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A BRUSH WITH IMMORTALITY

by Aaron Minsky © 2001

In my mid twenties, at a point in life when most musicians devote most of their time to getting a steady gig, I was spending countless hours pondering, improvising and composing, creating a new popular style of cello playing. The thing that kept me going through those lean times was the hope that one day, when I became an old man perhaps, my music would become standard cello repertoire. You can imagine then how happy I felt when my "Ten American Cello Etudes" was included this year in concert cellist and scholar, Jeffrey Solow's, "A Guide to the Standard Cello Repertoire!"

My cognizance of the spread of these pieces has come in ever growing waves. I was fortunate to have been able to premiere them at the First World Cello Congress in 1988, just after their publication by Oxford University Press. This gave them a good send off which lead to other publicity including a featured article in Strings Magazine. After that, years passed without much news, aside from several positive reviews. In the mid nineties, I started to notice that when I would attend music festivals, cellists would come up to me and tell me how much they enjoyed my etudes. On one occasion, I attended a festival and was immediately drafted as a coach. Next thing I knew, a group performance of my etudes was added to the program! During those years I also started to receive letters, programs and phone calls from concert cellists and professors from around the world.

In the late nineties, my "Young American Ensembles" was added to the manual of the New York State School Music Association (NYSSMA). Then "Ten American Cello Etudes" and "Three American Pieces for Viola" were added to the curriculum of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, United Kingdom, a group which gives half a million music adjudication exams in over eighty countries every year. Now, with the inclusion in Mr. Solow's list, the fact that my etudes are widely considered to be standard cello repertoire has a solid stamp of approval!

I currently have six titles published by Oxford. The first, and most well known, is "Ten American Cello Etudes". This set was written for college level and professional cellists who have a familiarity with the traditional etudes of Popper and others. It took standard techniques, and some new ones, and applied them to enjoyable, original music in several popular styles. The guiding principle was to create fresh new music which would provide a road map for helping the cello to fully participate in today's changing musical currents, while also helping cellists improve their technique in a fun new way. At the request of several violists, a set of three of the pieces was transcribed for viola as "Three American Pieces."

I called my pieces "etudes," because each one zeros in on a different set of techniques, but in reality, they are pieces of music, each expressing a different mood using the language of American popular music. Many of the pieces are joyful due to the fun I was having coming up with new ways of playing the cello. I was, however, influenced by composers of the past. Impressed by the Bach Suites, I composed in a way that would let the cello stand on its own, making full use of its broad range and ability to create satisfying counterpoint. Most of the pieces rely heavily on double stops and chords to create a robust sound. Often melody is interspersed with chords and bass tones. I was also influenced by the string crossings of Haydn. I would have great fun playing the one or two measure phrases that he would write that made use of rhythmic arpeggios. I took that concept and extended it to whole pieces.

I also borrowed a concept found in guitar playing; that of rhythm guitar. The cello traditionally goes back and forth between acting as a bass or a melody instrument. Why not act as a chord playing rhythm instrument? This concept was further developed in my "Three American Cello Duets", where one cellist plays "lead cello" and the other plays "rhythm cello" throughout a whole piece. This way of playing should lead to a whole new set of possibilities for cellists.

As my original set of etudes developed, I made sure to incorporate different techniques so that playing through them all, a cellist would get a complete work out. Some of the techniques include far reaching arpeggios, spiccato, thumb position, whole tone scales, tremolo, flautando, harmonics, syncopation, legato, and new techniques like finger picking and hitting the string onto the fingerboard with the bow. The technique always grew out of the music and was never an end in itself.

Most of the etudes began life as improvisations. Sometimes I would immerse myself in a certain genre of music and then improvise something that would be related. Other times I would just get into a calm receptive state and just play whatever would come. Only later were the ideas turned into thoroughly thought out pieces. That original spark can be found in each piece and it is my hope that cellists will take ideas back out of these pieces and create new improvisations. Once again we find a new direction for the cello, based on tradition. In Bach's time all instrumentalists were expected to improvise and so it should be again!

