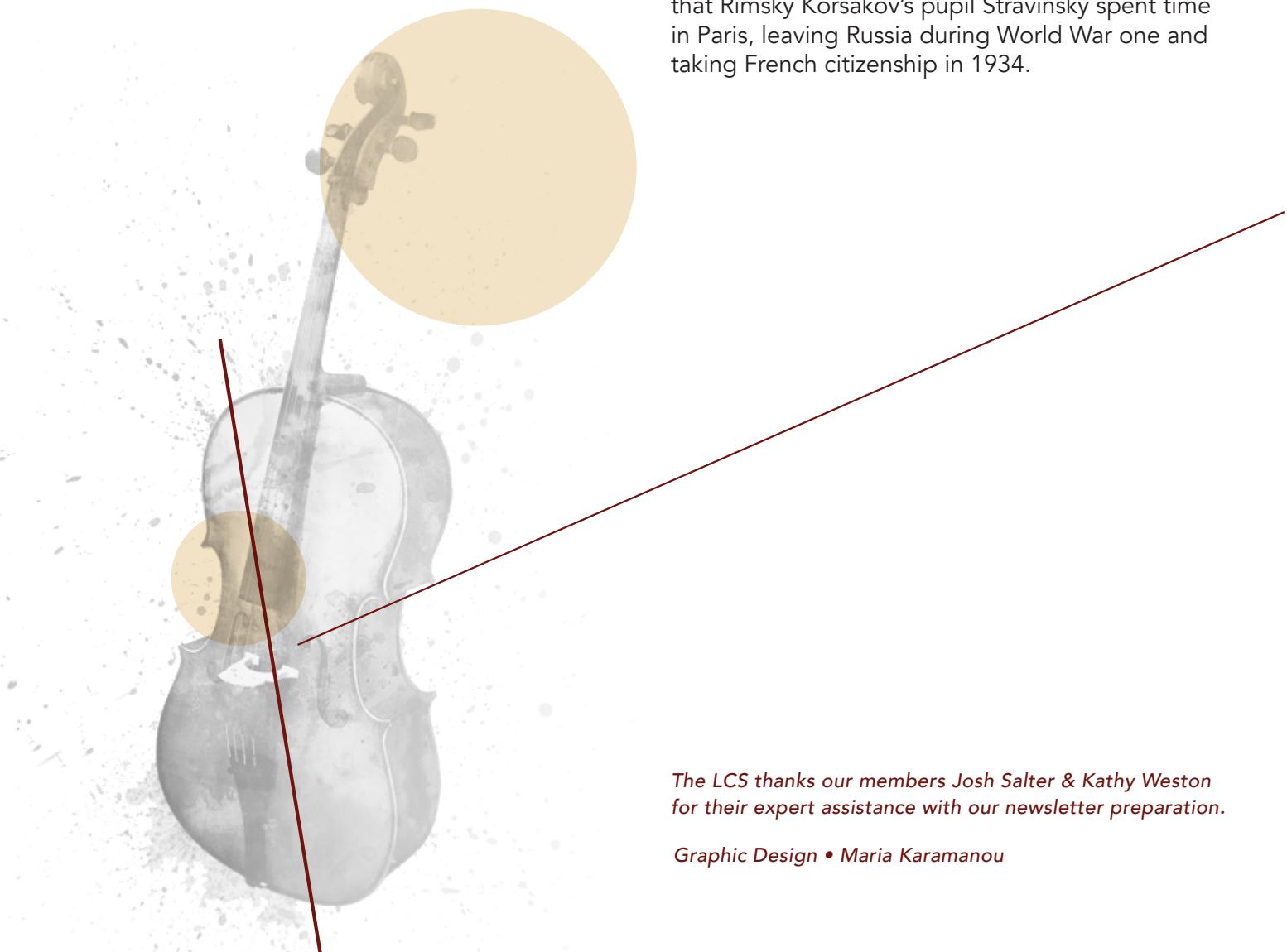
As a cellist, it seemed obvious that I should transcribe them for cello. In the violin versions 'MoodSwings' was the easier level and 'MoreMoodSwings' the more advanced. However, when I transcribed them for cello it turned out to be the other way round!

Available on my website www.timothykraemer.com or email me on timothykraemer24@gmail.com

• **From Helen Lunt**

Russian Cello Music

Whilst listening to Radio 3 recently, I heard this little piece called *Chanson Russe*, by Mussorgsky. I ordered a copy, which has now arrived, and is fun to play. I also bought a copy of *Nocturne* by Tchaikovsky, and these would be a good pairing. Leading on from this, I pulled out of my cello library the lovely *Nocturne* of WS Lloyd Webber (with quite a challenging piano part). Meanwhile I am working again on the Franck *Sonata in A major*, and am fascinated to explore the connection between Russia and Paris, evident in the composers 'Les Six': Milhaud, Poulenc, Honneger, Auric, Durey and Tailleferre. Les Six were friends, but with very different styles, who shot to fame under the guidance of Jean Cocteau in the 1920s. Les Six were named in emulation of the earlier grouping in Russia of The Five, also nicknamed the Mighty Handful: Balakirev, Cui, Mussorgsky, Rimsky Korsakov, and Borodin. These composers worked together to create a distinct national style of Russian music. Blending the two cultures, I love that Rimsky Korsakov's pupil Stravinsky spent time in Paris, leaving Russia during World War one and taking French citizenship in 1934.



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