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Winter 2024/25

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LONDON CELLO SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Growing Pangs

The London Cello Society in Transition

Selma Gokcen

Twenty-two years ago, the late Keith Harvey, distinguished British cellist and 'Encyclopaedia of All Things Cello' and I enjoyed a visit among the stacks of books, recordings and artwork in the sitting room of his iconic mill house near Norfolk. I had brought a proposal for him to consider, one I was not at all sure would, or even could, materialise. I hoped he would agree to establish jointly a cello society in London, without much more than the thought that it might flourish in the cello-friendly 'soil and water' of the artistic climate I so admired since moving to London in 1994. I believed the extraordinary gifts and accumulated knowledge that Keith possessed, combined with my past experience in America of setting out similar large projects, might eventually bear fruit.

Keith proved amenable and so we mapped out an organisational structure, found a lawyer specialising in Charity law who helped us to draft a founding document, and made several visits to the Charity Commission to make sure our objectives aligned with their requirements. Strangely enough, the 'money part' was not uppermost in our minds. I had always believed that money follows good ideas and I was certain that London loves the cello as much as New York City loves the fiddle.

Here, Jacqueline du Pré's legacy has long legs and runs deep. And before her, Beatrice Harrison and Amaryllis Fleming... and many others. If in any doubt, pick up a copy of the double CD *British Cello Phenomenon* (Cello Classics 1010) and be prepared for some surprises.

We 'made it up' with care as we went along, inviting cellists from varying walks of the profession to join the Executive and Advisory Councils. We established the requisite positions of Honorary Patron (Mstislav Rostropovich), Honorary President (Ralph Kirshbaum) and Artistic Adviser (Steven Isserlis); planned a smallish first season with a launch concert in Wigmore Hall and a wide variety of repertoire (thanks in large part to Keith's extensive

knowledge of cello literature); hired the venues; announced subscription fees to the Violoncello Society of London and waited to see how cellists and members of the public would respond.

Looking back over those twenty-two years, I am reminded that our 'sister society', the Violoncello Society of New York, was my initial inspiration; I had been a member since my student days at The Juilliard School. A small but devoted following of old timers had kept their Society afloat for years, primarily through events for their members, not for the general public. Keith and I wanted to widen our audience to include the general public and indeed, through subsequent years, we developed a loyal following who enjoyed our events and came to trust the high standard of our presentations.

After knocking ourselves out with work in preparation for our first year, which proved to be a success, what else could we do but... keep the fires burning, and keep going. We established our CelloDay for young cellists (grades 5–8), which soon included an adult Amateur section, and when the grades 1–4 cellists clamoured to be included, we expanded the entire event and established a separate division for adult members with their own activities. A few years later, after several BBC announcers kept referring to us as the Violincello Society, we dropped the formality of so many syllables and adopted our present, perky name.

When we made it to ten years, we celebrated with a wildly successful event, *Simply Strad*, where we assembled £38 million worth of Stradivari cellos from the UK and further afield, with their distinguished owners performing their works of choice – a thrill for the public who might never have heard seven Strads side by side in one evening, close up, under any other auspices. And for our members, it was an education in how a great instrument is made to speak and sound in each pair of hands.

Some of the other highlights in recent years have included:

Global Cello – The World on Four Strings (Argentinian, Brazilian music, Scottish folk music and more)

Princes & Poets – A Celebration of the French Cello School with seven of the finest French cellists

Slava! – A Tribute to the late Mstislav Rostropovich

Cello Olympics – Our parallel celebration with the London 2012 Olympic Games. The challenge was all of the 40 Popper Etudes / High School of Cello Playing

Go Cello – Three-day cello festival for young cellists aged 5–18 in collaboration with Trinity Laban Conservatoire and the National Maritime Museum

Beyond Cello – Cutting edge explorations with electric cello, free improv, jazz and world music at Kings Place, London

A Well-Being Day – Taking care of you the musician, player and teacher

Teachers on their Teachers – Explorations of the great teachers of the past by their former pupils

When the pandemic descended like a thunderbolt upon the London arts scene, we, like other organisations large and small, were forced to cancel events and then seasons, seriously impacting our financial reserves and casting doubt on our survival. We had a choice before us – either close our doors or reinvent ourselves. Since the pandemic, it has become clear that audience appetites, habits and proclivities have changed and we cannot carry on as before.

