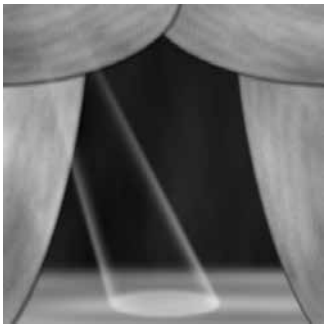

Performer Corner

Janet Horvath: A Cellist with Passions

by Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes

Cellist Janet Horvath best tells her own story in the first chapter of her book, *Playing (Less) Hurt*:

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I was born into a musical family. My father was a cellist. At the time of his retirement he had performed with the Toronto Symphony for 38 years. My mother enjoyed a successful dual career as singer and piano teacher. For all my early years, music permeated our home, and there was absolutely no question that I would become a musician. My mother always envisioned me in a gorgeous long gown, striding onstage with my cello! My lessons began at the age of nine, and despite the fact that no teacher was ever good enough for my father, I always learned something. You see, he is Hungarian and comes from a rigorous tradition of schooling. He thought playing duets was a waste of time when I should have been practicing etudes.

To my father's great pleasure, I was accepted at age 22 by the great cellist and pedagogue Janos Starker at Indiana University. Although I had heard stories about Starker's intensely competitive class, I made up my mind. I was going to be the best Starker student who ever lived.

Indiana University School of Music is a large, competitive place, and we Starker students were really in the limelight, right alongside the students of the legendary violinist Joserf Gingold. On top of those pressures, I had been a very sheltered young lady, and this was my first time away from home. I had to live in a dorm that I hated. I was very lonely, so, I practiced. Every day I would plant myself in a tiny cubicle of a practice room and I wouldn't get up for fear someone else would take my room. Easily, three or four hours would pass. Eventually my left arm began to hurt.

I had embraced the prevailing mentality, borrowed from the aerobics boom, that physical discomfort was an outcome of time well spent: "No pain, no gain!" So I continued to play with a sore arm with the rationalization that I could play through the pain and that the discomfort would just miraculously go away as I got into better shape as a cellist. But the pain didn't go away. It got worse.

My first impulse was denial. My thoughts were, "Nah, it doesn't hurt that much, it just couldn't be hurting." I was

wrong. There came a point when I could no longer ignore the pain and loss of function and dexterity. My pain became so acute that I couldn't use a knife and fork, or turn a doorknob, wash my hair or hold a telephone. I had let it go too long. I had developed a major case of what we now call overuse, or repetitive strain injury (RSI). At the time (1974) this came under the general heading of tendonitis or, as it was affectionately known at my school, "Bloomingtonitis."

I went to about a dozen doctors and tearfully explained my problem. Their shrugging—unhelpful—responses ranged from disbelieving to insulting. Some asked, how can it hurt to play a musical instrument? It can't possibly be as physically taxing as, say, football or ditch digging. After all, music is so ethereal, and performing onstage is so glamorous. They pay you for that? "It's all in your head," was one diagnosis. It must be psychological; everyone knows musicians are sensitive creatures. "Perhaps you should consider a change of career," said another doctor. This one did not go over well with me. Do something else? Inconceivable!

I do not fault those physicians so much now as I did then. I know now that many musicians' injuries affect primarily soft tissue and, as a result, are harder to detect on standard medical tests. I learned the hard way why consulting a physician experienced with repetitive strain injuries is essential for a proper diagnosis.

I went through a phase of utter desolation and panic. I thought I would never play again. My life was essentially over, I felt. At the time, Starker was on a solo concert tour. It seemed I had nowhere to turn for support, and I certainly had no concept of how to face the challenge.

Immobilized by pain, fear and despair, I didn't touch my instrument for three months. I feared re-injury and I was terrified to tell Starker. I had let him down! When Starker returned to town, I worked up the courage to let him know my predicament, and to his credit, he did a brilliant acting job and hid his horror quite well. Together we set out to put my technique back together from scratch.

