



PERFORMER CORNER

Tamas Strasser: Budapest to St. Paul (with points in between)

by Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes

Long-time St. Paul Chamber Orchestra violist Tamas Strasser tells a great story, familiar to teachers and parents who have worked with students or offspring who are “reluctant” to practice, and to those of us who used to be that very “reluctant” student:

My father was a task-master; he really had to push me. He would make me practice my fiddle in the same room where he was grading papers, so he could be sure I was actually practicing and not just goofing off. (He was very smart.) But one day he said, “I’ve spent the past 8 or 9 years forcing you to practice. You know, it’s not worth it anymore. I’m going to take your fiddle and sell it.” So he took it away from me, but he didn’t sell it, he hid it from me for the summer. And by the end of the summer I was craving it so much that I went and really buckled down, out of love and not by force. That was a huge change in my life.

Tamas and his family came from Hungary, where they lived until the 1956 revolution. They immigrated to the U.S., where they were fortunate to have family to stay with—first in New York and then in California—while acclimating to their new country. Tamas’ father was a math teacher and gymnastics coach; he ultimately found a teaching position at Cotty College in Nevada, Missouri, and this is where Tamas finished growing up.

His formal music education began quite early, back in Hungary, with piano lessons starting at the age of 3 or 4. At 6 years old he performed quite well in a competition held at the prestigious Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest. One of the competition judges, a violinist, approached Tamas’ father and suggested that playing a string instrument would provide many more opportunities to perform in orchestras than a pianist would ever find, so from that point Tamas studied the violin.

If you happened to see the documentary

Budapest to Berlin: On Tour with the SPCO on Twin Cities Public Television several years back, you witnessed quite a moving experience when the very grown up Tamas Strasser returned to the Franz Liszt Academy, as a member of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, to perform in the majestic Great Hall. This was his first visit back to the Academy since his he was a very young student, and he was delightfully excited to show his fellow-travelers all those familiar places back home in Hungary and especially at the Academy, his original musical home.



Once Tamas “caught fire” as a violin student that summer in Missouri, he started spending Saturdays up in Kansas City to play in youth orchestra and take lessons. From here he received a scholarship to study violin at the university in Boulder, Colorado. Why not Juilliard or Curtis or some other big-time conservatory? The answer is simple and not uncommon for many gifted, young musicians: his parents simply didn’t know that this was the “preferred” path. Nonetheless he studied with great teachers along the way (among them Andor Toth, Tiberius Klausner, Michael Rabin and Dorothy Delay) and found remarkable and informative performing opportunities (including the Kansas City Philharmonic, New Art String Quartet and Concerto Solo-

ists of Philadelphia, Cascade Music Festival in Oregon and the Santa Fe Opera). Like many university musicians in the 1960s, Tamas turned to one of the military service music ensembles so he could continue to make music rather than being drafted into the military. He auditioned for and was accepted into the U.S. Army Strings. To hear Tamas talk about it, a substantial life in music seemed to “just happen” for him.

Math is very strong for me; my father was a math teacher. And math and music have very strong parallels, so I could have done something else perhaps; but I like music. I like the hours; I don’t have to fight rush hour traffic...I really like music! Chamber music is my favorite; even through college I used to organize chamber music sessions several times a week. That’s how I learned the most. You listen to each other, you communicate, and you learn a lot.

A member of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra since 1975, Tamas has enjoyed participating in summer music festivals all over the country. (The SPCO does not work during the summer, and a position in the chamber orchestra can open many doors for other choice musical experiences.) However most recently he’s chosen to take it easier during the summer, stay closer to home and focus on his private life, family, motorcycling, and his favorite genre of chamber music at Alexandria Minnesota’s Festival of the Lakes. He believes chamber music has taught him the most important lessons for a musician, of listening and responding, as well as the psychology required to work with other musicians, skills that have transferred particularly well to a chamber orchestra.

