



## CELLO

### A Trio of Remarkable Cello Recitals

by David Holmes

Recently, I heard recitals by Steven Isserlis, the great British cellist, and through CELLOici (the 3-week summer cello camp at St. Olaf) I attended recitals by Mark Kosower, the principal of the Cleveland Orchestra and Astrid Schween, the cellist in the Juilliard Quartet. All three performances were extraordinary and wide-ranging in their technical approach and musical expression.

Steven Isserlis is perhaps my favorite cellist in the world. His Ordway recital in April with harpsichordist Richard Egarr was an exquisite Baroque Period manifesto. The program featured two Bach *Gamba Sonatas*, a Marcello *Sonata*, and the 5<sup>th</sup> Bach *Solo Suite in C Minor* as well, a real treat for hardcore Bach cello suite lovers like myself. Isserlis is often criticized for having a smaller sound on concerti, due perhaps to his preference for the warm sound of gut strings. Despite this, he has an unequaled ability to shape one heavenly phrase after another. His palette of vibrato colors is extraordinary as is his complete ease at the cello in service of the music. I always surrender to his stunning expressive powers. His bow arm and bow hold are so loose that he looks as if he could drop the bow at any moment. The notion of “how loose is loose?”



Mark Kosower

is what I am always reminded of when I see him play. It is interesting to note that Isserlis' solo career did not launch until after 10 years of relative obscurity. He commissioned the premiere of John Tavener's *Protecting Veil* in 1989, which set his meteoric career in motion. Isserlis has an interesting website where he posts comments on many topics, including for example, the value or dysfunction

of competitions, sincerity in performance, prodigies, and others. He performs mostly on the Marquis de Carberon (Zara Nelsova's cello) Stradivarius of 1726, although he is in the process of trying to purchase a Montagnana made in 1740.

Mark Kosower's July 17 recital at Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church was a tour de force of clear musical expression and an infallible left hand technique. Among other pieces, he performed beautifully his own transcription of the *C Major Solo Violin Sonata* of J.S. Bach. He was accompanied by his wife Jee-Won Oh on the Barber *Sonata*, a set of Beethoven variations, and on the Frank Bridge *Sonata*. Kosower's left hand dexterity and bow work were immaculate. Although he was expressive, I was somewhat perplexed by

his unorthodox approach to vibrato, which was always fast and narrow and used a bit sporadically. The other interesting thing I noticed was that his bow was always on the flat side of the horsehair, as opposed to the more common tilted approach of Isserlis and Schween and most other cellists. He sounded great despite these idiosyncrasies and throughout the evening left no doubt as to why he's principal cellist of one of the greatest orchestras in the world. I don't think he played a note out of tune all night. Melissa Ousley of MPR briefly interviewed Kosower, who was born and raised in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. He told of starting the cello at 18 months old when his dad put a tiny cello in his crib, which was inspired by Kosower singing what his dad—also a professional cellist—was practicing. Kosower's sister is a cellist in the Chicago Symphony and his father and mother were both in attendance at the concert.

On July 21, Astrid Schween and local pianist Mary Jo Gothmann gave a splendid recital of well-known classics: the Debussy *Sonata*, the *Prelude-Fantasia* from the Cassado *Solo Sonata*, the *Hungarian Rhapsody* by Popper, and the great Franck *Sonata*. Before entering the Juilliard prep school, Schween started cello at 7 in New York City with Yo-Yo Ma's father, Hiao-Tsiun Ma, who was a composer and violinist. She was in the Lark Quartet for many years and succeeded Minnesotan Laura Sewell when she retired from the group. In 2016, Schween replaced Joel Krosnick of the Juilliard String Quartet. Schween gave a dynamic and beautiful recital on a Stradivarius cello that the Juilliard School lets her use. It will be 300 years old in 2019. Schween's cello playing very expressive and she had a natural way of moving with the cello, and a very free left hand and arm and elbow that moved easily up and down often, possibly as a means of helping to shift, to move from finger to finger, or to balance on individual fingers.

Witnessing amazing cellists live in concert is inspirational and

provides an opportunity to glean important cello lessons from the masters. Although the musical pleasure is intense and the technical prowess awe-inspiring, I confess a feeling of competitiveness as well, where in my own mind I am always falling short of what I'm hearing. These are natural responses—both positive and negative—to beholding musical greatness. The joy and the discontentment live side by side within me because I am still driven to keep getting better, even at age 59. This, I imagine, is a good thing.

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Astrid Shween