Fortunately I had the right teacher; Starker is a master of ease and perfection. With his guidance, we sought first to eliminate any tension, and to focus on ease of playing. I accepted my limitations and learned to recognize the danger signals. We took an analytical approach. Each motion was scrutinized from a whole-body use perspective. The three-month rest period had allowed my muscles to recover. It took six months to implement our strategy. The result: After nine months I was totally cured and ready to learn how to become an advocate for injury prevention.

Since those student years, I have encountered countless musicians in various stages of denial or shame concerning their very real pain. Admitting to a problem ultimately means reckoning with it, making

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changes to playing technique or habits and oftentimes taking a hiatus from playing altogether.

We're all afraid of real or imagined stigmas associated with injury. Rationally or irrationally, we may wonder, does our pain signal that we have failed in some way? Will we be branded as bad musicians, flawed people?

Prestigious schools and summer music festivals frequently perpetuate a culture of overuse. These intensely pressured environments are virtual breeding grounds for injury. Often we are "big fish" in our hometowns, only to be thrust into a stimulating, exciting and intense environment for a period of weeks, where we are suddenly only "teeny-weeny fish." The inspiration of being amongst our peers and outstanding performers is offset by the frantic pace of performances and rehearsals and the pressures of new competition and different standards. When under these circumstances we also try to implement a new technique, we have a prescription for trouble!

When, in 1980, I was hired as Associate Principal Cello of the Minnesota Orchestra, I began encountering colleagues in pain. Six musicians were sidelined by injuries at one point. I was appalled. Surely we can come out of the closet and find solutions to our problems, I thought. I began extensive research into pain issues and as I did so, musical colleagues, physicians, orchestra managers, therapists, college teachers and even insurance carriers came out of the proverbial woodwork, making a beeline in my direction.

Due to overwhelming interest in the subject I approached the University of Minnesota in 1984. They agreed to sponsor a national conference called, *Playing Hurt*™, which took place in 1987. Twenty-three states were represented by the several hundred attendees. Doctors addressed musicians, pedagogues addressed doctors, and musicians shared their stories with musicians. It was cathartic, and a huge relief for everyone to finally talk about this to a receptive audience and to explore solutions. The field of performing arts medicine was given a shot in the arm.

Today, performing arts medicine is an established medical field. Clinics have sprung up all over the country. More and more music schools have advocated for injury prevention programs and there is awareness in the orchestral world as never before. Remember that this is a new and growing area of understanding and healing. The lessons we are learning are only as good as the teacher and advocate that you become for yourself and for others.

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Over the years Janet has become a remarkably knowledgeable and unabashed advocate for learning and teaching how to play with as little physical damage as possible. These days she is working on creating a curriculum that teachers can use in the classroom and studio. In the meantime she offers yet more advice: "If there is pain, stop. Ice immediately (during this acute phase), then take a couple days off. I will stop in mid-phrase when practicing, while in rehearsal or concert settings I will lay low or avoid positions and fingers that are hurt. In repetitive and taxing sections stand partners can help each other by taking turns. There's always some resistance—I ignore people like that."

So what is next for this accomplished musician and advocate? Using her music and writing to teach tolerance. Her parents were holocaust survivors. Late in his life her father finally told his own story of this terrible time. It included performing 200 concerts in over 100 displaced-person camps after the war. Janet's father performed the *Kol Nidre* every year in his adopted home of Toronto, and she has continued this tradition performing the *Kol Nidre* every year for the 30 years she has been in the Twin Cities. In fact for the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz a piece was commissioned from composer Stephen Paulus, *To Be Certain of the Dawn*, by the Basilica in partnership with Temple Israel. Composed for a large orchestra, children's and adult choirs and cantor, it includes pictures of villages affected by the holocaust, taken before and after the war. This is just the beginning of this part of her journey: "I'm not sure exactly how, but I know I can reach people with my solo playing and thought I could do more, incorporate my parents' story with some playing, reminding people that you're like me and I'm like you."

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.voxcorda.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.

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