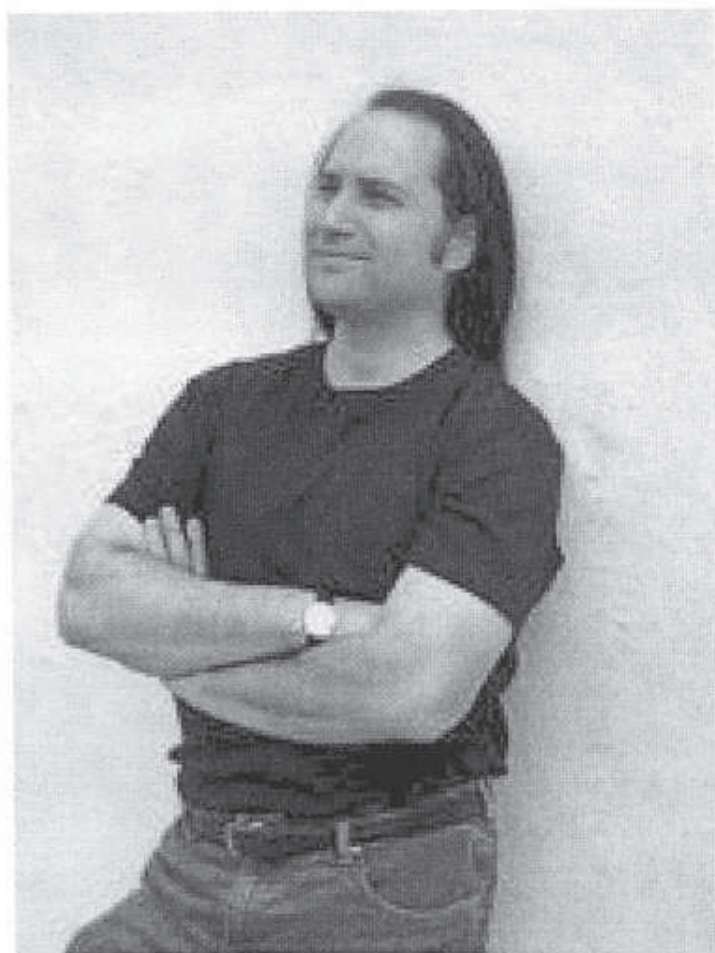
I next composed a set of more challenging pieces geared toward bringing this new style into the concert hall: "Three Concert Etudes." These pieces extend and amplify the techniques of the American and also use world music styles such as those of the Middle East and Brazil. In the first piece, the cellist plays in the highest possible register and uses more intricate chords. The second makes extensive use of left hand pizzicato. The third piece incorporates several new techniques including singing and stamping while strumming with a pick! It also employs a technique which I believe I invented. I call it the "bow harmonic". It is a way of creating a harmonic using the bow. I even invented a musical symbol for it! These pieces are very satisfying to play and advance the cello musically and technically beyond any of the others. I look forward to the day when a brave concert cellist will take on the challenge to give them a proper world premiere in a major concert hall!

Next I composed the set of duets, mentioned above which would bring the concept of playing chords and taking solos to the cello. It occurred to me that popular styles could also be taught to beginners on all string instruments, so "Young American Ensembles" was born in three volumes (violins and guitars, violas, cellos and basses). These pieces were hand tailored to actual beginning students. Some parts only use open strings and others only three or four notes, yet they sound like basic pieces of rock music or other popular music. This brings a new level of fun to the early days of string study and also brings early experiences of syncopation and other popular techniques such as pentatonic scales and playing with a rough sound (something kids love)!

I realized that to complete the set I needed a bridge from the beginner pieces to the higher level ones, so I composed "Pacific Northwest Suite", for high school and early college level string players in five volumes (guitars, violins, violas, cellos, basses). Based on country music and blues rock, these pieces use string crossings and chords in a similar way to the American etudes and duets, but were hand tailored to actual high school students and can lead string players up to the level of the college and professional level music. The idea behind the writing of music on all of these levels is that now cellists can play Minsky's popular style music from the first weeks of study until they perform as artists in the concert hall!

Adding to a small but important part of the cello repertoire, I also composed "Judaic Concert Suite" which is as yet unpublished. These pieces use similar concepts and techniques to my other advanced music, but apply them to original Jewish music. They represent a modern take on the spiritual type of pieces that Bloch wrote so effectively. I feel that they are part of a venerable tradition and hope that one way or another, they will see the light of day!

It may come as a surprise that the composer of some of the most recent additions to the standard cello repertoire actually began his musical life as a rock guitarist! In fact, influenced by Hendrix and others, it was a search for a unique guitar sound that led me to the cello. I felt, however, that I would never be accepted as an innovator of the cello unless I first gained the respect of the classical community. Therefore, I studied with top teachers in top music schools and then went on to play with professional orchestras, chamber ensembles and as a soloist, in major concert halls and on radio and television. The acceptance of my etudes by cellists worldwide, has given me the legitimacy for which I strove. My inclusion in Who's Who in America, has also helped. I now feel confident to bring my cello style back to the place where my musical life began. Through my recent CD, "Breaking The Sound Barriers" and with my new band, Von Cello, I plan to bring the cello into the center stage of rock! When kids are lining up at music stores to buy cellos, like they do now for guitars, I will know that my goal has been achieved.



