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# Janos Starker: Igniting a Spark by **Janet Horvath**

accrediting the original interview published in *Interlude* <https://interlude.hk>

*Johnstone-Music has been given permission to reproduce this from the author Janet Horvath (biographical details of her career are found at end of the article)*

When we think about the wonders of the world, we think in terms of natural marvels or edifices. Typically, we don't think in these terms when we describe creative artists but Janos Starker, qualifies. Virtuoso cellist, master pedagogue, articulate advocate and visionary, Starker has had an extraordinary impact on cello playing and music making. He has performed on virtually every continent. His discography numbers over 165 works on a host of recording labels, and he has been a professor at Indiana University since 1958 holding the title of Distinguished Professor.



Starker was born in Budapest, Hungary – which certainly contributed to my father’s keen interest in my studying with him. Starker’s cello lessons began at age six, he was teaching by the time he was eight and he was performing at age eleven! I actually came across a photo of Starker as a little wunderkind, playing cello in short pants. I know my mother had a crush on him.

Like my parents, Starker studied at the famed Franz Liszt Academy. Emerging from the cinders of World War II, he immigrated to the U.S. in 1948 becoming principal cello of first, the Dallas Symphony, then the Metropolitan Opera and finally the Chicago Symphony. I am certain that Starker’s experience in the orchestral world gave him a unique perspective. He experienced first hand the grueling schedules and the challenges of orchestral playing, while savoring the rich symphonic repertoire. Sometimes, I am able to hunt down old recordings of the Chicago Symphony with the legendary (Hungarian) conductor Fritz Reiner. When there is a cello solo I can immediately recognize Starker’s silken sound and pristine technique.

I remember Starker telling me that his first recordings of the Six Bach Suites for Solo Cello were recorded in the wee hours of the morning *after* Metropolitan Opera performances. What stamina that took!

Starker had a great affinity for his fellow Hungarian composers especially the musical giants Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály. Starker’s trademark piece, the famous Kodály Solo Sonata in B minor, is unlike anything you have ever heard – a technical tour de force. The demands start with scordatura tuning – literally, “mistuning.” Kodály requires the cellist to tune down the bottom cello strings from the usual G and C, to F# and B, to emphasize the key with recurring B-minor chords. I vividly remember hearing Starker perform the work. The flashy double note trills and hair-raising passagework was so mesmerizing that I was moved to tears.

Starker had the crème de la crème of students to pick from. How did he choose?

Starker's first criterion for selecting a student was that he or she would need to be able to assimilate a great deal of information in a compressed amount of time.

Secondly, he selected students geographically. "Spreading the word" was his fondest wish. He hoped that by choosing students from all parts of the globe, cello playing and teaching would improve exponentially. My class consisted of a motley crew of cellists from diverse backgrounds and countries far afield: Germany, Japan, Israel, the U.S. and Canada (me).

In his heyday, when I was his student, he would teach intensively for several weeks and then poof! He would be off on a three-month concert tour. During the time he was at IU, we had three lessons a week and each lesson had to be different repertoire. The pressure was tremendous. We would cower outside his massive metal studio door, taking deep breaths to calm our nerves before entering the sanctum. I remember that after each lesson, as soon as the studio door closed behind me, I would plop myself down on the floor in the hallway, right by his door, and furiously take notes so as not to forget one gem, knowledge which I would need weeks (or years) to assimilate.

Starker had many attributes but the three that most impressed us were evident during the three-hour Saturday master classes, required of course.

He could play anyone's cello and sound perfect, whether it was a poor quality instrument or a cello that was seriously out of adjustment. He could play any and every cello work flawlessly and from memory, picking up the piece midstream.

Most astonishing for us, was that Starker always had a cigarette burning. He'd hold it between the fingers of his right hand (his bowing hand.) His arm moved swiftly back and forth as he demonstrated. The cigarette butt would burn. The ash would grow, expanding precariously but somehow suspended. We watched in horror, our eyes following the bow back and forth like watching a tennis ball lob back and forth over the net, anticipating that the hot ash would fall on his Strad. Unfailingly, at just the right moment when the ash was impossibly long, he'd flick the butt into the ashtray. None of us dared react.

As a teacher Starker could be critical, demanding, sarcastic and intimidating but if you worked hard (and we did) he was inspiring, although compliments were rare. "You play on a very high level" was superlative praise from Starker.

Starker was determined to give us the tools to be consummate craftsmen on the cello as a means to the end: to be slavishly dedicated to the musical intentions of the composer. One of the attributes I admire most now, is that Starker discouraged ego. There was never an inkling of favoritism. Camaraderie was cultivated even between the demigod and the underlings. Starker was compelling, and provocative as a teacher. He ignited a lifelong spark within us to excel as cellists and musical ambassadors.