We know that opportunities for gathering as a community, for participation and for events that bring cellists of varying levels together should be our primary focus. Prohibited during the pandemic, such events are now more important and meaningful than ever.

Since the end of the pandemic, our board has deliberated over our way forward as a financially solvent and artistically relevant Society. We eventually realised that to flourish once again, we had to explore a more interactive environment, serving members further from London and making possible the participation of cellists in various cities across the UK. It gradually became clear that a national society was called for.

One of our first decisions was to establish two hubs – Manchester and Cambridge – and later, a third in Chichester, which will present their own series of events under the umbrella of this national organisation. Our intention is to develop this network of hubs slowly, wherever interest and demand grow hand in hand.

We are investing time, effort and funds in a comprehensive social media plan; we intend to



design and implement a new, interactive website and as a national society, we aim to serve as many cellists nationwide as we can draw into the fold.

If this sounds a bit like a rebirth, well ... it is! We cannot deliver this new baby without you. It's ambitious. And as the saying goes: 'it's bold and beautiful'.

We are putting heart and soul into this transition and we hope you'll support us, financially and otherwise.

- To contribute, just visit us at www.londoncellos.org where you'll find the link to our Big Give page.

- The Society is also looking for volunteers to contribute to various parts of the new website under construction. To volunteer (for a small or larger task), please write to us at: events@londoncellos.org and we will welcome your help.

We invite you to become an active user of our new Facebook and Instagram accounts. They are the prelude to our rebirth as the British Cello Society and, when we officially launch in May 2025, they will be an important engine of growth.

Here's to the next six months,
the magic number!



In January 2024, I was pleased to accept an invitation from Selma Gokcen to become an Advisory Board Member for the London Cello Society and I was asked to think about the idea of starting a Manchester Hub. It seemed the perfect opportunity to organise a full-day event for cellists preparing for orchestral auditions. Over the past few years, I have been working on ways to help recent graduates and professionals navigate through the labyrinth of applying for orchestral jobs.

Every day, cellists feverishly check the musicalchairs website for orchestral vacancies. On average, more than 100 cellists swarm to apply for a permanent position in a professional orchestra. The process begins by sending a CV, a covering letter and often a home-made recording for initial assessment. If invited for audition, there will be a few weeks to prepare the required repertoire. Auditions are often anonymous, which means the candidate must perform behind a screen, knowing that the principals of the orchestra are sitting on the other side of it. They will perform at least one concerto movement, a host of excerpts (tricky bits from the orchestral repertoire) and usually some sight-reading. The candidate must not speak. If successful in round one, there may be a second audition. This second round might be in-person and sometimes the cellist will be invited to play chamber music with the panel. Once all the candidates have been heard, a handful will be chosen to work with the orchestra as part of a trial. The trialists are paid as freelancers for the work; usually they will take part in a number of different projects covering a wide variety of repertoire in different settings. A panel from within the orchestra decides who is offered the permanent position. This part of the process can take years! Can you think of another profession that has an application process as rigorous as this?

The period after graduating from a conservatoire can be a difficult time for musicians; leaving behind the busy environment of a college, cellists can find themselves feeling isolated, without the opportunity to play to a teacher or practise performing. The audition process can feel daunting and it's common for excellent cellists to lose heart and start to look elsewhere for employment.

