



CHAMBER MUSIC

Maybe Aretha Franklin Started out Playing Second Violin!

by Tom Rosenberg

Aretha Franklin's amazing and powerful version of *Respect* is unforgettable. But if one also pays attention to the background singers on that track you will hear fantastic singers. The documentary film *Twenty Feet From Stardom* shines a spotlight on these women who stand in the shadows. Morgan Neville, the film's director says:

I don't think [background singers] get enough credit, because they don't get any credit. People think being a backup singer is just about singing 'oooh' or 'ahhhhhh.' But it's about so much more—the way they sing, the way they do harmony. They're just incredible musicians. They're the most incredible artists you've never heard of.

That song made famous by Aretha Franklin could be the anthem of those who are great second violinists. Being a great second violinist is in many ways more difficult than playing first violin and requires skills that are tremendously underappreciated.

There is a perception that if you are playing second violin, you are not as good a player as someone playing first violin. Sometimes, in amateur or student settings, that may be true, as playing the melody in high registers and some of the fast and virtuosic playing the first violins are given can require more advanced players.

But there is no good quartet where the second violinist is a technically and musically inferior musician. The same is true in orchestra. Playing second violin generally requires a different skill set. Those playing second violin are often required to cleanly execute sudden complex rhythms, large jumps of register, non-standard arpeggios and scale patterns, etc. All the while, they are usually in support of a melody played in the upper register of the first violin or another instrument. In addition, they are often on the lower strings, which can be more physically taxing. When they do get the melody, they have to work much harder

*What you want
Baby, I got it
What you need
Do you know I got it?
All I'm askin'
Is for a little respect*

*R-E-S-P-E-C-T
Find out what it means to me!*

at projecting it out of the texture. Not only is the melody usually in a register below an accompaniment in a higher register by the first violin, but also second violinists are sitting in a position behind the first violin and farther from the front of the stage.

Because the often used and unfortunate expression "playing second fiddle to" has negative connotations, it can be considered a put down by some violinists to be assigned a second violin part. This is especially true of students and often the parents of student violinists. All it takes is a search of the phrase "playing second fiddle to" to find why this perception exists. Here are some examples:

The Cambridge Dictionary has this listing: "to be less important or in a weaker position than someone else: I'm not prepared to play second fiddle to Christina any more—I'm looking for another job!"

The Free Dictionary website has these examples: "If someone or something plays second fiddle to someone or something else, they are less important than them. To have a lower or less important position than another person."

Great second violinists must often feel like saying what the late comedian Rodney Dangerfield would always say in every one of his routines: "I don't get no respect!" Ironically, he was one of the most successful and respected comedians of the 20th century!

As a kid, I was lucky to be exposed to the great Budapest String Quartet in their final years. I sat on stage numerous times in my pre-teen years watching and hearing their Beethoven String Quartet Cycle concerts. Although Josef Roisman was the

first violin, many considered the real star and driving force of that quartet to be the second violinist Alexander (Sasha) Schneider. It is impossible to forget or to not think of his presence in the quartet. After the quartet retired from the concert stage, he went on to be one of the most important classical musicians of the 20th century where he deeply influenced legions of young artists. Here is a link to a video of when he received the Kennedy Center Honor in 1988. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Gfpl-jlnys>

Some of the other charismatic and fabulous violinists who have been great quartet second violinists are Peter Salaff of The Cleveland Quartet, Elisa Pegreffi of the Quartetto Italiano and John Daly of the Guarneri Quartet. I urge readers to listen to and watch videos of these great quartets who no longer are on the concert stages of the world and observe what a powerful presence those players had in their quartets.

Although members of professional quartets are keenly aware of this, students who play second violin in chamber music groups need to learn that they are crucial to the inner workings of the quartet. Audiences often have no idea that the second violinist is usually the inner motor and leader of the quartet, and is crucial (as are all members of the group) to the interpretation, voicing or balance, pulse, character, intonation, rhythmic integrity of accompanying lines, etc. Then, they have to emerge out of the texture, often in a difficult register to present melodic or motivic material with a sound and color unique and different than that of the first violinist.

Some violinists strongly prefer to have the role of second violin. Some say it suits their personality, some say they are simply more comfortable in that role. I decided to ask a great contemporary violinist who is fully capable of playing first violin at the highest level, but has nearly always been a second violinist in award winning quartets, even as far back as her high school days. Karen Kim is the Grammy Award winning violinist who has played second violin professionally in both the Parker and now the

Jasper String Quartet. Both groups are very well-known and successful. Prior to that, she played both first and second violin in high school ensembles that were prize winners in the Junior Division of the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition. So, Karen has been playing the role of second violin at the highest levels for parts of three decades.

I asked her to talk about why she likes that role.

I really love that you get to know the piece intimately because you are learning it from the inside. You have a lot of influence on the flow and color of the performance. The hardest parts are that it requires a lot of flexibility and a specific type of empathy to be really good at it. And, it can

sometimes be hard to know that your contribution will not always be recognized in the same way as the work of the first violinist. But, when you are playing in a group when all four are responding to each other, it is very rewarding. Plus, the second violin often has the most interesting note of a chord and side commentaries that bring life, dimension and often wit to a performance.

If you are asked to or choose to play second violin in a quartet, embrace the role and be proud of it. Let the world know that playing second violin is a great art! Make it your aim to have the expression “playing second fiddle to” become understood to mean that that person is great at what they do, both a leader and team player and worthy of

tremendous amounts of:
R-E-S-P-E-C-T!!

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