



PERFORMER CORNER

Adam Han-Gorski:

A violinist of the world finds home in Minnesota

by Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes

When Adam Han-Gorski states that he is one of the youngest survivors of the Holocaust and what's more he is the only performing violinist today who survived the Holocaust, you suspect there might be some interesting stories to hear. He does not disappoint. His life has been one of dramatic changes, both personally and as a musician, oftentimes reaching the pinnacle of accomplishment only to find himself starting all over again.

The city of Lwów was already in the midst of tumult, claimed by both Poland and Ukraine, under German and then Soviet occupation when Adam was born in 1940. Born into an artistic, Jewish family, his childhood was defined by World War II in the most dramatic ways: his mother was trapped in the Soviet Union while on tour as a pianist; his father tried to find her by volunteering for a military unit going east, only to be captured by the Soviets and placed in the Gulag as a spy. In the meantime Adam had been placed with his paternal grandparents for safety, but when his grandfather was taken away by Germans one day, never to be seen again, he was sent to Krakow to live with his maternal grandparents. However when residents of the ghetto began to be shipped off to extermination camps, a family friend bravely and surreptitiously removed two-year-old Adam from danger and began to raise him as part of her own, safely Christian family. Three years later, the war ended, his parents managed to reunite and return home, and Adam too was miraculously reunited with his family when his birth mother and adoptive mother had a chance meeting on the street. Post-war life in Soviet-occupied Poland was very difficult for everybody, and for a surviving Jewish family was additionally uncomfortable. Nonetheless it wasn't long before Adam's mother began searching for a violin teacher for her five-year-old son. The concertmaster of the radio symphony orchestra reluctantly agreed to teach Adam on a trial basis, and soon took him on in earnest as a student, for no fee.

Adam made his performing debut in 1948 as a soloist with the Silesian Philharmonic in Katowice, Poland. The debut was captured on film and played as a newsreel for months in movie theaters across the country (and is still available to view on YouTube), making Adam quite the young celebrity. He attended a public music grammar school, where private lessons, music theory, ensembles, and all of that were part of the daily curriculum, right next to traditional academic subjects. While a teenager Adam's family received permission to emigrate to Israel, and as he put it, "You leave immediately—you didn't wait an hour" once such permission was received.

So suddenly the family experienced another upheaval, moving from post-war, Soviet Poland to the young nation of Israel. He studied at the prestigious Music Academy in Tel Aviv and among his fellow students at the academy were the young violinists Itzhak Perlman and Pinchas Zukerman. One by one Perlman, Zukerman and then Han-Gorski left Israel for the United States in order to further their development as violinists. Adam's opportunity came when he was invited by Jascha Heifetz to be part of his prestigious master class at the University of Southern California under full scholarship.

Mr. Heifetz proved to be a very direct, manicured businessman in his demeanor, unlike the wild-eyed Paganini one might imagine in such a great artist. His teaching was just as businesslike and exacting and it was not just about performing the violin but all that Heifetz believed a young musician needed to know to join the ranks of the musical world and society at their highest levels. Adam's experience was much like any young person starting life in a new city, but for this young person it was on a new continent, speaking a foreign language, with no financial resources, and with a student visa unable to join the musicians union and earn a living.



Although fully committed to his teaching, Heifetz could offer little to his students in the musical world outside of the studio. As a defector from the Soviet Union Heifetz had alienated many important people, so his students could never succeed in important competitions like the Tchaikovsky. Heifetz was also very reluctant to offer his students invaluable recommendations to artistic management and arts organizations for fear

of playing favorites among his accomplished class. Nonetheless Adam speaks well of his time with Heifetz and the lessons he continued to process for years to come. After four years in the master class Adam was pronounced ready to go out into the world and as a final gesture Mr. Heifetz made a fine Italian violin available for Adam.

Beginning professional life as an accomplished violinist in Los Angeles meant that the choices of possible musical paths included not just pursuing a solo or orchestral career, but film and studio work. Adam's first musical employment in the U.S. was at the Hilton Hotel playing for dinner guests. This was followed by film studio work and even a stint with Andy Williams, opening Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. Adam's first orchestral job was as concertmaster for the Metropolitan Opera's touring company. The schedule of

performing and crossing the country by bus was so grueling that Adam recounts having to ask at his hotel's front desk which city they were in. But he also made good use of his travels by contacting the music director of the orchestra in each city he visited, asking to play for each maestro, thus networking on a very high level. One of these informal auditions led to an offer of a principal second violin position for Max Rudolf, which he turned down, since his ultimate desire was to be a concertmaster. Nonetheless one day he received word from the Cleveland Orchestra that Mr. Szell wanted to hear him play. How did Szell know about him? "Mr. Szell hears a lot from many people," was the intriguing reply. Shortly afterwards Szell invited Adam to join the Cleveland Orchestra, where he sat prominently in the first violin section.

Adam described a telling moment in his first rehearsal at Cleveland, when his stand partner warned him about a notoriously tricky entrance because "nobody really knew how it starts, but it just does!" Sure enough, Adam continues, "At first I was simply left behind! It was like riding in a Lamborghini when I'd only driven a Chevy before!" In addition to working with Szell in one of the pre-eminent ensembles of the day, since the Cleveland Orchestra hosted all of

the great conductors, Adam had the opportunity to learn from the greatest musicians of the time. Once Szell passed away Adam decided to move on, first to the concertmaster position with the Syracuse Symphony, and then as Associate Concertmaster of the Minnesota Orchestra (then the Minneapolis Symphony) under Stanislaw Skrowaczewski.

It was time for the next challenge when Adam left for Germany in the mid-1970s, and he was appointed concertmaster of the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra, a position he kept for 25 years. With a favorable work schedule and proximity to many great cities and great musicians came many opportunities. Adam was also able to perform widely as a soloist and to create his own ensemble, "Virtuosi di Vienna," which toured extensively in Europe. But when the time came to retire it was to Minnesota that he returned. Adam had very much enjoyed his life in Minnesota all those years ago and he'd felt this to be the most home-like of any of the many places he'd lived throughout his life. Twenty-five years is a long time to be away, so in essence when he returned to Minnesota he started all over again, one more time! He describes himself as semi-retired, but is overflowing with knowledge, experiences and accomplishments. Adam performs, coaches and

teaches, in order to pass along what he has learned and experienced from his remarkable life. Adam may sometimes seem intimidating for all he has done and all he has thought about, processed and practiced as a musician. Yes in his semi-retirement he perhaps has more to offer than ever before, since he has nothing to prove and so much to share. It's very clear that throughout his lifetime of experiences across the world he hasn't just done things, but processed and analyzed his cornucopia of experiences. He offers a remarkable list of suggestions for master classes, not just teaching students and teachers in the conventional sense, but deeply exploring musical concepts that we use all the time (such as flexibility, rubato, tastefulness, portamento, technique, practicing, accompanying and leading, not to mention orchestral playing, unaccompanied Bach, and working deeply and flexibly with scales) but perhaps don't even think much about anymore. To learn more about Adam Han-Gorski, his life, illustrious career and heritage, visit his website as a starting point www.hangorski.com, then consider what his experiences and understandings might bring to you and your students.

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