AARON MINSKY, North-American Pioneer Cellist

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

(taken from the web site entry in 'My Space')

Von Cello is a rock cellist. He began his career as a rock guitarist and was influenced by Jimi Hendrix, Frank Zappa and Jerry Garcia. In his early teens he was already "famous" in his populated Brooklyn neighborhood, and was performing professionally as a singer/songwriter and lead guitarist. During high school he had a "vision": he would do for the cello what Hendrix did for the guitar and what Ian Anderson (Jethro Tull) did for the flute. He would teach the cello to rock! So he started to transfer his knowledge of rock guitar to the cello, creating a new style of cello playing that he calls "Celtar". He went on to study the cello, obtaining Bachelors and Masters degrees in music performance from the Manhattan School of Music, also studying with professors from Juilliard. He played in the Caracas Philharmonic of Venezuela, and the Virginia Opera. He concertized in diverse settings including Carnegie Hall and CBGBs. After proving that he could be accepted as a professional classical cellist, he went back to his original goal of revolutionizing the cello.

Von Cello (under his given name, Aaron Minsky), is widely known as a composer of cello etude and string ensemble books combining classical technique with popular styles. His music is published by Oxford University Press, and is in the curriculums of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, U.K., and the American String Teachers' Association. He is included in Who's Who in America, and the International Who's Who. He has endorsement deals with the Yamaha and D'Addario corporations. He has recorded several CD's with his band, also known as Von Cello. His music has been heard on the radio internationally, as far away as Siberia. He has performed and been interviewed on Fox and Friends, Good Day New York, and the Joey Reynolds Show, among others.

His CDs include: "Breaking The Sound Barriers", "Von Cello Rules!", "Excalibur", and "Celtar". His published compositions include: "Ten American Cello Etudes", "Three American Cello Duets", and "Judaic Concert Suite", "Ten International Cello Encores". Minsky continues to bridge the gap between classical and rock music with his yet to be published transcription of songs by the Grateful Dead titled, "Dead Cello". His version of "The Other One" is on a compilation CD issued by Relix Magazine (with Frank Zappa as the lead artist). Von Cello is a unique band in the jamband universe. Von Cello's musical goal is to bring the cello "where no man has gone before"! His personal goal is to bring peace to the world. (Good luck Von Cello!)

MINSKY'S LATEST CELLO WORKS:

From personal information of Aaron Minsky and extra google searches, collected and prepared by David Johnstone

Judaic Concert Suite:

The Judaic Concert Suite combines two elements from the traditional cello repertoire. One element harks back to Ernest Bloch, well known for his short works for cello and piano based on Jewish themes. This suite, however, is for solo cello, and with its robust sound and use of counterpoint of chords, it is also in the tradition of the Bach Cello Suites. What is new is the use of modern melodies and rhythms and the way the three movements form a unified whole, musically and spiritually. Here are more details notes on each movement:

Entrance of the Bride and Groom - portrays a traditional Jewish wedding. After the ceremony, the bride and groom go into seclusion while the guests mingle about quietly. When the couple finally emerge and enter the reception hall, the guests break into wild song and dance, as if a king and queen had entered the room. Spiritually, the bride and groom united, are symbolic of the unification of God and mankind, so the dancing is also a form of prayer, demonstrating the hope that one day God and man will be as one.

Variations on Adon Olam is a set of variations on one of the most famous melodies of the traditional Jewish liturgy. The words of the prayer speak of God as the "Lord of the universe, who reigned before anything was created", and they speak of a time when "after all things shall cease to be, the Awesome One will reign alone." This mood of awe and timelessness is reflected in the musical variations.

Sound the Shofar begins with the call of the ram's horn, known in Hebrew as the shofar. The shofar is blown during the Jewish High Holidays. Its soulful cry is believed to bring the listener closer to an experience of the divine. After dancing at the unification of God and man, and praying to the Lord of the Universe who exists beyond time, it is time for us to open our ears to the shofar and find our own path to the King who reigns over all humanity.