The Professional Development Day for Cellists on 24 November 2024 at the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) in Manchester was

designed to help with every aspect of the audition process. Cellists at different stages of their careers attended, as well as teachers and enthusiasts. We aimed to ignite their enthusiasm and ambition by giving access to experts in the field who shared their knowledge. I wanted to burst the bubble of anxiety surrounding auditioning and start to build a community of mutual friendliness and support. We examined every aspect of the process, from CV writing, to sight-reading under pressure, and dealing with adrenaline. There was a demonstration talk on orchestral excerpts with Nicholas Trygstad, Head of Strings at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. The event culminated with a two-hour masterclass on Haydn, Dvorak and Schumann concerti with Hannah Roberts, Jacqueline du Pré professor of cello at Royal Academy of Music and professor of cello at RNCM and composer and pianist Simon Parkin, who is head of the Musicianship Department at the RNCM. There was also an opportunity to sign up for a screened audition and receive one-to-one advice on improving your CV.

The event was a great success, and we hope to repeat it in Manchester.



Of Special Interest

A Starker Contrast:

The Stern Visage and the Comic Genius • James Nicholas

My favorite Starker master class story (fall 1975)

A young man named Joshua Allwell (name somewhat altered to preserve his anonymity) played 'Schelomo' in Starker's class. Joshua was like a human teddy bear – a lovely, friendly, slightly stocky clean-cut kid with dark brown button eyes and a perpetual smile. A student of Éva Czákó-Janzer, he was also a very fine cellist.

He gave an excellent performance of 'Schelomo' in the masterclass – as always with Joshua, impeccable and refined. Starker put down his cigarette (yes, you could smoke indoors in those days), clapped perfunctorily a few times, and then said in his typically low, quiet, staccato voice: "Thank...You... As always, this is cello playing on a very high level. The prroblem vid you, Joshua, is that you believe in your own name too much: All vell. But in this piece, everything is not all vell. In fact, in this piece something is verry wrroingg... verry, verry wrroingg. In this piece, you supposed to be screaming. Screaming at God: [looks upwards and shakes his raised hands repeatedly]: Vy, God, VY? [pauses] Joshua: can you scream?"

Joshua [with his perpetual but now somewhat embarrassed smile, pauses for a few seconds]: No...

Starker: Joshua: Scream. Scream!

Joshua: I can't...

Starker: Scream!

[Joshua's mouth is open but he can't seem to make a sound come out. Starker changes tack and tries a different approach]

Starker: Joshua, if someone called you on the telephone at tree o' clock in the morning, how would you ahnswerr the phone?

Joshua: [pretending to hold a phone and with the same lovable teddy-bear mien]: Hello?

Starker: Hello? HELLO? I mean wouldn't you even say 'Drrop dead!' orr sometingg?

Jim shows up for his lesson at 8am one morning and opens the studio door. Starker is at his desk, smoking and opening up his mail. He looks up at me bleary-eyed and says: 'So. Vot JOYS arre you brrringg me today?'

A very conceited, rather arrogant student played the Paganini *Variations on a Theme from Rossini's Moses* in a manner so exaggerated that the

listeners were audibly snickering here and there.

Starker: David. If I forgot my vatch and left it here ahfterr clahss vas overr, and you took it and didn't rreturn it to me, vy vould that be wrroingg?

Student [in an unpleasant, croaky voice]: Because it would be against society's expectations.

Starker: Because it vould be inherrently wrroingg. Vot you doing is inherrently WRRONGG.

A student played a piece with little to no nuance (the performance was so forgettable that I don't even remember what piece it was).

Starker [with proper Hungarian grammatical construction in the first question]: Do you know it, that vot is the prroblem vid HUNGarians speaking English? I mean, doesn't it GRRRATE on your nerves that I say 'vot' instead of 'vot' and 'vy' instead of 'vy'? It's because ve never learn to temperr the sounds ve make. Every letterr is always prronounced the same. EX-perience. E – e – e – e – e. You got to **temperr** the sounds you make.

