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Stringing Along

Jayne I. Hanlin

In 1959, my “new” cello (made in Italy about 1770) arrived in its heavy, wheel-less black case. Eager to try out the instrument, I was dismayed to discover only three playable strings. Regrettably, during its ocean voyage, the C string (the lowest, thickest, and most expensive one) had snapped. I hurriedly bought another, which cost \$5. At the time, I thought this was an expensive purchase.

Through the years, I have needed to pay for many more strings, which wear out periodically. Recently, I decided to invest in a new set and made an appointment with Valery, an expert luthier. He can replace all four strings in less time than it takes me to change a single one.

After greeting me politely, he immediately inquired, “Did you hear that Rostropovich died today?”

Mstislav (“Slava”) Rostropovich (who was 80) is well known—especially to cellists, but I hadn’t yet heard the sad news.

Then Valery asked, “Did you know that he used to live in my hometown in Russia?”

“No,” I answered.

My string repairman continued, “I was born in Veronezh where Peter the Great built his fleet of sailing ships, using pine from the nearby forests.”

Then Valery pointed to a personal black-and-white photograph, one I had often admired. Standing in a line were Rostropovich and three other celebrities: composer Dmitri Shostakovich, soprano Galina Vishnevskaya (Rostropovich’s wife), and violinist David Oistrakh.

Valery explained, “Nathan Zarahovich, my wife’s uncle who played the violin and was also a journalist, gave me this snapshot he took in the early 1970’s. He had just interviewed this quartet. He lived near Shostakovich’s dacha outside Moscow at Peredelkino. Many artists and writers had their summer houses in that village.”

Those in the photograph were good friends as well as collaborating musicians, and I have specific connections with each one. Besides playing Shostakovich's music in a community orchestra, I have read books and memoirs about these Russians. I also own quite a few recordings made by these virtuosos and was privileged to attend several of their concerto performances with orchestras as well as their recitals.

I clearly remember Rostropovich playing a solo recital exactly forty years ago at Kiel Opera House in my hometown. After the audience gave him a standing ovation, I went backstage to the green room where he kindly autographed the LP recording I had brought with me. But I also have three other 33-RPM's he autographed. Today I found the 5x7 inch-color photograph (dated 2/10/84) with him signing two of these record jackets for my mother when my parents were on a musical cruise. I must show my photo to Valery.

Also in my pre-CD collection of recordings is a smaller one--only 10-inches in diameter---which I purchased in Leningrad in 1964. It is still in its original dust jacket with an artist's colorful drawing of the city's Peter and Paul Fortress by the Neva River. On the center of the record itself is a label, printed in the Russian Cyrillic alphabet, which identifies the beautiful cello pieces by Bach, Tschaikovsky, and Glazanov that Rostropovich is playing on the disc.

After my luthier had installed the new strings on my cello, I began to tune it. Right away, and for the first time ever—even though I had often purchased new strings from him, he stopped me and shared advice Rostropovich had once given him: “When you tune, play pianissimo to hear two strings clearly; it is harder to hear pure pitch with more dynamic volume.”

I resumed tuning, using less bow pressure and understood at once what Mstislav the Great meant. Then I put my cello back in its current less heavy, wheeled black case.

Finally, I paid for my new strings, including the C, which was about sixteen times the price I paid almost fifty years ago. But this time with the added value of hearing the master cellist's tuning wisdom, I felt I had gotten a real bargain!

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