In a chamber orchestra I like to say you’re a bigger cog in a smaller wheel, so you have a lot more impact, and you have to be more aware. You can’t just follow the beat and get lost in a

sea of violins. Day after day playing with the same people is like a family. A marriage between two people is hard enough, but when you have 34...! (It's really like that.)

Teaching has become a larger part of Tamas' life in the last decade. He teaches violin and viola and directs the string orchestra that he developed at the University of St. Thomas. He believes the most important quality he can bring to teaching is honesty. During a first lesson he will encourage his student to define a long-term musical goal, what they want to ultimately achieve as a musician, be it playing in a professional orchestra, a community orchestra, at church, or chamber music with friends. Everything in Tamas' teaching of these university students (most of whom are not music majors) flows from their musical interests and goals. Part of Tamas' focus on honesty also includes telling a student if he believes music is not a good fit, so they can find a pursuit better suited to their strengths. Of course part of his role as teacher is to learn about his students' lives, interests and concerns. Since music comes from our hearts and deepest selves he believes it is essential to meet his students at that place. He even stopped offering 30-minute lessons at St. Thomas, and instead offers somewhat fewer 45-minute lessons each term (which generally turn out to be at least an hour anyway). This way there is time to develop the personal relationship that is key to a quality music teacher-student relationship. Tamas greatly admires and respects people who teach full time—after all he grew up with a teacher for a father.

It's really admirable to be a good teacher. I'm not going to say it's harder because for some people it's not hard. Some people can really do this well. I think I'm getting better at it as I'm doing more and more of it. I wasn't a natural-born teacher; I think I was a natural-born performer. I've always done that!

Tamas is philosophical when asked what he knows now after so many years as orchestra, chamber orchestra, and chamber music practitioner, that he wished he knew back when he started out.

I wish I would have known...but that's life! You're not born with all this knowledge, but what I did learn—I always expected to learn something, I just didn't know what it was going to be—was that the psychology of playing with other people is just as important as playing the music itself. You have to learn how to get along with your stand partner and the people around you. You can be critical but in a good way, and you can accept criticism. It's very important to be able to communicate like that.

When you're in college learning to be a musician you have a semester to prepare a concert, so it is really a shock when you just have 3 or 4 rehearsals! I knew that was how it was going to be, but to learn some major repertoire, some really difficult stuff, perhaps some contemporary stuff you've never heard before, and learn it in just 3-4 rehearsals—even if you get the music a few weeks ahead of time—is a whole different thing than working on a Beethoven symphony for a semester and then performing it.

So how does one learn music thoroughly (and quickly)?

You want to become totally familiar with a piece. You want to listen to it on a recording; you can look at the score to see where you fit in (like you would with a string quartet). You don't want to just play. You try to do whatever preliminary work you can. But after the first rehearsal is when the major practicing comes because now you know what is expected; you get a picture of what you're going to have to do.

Regardless of all of this attention to music, in the end this is how Tamas Strasser describes his life: "The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra is my major job...or I should say it's my major source of income. My major job has been raising my kids."

His two daughters are pretty well grown. Talia, the older, majored in psychology at Duluth, and now manages a credit union. She and her husband will make Tamas a grandfather for the first time this winter. Ariel, the younger, is at Boston Conservatory studying, song, dance, piano, music theater, all of it! And what does Tamas hope for his young performer?

It's a hard life; it's hard to make a living at that. Ariel is studying everything from song and dance, to piano, to running the lights, to stage directing, so hopefully she'll be able to make a living doing that. We'll see. If not then she'll do something else!

Chicago native Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes is an innovative orchestra conductor who has also worked extensively in the realms of outreach and arts-in-education. As music director/conductor of the East Metro Symphony Orchestra (formerly the 3M Orchestra), www.emsorch.org, she has brought original and enlightening community partnerships to the center of its work. Through the development of Vox Corda (voice of the string), www.vox-corda.org, she has led the way in exploring all genres of acoustic string music through the lens of the orchestra and offers an additional perspective for string music advocacy. 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.). †