



PERFORMER CORNER

Introducing Michal Sobieski

by Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes

One of the hallmarks of a fine orchestra is that every member of the ensemble functions together as one perfectly cohesive unit. In each moment of music-making, every member of the ensemble contributes—virtually anonymously—from their own vast set of skills, knowledge and unique bundle of human experiences to the singular musical purpose of their orchestra. Thus to the casual observer of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Michal Sobieski might be just another member of the violin section.

Mike was born in the city of Poznań, Poland, into a family whose professional musical roots reach back five generations. His mother Jadwiga and father Marian were such renowned ethnomusicologists that they are credited in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* with “laying the foundations of ethnomusicology as a scholarly discipline in Poland.” Their groundbreaking work in the field of ethnomusicology ultimately brought the family to Warsaw, and it was there that Mike received most of his formal education.

Mike’s grandfather—a church organist and choir director who had been educated at the Berlin Hochschule—was his first violin teacher. As the Soviet model of education took hold in post-World War II Poland, elementary schools were created especially to nurture the musical abilities of its most talented children. Mike and his siblings were all steered into this system, and by the third grade Mike was studying violin at the Warsaw Conservatory with the renowned performer and pedagogue Irena Dubiska (herself a student of Carl Flesch). He was able to study with her all the way through his post-graduate work, and credits Dubiska’s intuitive skills and ability to demonstrate the highest level of technique and sound production to even her youngest students as crucial to his development as a violinist, since from his earliest years he held a model of the finest sound and exacting technique to strive for.

Post-World War II Poland still included many remote villages, and it was through-

out these areas that Mike’s parents traveled, often on bicycles, to collect indigenous folk music before it could disappear into a more industrialized world. Mike sometimes traveled with his parents during the summer months, and what he remembers most passionately was that in these villages—many still without electricity, and where horses were spooked by the occasional motorized vehicle—music was an integral part of life rather than an exclusive art form set apart from everyday activities. Since folk music permeated life in the Sobieski home from Mike’s earliest years, he developed rather a dual musical citizenship in the worlds of folk and classical music. He apparently began spontaneously to sing folk songs at about the same time he began to talk, and one of his favorite childhood memories was being asked, at about the age of 2 or 3 years, to sing for an extended family gathering. He did, quite comfortably regaling his audience with a series of folk songs, but he followed this performance by passing a hat to collect donations, much to his parents’ horror. He speaks of this episode as the beginning and end of his entrepreneurial career.

One of the great advantages for Mike as a young musician was the opportunity to perform regularly, oftentimes in great halls before large audiences. This came out of a political system where displays of great musical accomplishment were used as a propaganda tool. Over the years Mike performed as soloist, chamber musician, and orchestra member all over the country,

ultimately with Warsaw Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble, Chamber Orchestra, and Concert Bureau. He credits this constant stream of performance opportunities with helping him to simply move past the stage fright that can trouble so many musicians.

During his final years of formal education in Warsaw he was tapped to be concertmaster of the *Con Moto Ma Cantabile* chamber string orchestra sponsored by PMW, Poland’s leading music publisher. Composed of young performers who like himself were just finishing their outstanding formal education, the orchestra worked



without a conductor and Mike also functioned as its leader. This was an experience that served him well throughout his professional life. But perhaps the capstone to his musical development in Poland was his success at the Sibelius Violin Competition in Finland, where he earned a special diploma of honor and a scholarship to study violin with the renowned virtuoso and pedagogue Josef Gingold at

Indiana University. It took him a year of haranguing the Polish cultural ministry to allow him to leave the country (since the government was reluctant to lose this young star, in whom they had invested so much), but Mike was certain he would only be going to the U.S. for a short time, to take advantage of this singular opportunity to study with the great Professor Gingold.

Of his many surprises on this journey, the first was how vast distances were in America. He flew into Montreal, and

boarded a bus for Bloomington, Indiana, expecting to arrive in short order. However the bus drove for one day, then another, and yet another before arriving in Indianapolis. His next surprise was discovering that the 30 English language lessons he had taken in Poland did not prepare him for the unique southern-Indiana accent; while changing buses in Indianapolis he discovered that he could not understand one word that people were saying! However his time with Professor Gingold fit comfortably with the education he had already received in Warsaw, since Gingold was raised in essentially the same musical traditions as Mike had already experienced, focusing not just on technical mastery, but on the intricacies and varieties of tone production, and most importantly the humanity and heart of music-making. Gingold's own performance career was so multifaceted (including playing in the pit for Jerome Kern and Cole Porter musicals as well as under the symphonic batons of Toscanini and Szell, all in the wake of his successful debut as a soloist) that it modeled to his students the importance of relishing every opportunity to make music that comes your way. What's more, Gingold had been a student of Eugène Ysaÿe, who was in turn a student of the great Polish violinist and teacher Henryk Wieniawski, so Mike felt a kinship with Gingold around the music of Poland. Mike's time in Indiana included studies with Gingold, intensive English language studies, some teaching and coaching responsibilities, and participation in orchestra. It was in orchestra where he first spied a young undergraduate violinist named Liz who ultimately became his wife.