Ten International Cello Encores

On the 20th Anniversary of Ten American Cello Etudes, Minsky has brought together a set of ten cello pieces based on musical styles from around the world, such as Mexico, Ireland, Asia, Israel, Africa, Caribbean, and America. Ten International Cello Encores is perfect for students and recitalists who are looking for fresh, new music for solo cello. *'While listening to this suite one cannot help but be impressed by the wonderful musical harmony that exists on our planet. It is with the hope that we may soon create an equally wonderful social harmony that I offer these Ten International Cello Encores to the world.'* - Aaron Minsky

Three Concert Etudes:

These Three Concert Etudes extend and amplify the techniques and styles introduced in Ten American Cello Etudes, and represent an aspect of contemporary music often neglected in the concert hall. They are too composed for unaccompanied cello. One might describe these as three pieces in an expressive mood combining popular international styles, technical achievement, and more serious thought. They are among the most challenging and virtuosic of Minsky's output, and most suitable for concert performance, encore material, or as practice studies. The first piece uses energetic pop rhythms, many double-stoppings, and high positions on the cello fingerboard especially in the middle section. The second is slow, but quite difficult (uncomfortable) in producing clear left-hand pizzicatos within a cantabile bowing arm action. It is quite short, and in A-B-A form. The last piece is an amazing explosion of cello vibrancy and out-of-this world effects; for example both feet have rhythmic contributions to add (these being carefully annotated in the score), one has to occasionally accompany oneself with a vocal SINGING voice, and finally great use is made of strumming with a guitar pick which gives the cello an incredible rock-like effect.

Dead Cello

His latest effort is a transcription of the music of the Grateful Dead, entitled Dead Cello. It is not yet published, at least by the date of this article (summer 2009) but a publication deal is imminent. The music has been performed by the fine American solo cellist Jeffrey Solow. This is obviously for me something that has to be investigated.

Annex

by David Johnstone

Although we have never met in person, I consider Aaron Minsky a friend. I was interested in, and practicing/playing, his solo cello pieces way before our first e-mails crossed to-and-forth. This most interesting article was written quite a few years ago. I felt it my duty to fill the reader in on some of the last compositions and projects of this pioneering musician. I too feel myself somewhat pioneering. For in association with the words of Aaron *"I look forward to the day when a brave concert cellist will take on the challenge to give them a proper world premiere in a major concert hall!"* He was then referring to the 'Three Concert Etudes'. Well ... I was that cellist who gave you gave that premiere!!! Maybe the Concert Hall of the Navarra Superior Conservatoire cannot be classed as a world 'major concert hall', but on Monday, 29th March 2004 a most successful performance did take place (see the separate article *VLC03 - 'Bravo Minsky': Homage to Aaron Minsky by David Johnstone* in johnstone-music for more details). Not only that, I am proud to say that in the same very concert I also premiered the Judaic Concert Suite, besides playing all ten of the Ten American Cello Etudes. Since then I have all works further times, both in Spain and in Britain. All these works are now published by Oxford, and will surely maintain a place in the cello repertoire of the 21st century. I know I give high praise - I once even wrote:

"There are a number of works for the cello which, although not apparent in their time, have changed the course of cello writing or at the least have had a telling influence on the next generation of cello literature. We all know about the Bach Six Suites...the concerto of Dvorak...the Kodaly Solo Sonata...the Prokofiev Sinfonia Concertante...And now we come to AARON MINSKY. Maybe at the moment less known than his renowned predecessors I predict that his work for cello may well assume a similar importance."

I well might understand someone reading this to say "ah, but he would write that, wouldn't he because he's a colleague out there and wants to do a favour"! Well, that is not actually the case, because the fine words do not just come from me. Please consider the following words too (sadly not all these names are with us today):

Boris Pergamenschikov, Russian concert cellist, professor at Musikhochschule, Koln, Germany:

"I believe that the new generation of cellists must pay attention to the American popular music using these pieces. I'd like to include the etudes by Mr. Minsky in my teaching and solo repertoire."

Janos Starker, legendary concert cellist, professor at Indiana University:
"I find these etudes excellent, innovative, intelligent, useful and amusing. I will advise its use wherever I can."

Craig Schroeder (Classical pianist) *"Von Cello: The Most Unique Cellist in the World!"*

David Wells (Aaron's former teacher at Manhattan School of Music) *"We used to think he was crazy. We didn't know he was a genius!"*

This should be enough proof to get the reader to investigate more – how often can you say you have had "A brush with Immortality"?!

DAVID JOHNSTONE

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