Cello

Steven Isserlis visits Minneapolis

by David Carter

Steven Isserlis definitely takes the road less traveled when compared to his cello peers. While the likes of Yo-Yo Ma, Truls Mork, Heinrich Schiff and a host of others strive for a big brilliant sound, Isserlis strings the "Feuermann" Stradivarius with all gut strings, and draws the audience into his musical world. That world is lively, varied and intellectually deep, as he demonstrated through his teaching on a Saturday midday master class at Orchestra Hall this past October. (He was appearing with the Minnesota Orchestra playing the Elgar *Concerto*.) In the two hours of the class, Isserlis worked with four young cellists, exhorting all to bring out more in the music, to find the essential character of each passage, and *not* just "play cello."

One could immediately tell that Isserlis has an active sense of humor, a dry wit that was at times even painful. He soon referred to the timekeeper at the class as "the Grim Reaper," and made references to topics as diverse as the World Series ("Why does it only involve American teams?"), Dudley Moore ("I miss him dearly!"), and articulation, both in language and music. For the latter he used several phrases based upon mothers-in-law: "My mother-in-law is arriving tomorrow for a two week visit" would be articulated much differently than "My mother-in-law is leaving tomorrow after a two week visit." Yet the class was not all fun and games; he asked one student to describe the work he was playing. The student replied that it was a lot of scales without much substance, and Isserlis replied, "That's just how you are playing it."

The first student played the *Prelude* to Bach's *d minor Suite*. Isserlis began with the question of what is the difference between a sonata and a dance suite. He at first said, "Do nothing to the piece," and then later modified that by saying "Do as little as possible to the music." [Let the music speak for itself.] Isserlis urged the performer to "mean every note," to play with great conviction. He said the performer must bring life to the music just as an actor does: by acting a part, by "being the piece." Isserlis stressed how Bach should be "natural," how sometimes the music makes a point, and at other times it seems like thinking out loud. The discussion and subsequent coaching then turned to rhythm. Isserlis felt that even the *Prelude* to a dance suite should have a pulse that is compelling. He mentioned that slurring across the beats tends to obscure the pulse, and that the hierarchy of beats needs to be observed. One's attention should not be drawn to the eighth-note level in the opening measure through an accent on the second eighth note. He also dealt with the sequential nature of this *Prelude*, how to pace them and give larger sections shape. In terms of use of sources, he pointed out that now the Henle edition of the suites includes copies of all three manuscripts available: the copy in the hand of Anna Magdalena Bach, and those by two of Bach's students.

Elgar *Concerto* 4th movement was next, and after noting that the performer spent too much time looking down at the cello ("I feel I should paint some interesting drawings on your fingerboard for you to look at...") he went on to point out some of the performance habits the current generation of cellists have adapted for this piece. [Based on our fascination with the Du Pre recording?] He insisted that the score be faithfully adhered to, and brought out some of the characters of the various passages. For example, he urged that the ascending flourish at the end of the introduction be strong and bold, regardless of the consequences of possibly missing a note. At that point in the class he joked that he often missed notes in that passage. (Again, the focus on not just "playing cello".) The extended 16th note passage at the beginning of the development could be played with more attention to the orchestra's part, especially when they play more lyrically. (This passage elicited the reference to the World Series; it is not a contest! The sense of humor came out again after wondering why only American teams play in the World Series; he looked at the student playing and said, "I blame *you*!") He also dealt in quite specific terms with some technical details in the bow arm, finding the optimal match of bow speed and weight.

Haydn *C Major Concerto* third movement was next, and Isserlis worked extensively on matters of character. How articulation and modulation affect the character were discussed (the articulation question and the mother-in-law quote) — how articulation cannot be the same for modulations into minor keys as for major keys. Isserlis also described, in the quest for a more sprightly character, a bow stroke controlled by the hand alone. In the double stops of the main theme, he demonstrated how the hand can make the notes jump out with clarity. Most notable in this coaching was Isserlis' tireless insistence on the student playing with character and enthusiasm.

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The class concluded with the first movement of Haydn's *D Major Concerto*. Again, despite the technical demands of this work, Isserlis was adamant that the performer should not just "play cello." He pointed out what he felt was the operatic quality of the concerto. Isserlis worked with issues of character as with the other performers, and commented, "Glissandos are like kisses; they are very nice but you don't go around kissing everyone." At one point he asked the performer what the character of the second theme was, and when the answer came back with references to one theme being masculine and one feminine he blurted out, "But you can't say that in America!"

Of course an article such as this is a poor substitute for being there in person. Much more information on Isserlis, with

the intellectual curiosity and humor that are so evident in his life, is available on his website, www.stevenisserlis.com. He has a section on the things that interest him (his "enthusiasms") as well as a discography complete with commentary on the recordings! Included in the website is also a description of the three cellos he currently plays. Interestingly enough he mentioned at the class that he does use steel strings (though not on the Strad!) for concerts of Shostakovich and Prokofiev concerti.

Steven Isserlis is perhaps one of the most versatile cellists active today, moving with ease from Baroque and Classical styles to the most contemporary literature. Perhaps the only other cellists doing this so well are Pieter Wispelwey and Yo-Yo Ma, though the latter's forays into Baroque style (though certainly impressive) do not seem as much part of his essential style as that of either Wispelwey or Isserlis.

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