Photo : <http://www.bruceuffie.com/starker.html>

### **Janos Starker – Bach Cello Suite 3 I. Prelude**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=2&v=dtLKjeEssAo&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=dtLKjeEssAo&feature=emb_logo)

### **Janos Starker – A Lesson in Music**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WxtYc\\_cTTc&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WxtYc_cTTc&feature=emb_logo)

### **Janos Starker – Kodály Cello Solo Sonata II. Mvt**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qm7\\_cl2b30&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qm7_cl2b30&feature=emb_logo)

**Janet Horvath**, the Minnesota Orchestra's associate principal cello from 1980 to 2012, is a lifelong performing classical musician, soloist, and speaker. She has appeared as soloist with orchestra, and has performed in recital and chamber music throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and Asia. *"Ms. Horvath's outgoing musical personality and passionate intensity flavors every aspect of her musicianship, and draws from her instrument a tone, which has the texture and feeling of rich golden honey..."*

She earned her master's degree in music performance from Indiana University studying with Janos Starker. Since leaving the orchestra, Janet has focused on her writing and in November of 2017, she completed her MFA in creative writing from Hamline University, Saint Paul, MN. Horvath is the author of [Playing \(less\) Hurt—An Injury Prevention Guide for Musicians](#) published by Amadeus Press (Hal Leonard Performing Arts Publishing Group), and is considered a pioneer and authority in the area of the medical problems of performing artists. Initially self-published, her book won a gold medal at the 2009 IPPY awards and is still in print.

Recent essays include *A Musician Afraid of Sound* published in *The Atlantic*, October 2015, and *Sound of the Cello*, published June 2017 in the Minnesota Orchestra's monthly program book and online. Her nonfiction has appeared in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (December 2015 and 2011) and in national and international music publications, including *Musical America*, *Chamber Music America*, *Strings Magazine*, *The Brass Herald* and *Strad Magazine* among others. A contributing writer for the online classical music e-magazine [Interlude.HK](#), she has written over 250 feature articles about music and musicians.

After more than thirty years as a performer, and as an arts and injury prevention advocate, Janet is well-known among both amateur and professional musicians, teachers and students, and health care providers. Her seminars have been well received by orchestras including the San Francisco Symphony, Utah Symphony, Indianapolis Symphony, and Boston Symphony Orchestra, and at colleges, conservatories, and conferences from coast to coast. Her appearances on national radio and television include Terry Gross' Fresh Air on NPR, The Woman's Connection [\[watch video\]](#) and Athletes and the Arts [\[click on 'Articles' to watch videos\]](#).

The recipient of the 2001 Richard J. Lederman Lecture Award presented by the Performing Arts Medical Association, she has lectured at the prestigious Medical Problems of Musicians and Dancers Symposium in Aspen, Colorado. Janet is in demand for her injury prevention roundtables and has been involved in leading discussions with doctors, insurance companies, professional, amateur, and student musicians, managers of orchestras, and directors of schools regarding prevention of playing injuries. These lectures and master classes include a variety of injury prevention strategies, including good practice and warm-up habits, on-stage tricks to alleviate tension, Do's and Don'ts, injury susceptibility, ergonomics, orthotics and props that are available to us, and rehabilitation strategies. Recently, hearing issues have come to the fore. Decibels can be dangerous. Janet has been at the forefront of exposing the risks and raising awareness of hearing injuries that can occur due to noise and loud music.

Please do see other original works for many different instruments and groupings, and also special transcriptions for cellists, and cellists with other instruments on the *Johnstone-Music* web page

Also both general musical and cello based articles, directories of famous historical cellists, and many other items of interest

**DOWNLOADS** - Many downloads on *Johnstone-Music* are now available, for those that are interested, at a *symbolic* payment, which is to help cover the costs of this web site. Some scores/parts are presented in musical edition programmes but generally they are found here in a most “clear” hand-written manuscript copy (the majority to almost a professional copyist standard) and transferred to a PDF file.

As far as *Johnstone-Music* is concerned you are welcome to publicly perform or record any work or piece found in the web; however you DO need to make mention of the name of the composer and the arranger on any printed information (hand programmes, disc covers etc.).

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To take advantage of this, try to write to us three weeks or more in advance with any information. Last-minute entries are certainly better than not writing at all - however, understandably, once we have past the calendar month of the event it is not usually possible to add old items to the calendar. It is very interesting for the promoters of *Johnstone-Music* to have knowledge of your activity - and so in return for your information you will be entitled to a free gift of a work/s for every diary addition you tell us about. To find out more about this, please visit the “*Cello Club*” section in the web!