A Canadian cellist played *Illusions* for solo cello by Donald Steven. Starker, not usually a fan of contemporary music, walked over to her music stand, indulgently picked up the music and perused it with a half-smile, half-grimace, and said: 'Illusions, for cello solo. Anybody everr heardd of a piece forr solo cello dedicated to two people? [pause, setting the music down, eyes twinkling] And ahfterr hearringg it, ve don't have any illusions, do ve?'

My Remembrances

Helen Reich

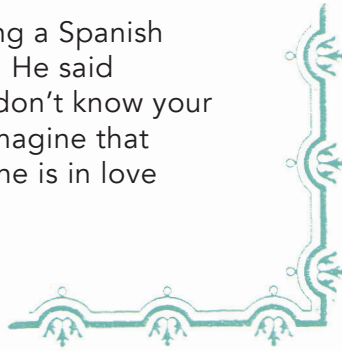
violinist, recently retired from the Milwaukee Symphony

Vy do we scratch? TOO MUCH BOW
PRESSSSSSURRRRRE. NOT ENOUGH BOW SPEED.
Vy do we vistle? TOO MUCH BOW SPEED. NOT
ENOUGH BOW PRESSSSSSURRRRRE.
Now, vould you like to try it vonce again ...
Misterrr Beeeeenforrd? (Or whoever it was).

Also, he once said to someone with a worried expression: 'Don't vorry, my favorite pastime is lifting elbows.'

And of course: 'If someone tells you that playing cello is hard, laugh at them. It's easy.' (I love that one!)

Also, once a young lady was playing a Spanish piece in a not very interesting way. He said something like, 'It's a love song! I don't know your taste in Hollywood actorrrrs, but imagine that Roberrrrt Redforrrrd tells you that he is in love with you!'



Cello Talk

Bowmaker • Christopher Graves

I came to bow making from the playing side of music – I was the cellist of the Castalian Quartet for ten years and during that time I played a bow made by Gary Leahy, which I always found to be an inspiring piece of work. Playing with that bow brand new, fresh off the workbench, as it were, was the first real connection I had to bow making as a living art.

As musicians, we get into a close relationship with these instruments – they become our voice. In my case, I am also a lifelong woodworker, who grew up learning about wood and tools from my dad. I found that the bow spoke to me from both points of view: its sound, the musicality of it, the workmanship and artistry; and the unity of form and function – the simplicity.

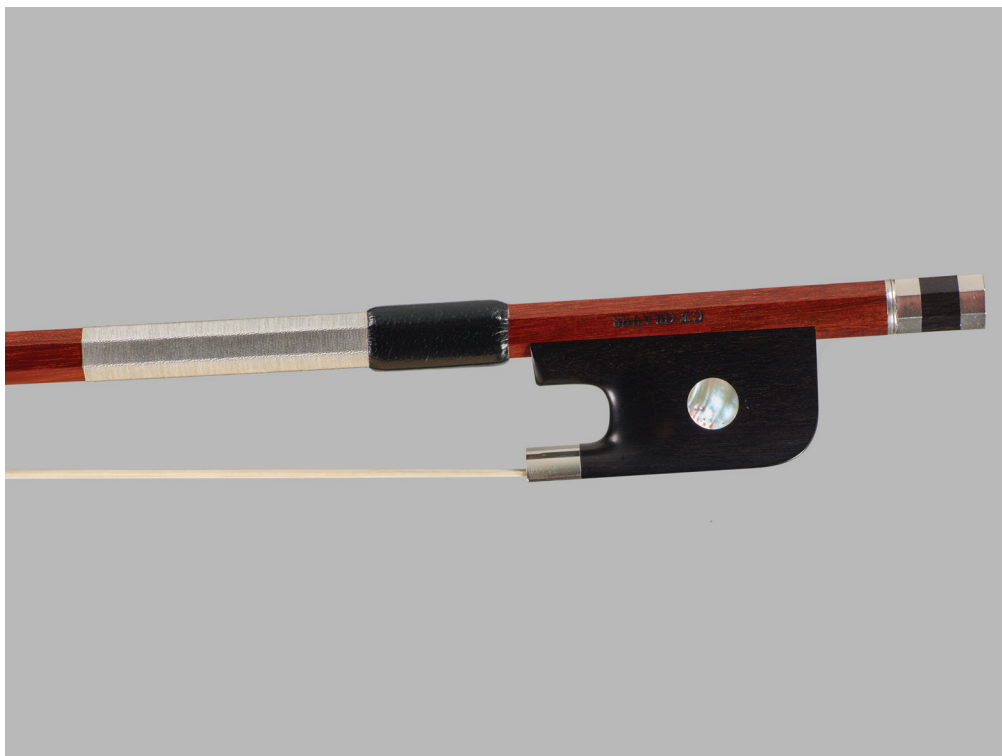
Gary became my bow-making teacher and I made my first two bows under his instruction. Since then, it has been a fascinating journey of discovery. A bow seems simple at first glance but, like any art form, it can be endlessly refined and subtly re-imagined in the pursuit of true musicality and beauty. A bow is a solid, physical object but it has to transcend that reality and enter the world of sound, colour, rhythm, character and, in the end, make a deep human connection and express profound emotion. That's quite a journey for a tree from a simple life in the Brazilian rainforest!

