

# Cellists' Corner

## Brief Career Details of Important Cellists

*prepared by David Johnstone from public information*

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# GREGOR PIATIGORSKY

*By Karel*

Now, in the 21st century, the great Russian patriarch of cellists is Mstislav Rostropovich. However, 25 years ago, it was Piatigorsky who held that honored position. Piatigorsky was born in Ekaterinoslav (Dnepropetrovsk) Russia on April 17, 1903. He studied violin and piano as a young child with his father, until he saw and heard the cello at an orchestra concert, and became determined to be a cellist. He constructed a "play cello" of two sticks, a long stick for the cello, and a short stick for the bow, and enjoyed pretending to perform. When he was seven years old he was finally given a real cello, and began his remarkable life as a cellist.

A student of Klengel told him he had no talent whatsoever, and to stay clear of the cello. Piatigorsky ignored the unwanted advice, and won a scholarship to the Moscow Conservatory, where he studied with Gubariov, von Glehn (who had studied with Davidov) and Brandoukov. While studying at the conservatory he earned money for his family by playing in local cafes.

The October Russian Revolution occurred with he was only 13 years old, and he began playing in a string quartet shortly thereafter, appropriately named the "Lenin Quartet." At the age of 15 he was engaged to be the principal cellist of the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow.

Despite his success as a cellist, or maybe because of it, the Russian authorities would not allow him to travel abroad to further his studies, or to perform. He therefore defected into Poland by taking a cattle train to the frontier, and then fleeing across the border with his cello. Unfortunately his cello didn't make the crossing intact. Border guards were shooting at him and his companions, one of which happened to be a large lady opera singer. When the shots rang out, she grabbed Piatigorsky, crushing his cello. Neither Piatigorsky or the soprano were injured, as he helped her across the border.

Piatigorsky, now 18 years old, traveled from Poland to Germany, and studied for a short time in Berlin and in Leipzig with Becker and Klengel, neither of which were much appreciated by him. He found employment playing in a trio in a Russian cafe in Berlin, frequented by the likes of Feuermann and Furtwangler, who heard him play and hired him as principal cellist of the Berlin Philharmonic. He kept that post until 1929 (now 26 years old), when he decided to pursue a career as a traveling concert artist. When Richard Strauss heard him perform *Don Quixote* with the Berlin Philharmonic, he said, "*I have finally heard my Don Quixote as I thought him to be.*" That same year he made his debuts with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Stowkowski, and the New York Philharmonic, with Mengelberg. (He loved the United States, and became a citizen in 1942.)

He formed a chamber group with pianist Artur Schnabel, violist William Primrose and violinist Jascha Heifetz. The group became very famous and recorded at least 30 long playing records. Privately he enjoyed playing chamber music with Horowitz and Milstein.

Both the concert going crowds, and composers loved him, and many works were written especially for him, even as we now see in the case of Rostropovich. Both Piatigorsky and Rostropovich have a relationship with Prokofiev's Symphony Concerto Opus 125. Prokofiev had written a Ballade in 1938, for Piatigorsky, which he premiered with the Boston Symphony under the baton of Koussevitsky. Prokofiev later reworked his material into the Symphony Concerto, which he dedicated to Rostropovich. Piatigorsky collaborated with Stravinsky on a transcription of the Pulchinella Suite, which became known as the "Suite Italienne" for cello and piano.

He became an influential teacher. From 1941 to 1949 Piatigorsky was head of the cello department at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, and taught chamber music at Tanglewood. The years 1957 to 1962 saw Piatigorsky heading up the cello department at Boston University, and then in 1962 continuing his teaching at the University of Southern California, where he remained until his death in 1976. In 1962 and also in 1966 he was a member of the jury of the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. It was also in 1962 that the Cello Society of New York honored him by beginning the "Piatigorsky Prize," awarded every other year to a deserving young artist.

Piatigorsky owned two Stradivarius cellos: the "Batta" dated 1714, and the "Baudiot" dated 1725. He died August 6, 1976 from cancer, and was buried in Brentwood Cemetery, near Los Angeles.



*Piatigorsky and Heifetz*

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