Certainly Mike's greatest surprise on his journey to the U.S. is that he ultimately made his musical home here. However his first two jobs upon finishing his studies in Indiana connected back to his studies in Warsaw with Irena Dubiska. The South American country of Venezuela was flush with oil wealth at this time, and brought 35 young string players from Poland and 25 wind players from Juilliard to populate the Maracaibo Symphony Orchestra. Mike was invited to perform the Brahms *Violin Concerto* and then to join the orchestra as co-concertmaster, while his new wife Liz joined the violin section once she finished her undergraduate work at IU. Mike's next orchestra position, which brought him back to the U.S. was as concertmaster for the Canton (Ohio) Symphony. This also linked back to Poland since the orchestra's music director at the time, Tomasz Michalak,

had also been a violin student with Irena Dubiska back in Poland. However it was his next position, as violinist with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, which brought him a permanent musical home in Minnesota, and he quips that this, only his second full-time job in the U.S., is where he will stay for the rest of his career. His almost 30 years of residency in the SPCO violin section does not seem unusual to him, since the opportunity to play in a chamber orchestra is so compelling. Instead of being just one player in the sea of violins in a full symphony orchestra, playing a string instrument in the small section of a chamber orchestra means that every note you play and every nuance you make clearly impacts the sound of the whole. Also for Mike the opportunity to play chamber music and within a variety of chamber orchestral configurations that the SPCO utilizes in its various series and venues makes this job a perfect fit for his diverse musical background and interests. He has observed over the years that very few people leave the SPCO because it is such a satisfying musical experience.

Probably Mike's most extraordinary experience with the SPCO—not including the time he danced a Polish *krakowiak* on the Carnegie Hall stage (see the NYT review of the 1998 SPCO concert at: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9407E7D91F3AF937A35751C0A96E958260>)—happened when violinist/conductor Iona Brown developed pneumonia on the day she was to perform (as violinist and conductor) all four of the concerti that comprise Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* with the SPCO. Orchestra management had a concert program to fill within a matter of hours and put the word out to the orchestra to see if per chance any of the violinists could at least perform one of the four Vivaldi concerti. They took Mike up on his offer to play them all, leading from the violin—after all, this is exactly the work he did with the chamber orchestra he led those last years in Warsaw, and he actually did know all of the concerti. He saved the day and added mightily to his local reputation as a performer. It was soon after this that he was approached by the Minneapolis Pops Orchestra, inviting him to take the position of concertmaster. This summer job continues today, making a great complement to his work with the SPCO, since it gives him the opportunity to sit in the concertmaster seat, and perform a concerto with the orchestra each season. He is also active as a soloist and chamber musician, oftentimes with his wife, Liz

(herself an active freelance violinist), playing in a wide variety of groups in just as many circumstances.

I personally got to know Mike when he agreed to become the concertmaster of the community orchestra I conduct, the 3M Orchestra. What impresses me so deeply about him in his role with this ensemble of avocational musicians is not just how much he has at his disposal to teach about playing effectively in an orchestra with the fine points of playing technically and stylistically, but how passionately and with how much patience and care he shares his overflowing wealth of information in a setting that is unlikely to impact his career or artistic stature in any way. When I asked him about his connection with this orchestra he responded that he respects the idea that these people are making music simply because they want to and because it brings them pleasure. He feels their satisfaction and that is good to be around. He believes that if you are approaching music solely as a way to earn money then you are missing a good part of the picture. Perhaps not so coincidentally many members of the 3M Orchestra also subscribe to the SPCO, so they experience both processes of making and listening to music, while he in turn performs service to the community and to the SPCO by sharing his knowledge to community-based musicians while at the same time helping these musicians make a personal connection with his professional orchestra.

So as one of the senior members of the SPCO what are the qualities he believes are important for young musicians to cultivate? Perhaps not so surprisingly they focus much more strongly on the humanity and heart of music making, and thus hearken back to the important lessons he received as a violin student and from traveling with his parents at a young age observing the place of “folk” music in the life of people in the villages of Poland.

“I think music should be a way of life, not just a profession where you compete with others and try to overcome the competition, sometimes in a ruthless way. It should be humane. A big part of any artistic organization is support within the community. People in the community will want to support something they can relate to—not only on the stage but to cultivate good relationships between people. I think it's important to be educated as a human being. It's not how fast somebody is playing alone, but what they express in their

music and how they can relate as a human being. Art is about relating [to music and to other people]. There is life in music. You can be any age and still be young that way. It doesn't decay."

Chicago native Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes is an orchestra conductor who has also worked extensively in outreach and arts-in-education. Through these experiences she was introduced

to some of the extraordinary musicians working outside of the classical music realm. This led her to create Vox Corda (voice of the string), as a way to explore all genres of acoustic string music and offer another facet of string music advocacy. This past season the professional Vox Corda String Orchestra (www.voxcorda.org) presented its first season of cross-cultural string orchestra concerts. Elizabeth has performed and taught extensively

on both coasts, conducting orchestra, opera, musical theater and choral ensembles, working with all ranges of musicians, including students from beginners to graduate students, amateur and professional adults. Her academic degrees are from Northwestern University (B.M.), Catholic University (M.M.), and the University of Minnesota (D.M.A.) ‡