I work mostly with hand tools, and I do prefer musical instruments to have the feel of being hand made, but I know many makers use machines for

large parts of the process. I have made many of my own tools and so I feel particularly attached to them. But hand tool or machine or instrument – whatever you use – you have to get to know it and how to use it. In the end, the method is personal but that's not the most important thing. What is most important is the concept in the maker's head and hands of what a bow can be that most affects the final product – just like a musical idea in a musician's ears, without which the best instrument in the world is wasted. That's why I love having beautiful bows by great makers of the past or present coming through my workshop for repairs, maintenance or just on holiday – each bow affects my knowledge and feel of what a bow can or should be, and the next bow I make is different as a result.

I learn a lot through working with musicians. Some simply try a bow and buy it; others commission something to their own requirements and ask for particular playing qualities, which is a wonderful exercise for me in expanding my horizons and pushing myself to understand the possible variables in greater depth.

These variables are many. Making a bow is a series of choices, starting with: selecting an appropriate stick of Pernambuco with the right balance of strength and weight, then thinking about the taper, the camber, the balance, the frog and head heights, round stick or octagonal stick, and on and on. Then come the stylistic elements which are more personal to the maker: the shapes, the



carving, the tools to be used, and whether to leave tool marks on the finished bow or not. I have always liked seeing the confident and fluent tool marks of a master craftsman, so if I like the cuts my knife, planes and files make in a piece of wood, I try not to entirely erase the character of those marks in the sanding and finishing process.

A fine finish is an important part of a high-quality bow, but spontaneity and a creative human hand speak to me more than plastic perfection. And there are the elements of mystery too – despite the maker's best efforts, each stick almost stubbornly has its own sound and character. Apart from anything else, the wood has had a long life before it ever even met a bow maker, out in all seasons and all weathers fighting for resources, and that's all part of the magic.

Style and visual beauty take second place when a player takes a bow in their hand and puts it to the string – that's the moment of truth. As someone who does both, I know that playing and making are very different modes of creativity, but I love the fact that all the energy, work and inspiration of the two disciplines connect at that sharp end of the musical process, where bow touches string.

If you're interested in finding out more, do please get in touch to discuss bows for sale and new commissions. Read about my work and how to contact me at: www.gravesbows.com





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Drawing on my ten years as the cellist of the Castalian Quartet, I now craft bows for violin, viola and cello. My aim is to create bows which directly serve the needs of the great music written for those instruments and the musicians who play it.



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