
ralph kirshbaum

KIRSHBAUM ASSOCIATES INC.
307 SEVENTH AVENUE SUITE 506 NEW YORK NY 10001 (212) 222-4843 TEL (212) 222-7321 FAX WWW.KIRSHBAUMASSOCIATES.COM

Ralph Kirshbaum, cello
Biography

The distinguished career of Texas-born cellist Ralph Kirshbaum encompasses the worlds of solo performance, chamber music, recording, and pedagogy, and places him in the highest echelon of today's cellists. Possessed of "wonderful tone, utter technical reliability and the imagination to make the music feel both spontaneous and well planned" (*Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*), Kirshbaum enjoys the affection and respect not only of audiences worldwide, but also of his many eminent colleagues and students.

Kirshbaum has appeared with many of the world's great orchestras, including the Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Pittsburgh, BBC, and London Symphonies; the Los Angeles and Israel Philharmonics; the Cleveland Orchestra; Philharmonia; Zurich Tonhalle; and Orchestre de Paris. He has collaborated with many of the great conductors of the time, including Herbert Blomstedt, Semyon Bychkov, Christoph von Dohnányi, Andrew Davis, the late Sir Colin Davis, the late James Levine, the late Kurt Masur, Zubin Mehta, Sir Antonio Pappano, the late André Previn, Sir Simon Rattle, Leonard Slatkin, and the late Sir Georg Solti. Kirshbaum has appeared frequently at such prominent international festivals as Edinburgh, Bath, Verbier, Lucerne, Aspen, La Jolla, Santa Fe, Music@Menlo, Ravinia, and New York's Mostly Mozart.

An unusual component of Kirshbaum's distinguished legacy is the creation of cello festivals. Kirshbaum founded the RNCM Manchester International Cello Festival in 1988, the final iteration of which was awarded the Royal Philharmonic Society's Music Award for Concert Series and Festivals in 2007. In 2012, Kirshbaum inaugurated the highly successful Piatigorsky International Cello Festival in Los Angeles, centered at the University of Southern California - Thornton School of Music. A rare opportunity for artists to collaborate with and to interact with one another, the Festival returned to Los Angeles in May 2016.

Renowned for his pedagogy, Kirshbaum served on the faculty of the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester for 38 years. In 2008, he accepted the Gregor Piatigorsky Chair in Violoncello at the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music, where he served as Chair of the Strings Department from 2016 to 2022. In July of 2016, Kirshbaum received an Honorary Doctorate of Music from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in Glasgow. He is Founder/Honorary President of the Pierre Fournier Award, as well as Honorary President of the London Cello Society, and continues

to serve as Artistic Advisor of IMS Prussia Cove. Kirshbaum previously served a five-year term on the United States President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.

Having enjoyed a thirty-year collaboration with pianist Peter Frankl and violinist Gyorgy Pauk, Kirshbaum has appeared frequently in recent years with Pinchas Zukerman, Robert McDuffie, Lawrence Dutton, Peter Jablonski, and pianist Shai Wosner. Other recent collaborators include Leif Ove Andsnes, Joshua Bell, Yefim Bronfman, Midori, Lang Lang, Vadim Repin, Joseph Swensen, Pepe Romero, and the Emerson and Takács String Quartets.

Kirshbaum and Wosner performed Beethoven cycles throughout the U.S. and Great Britain. The live recording of their performance at London's Wigmore Hall, released on the Onyx Classics label, received a five-star review from *Classical Music Magazine*, which raved: "Kirshbaum…is in fine form with distinctive rich-yet-lithe tone and deeply intuitive phrasing. No detail is overlooked, yet each piece is allowed to unfold organically." Kirshbaum also has performed the complete cycle of Bach Cello Suites in Wigmore Hall, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and in Sydney, Edinburgh, Lyon and San Francisco. A *London Times* reviewer wrote of Kirshbaum's solo Bach Suites recording for EMI/Virgin Classics: "There are more than 20 complete recordings of Bach's Cello Suites currently in the catalogue, and of all those I have reviewed in recent years, few have given me as much pleasure as these new performances by Ralph Kirshbaum."

Kirshbaum's world premiere recording of Tippett's Triple Concerto for Philips was named a Gramophone Magazine "Record of the Year." Kirshbaum has recorded the Elgar and Walton Concerti for Chandos; the Ravel, Shostakovich, and Brahms Trios for EMI; the Barber Concerto and Sonata for EMI/Virgin Classics; the Shostakovich and Prokofiev Sonatas with Peter Jablonski for Altara Music; the Brahms Double and Beethoven Triple Concerti for BMG Classics with Pinchas Zukerman, John Browning, and the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Christoph Eschenbach; and the Schubert Quintet with the Takács Quartet for Hyperion.

The rare Montagnana Cello that Kirshbaum plays once belonged to the 19th-century virtuoso Alfredo Piatti.

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JUNE 2025 - PLEASE DESTROY ALL PREVIOUSLY DATED MATERIALS.

Ralph Kirshbaum
Critical Acclaim

“Kirshbaum’s set, with pianist Shai Wosner, is the ideal of modern Beethoven. Beautifully recorded, it boasts Beethoven as we imagine him today. Cello and piano are perfectly balanced. Both musicians have big, involving tones that pick every Beethovenian nuance. The performances are straightforward to the point of being all Beethoven, all the time. How in the world could the Grammys have missed this one in its recent chamber music nominations?

Los Angeles Times

"With his characteristic refinement, he searched out the evanescent sighing of the music, its diffidence and its dream."

The London Times

"For the Dvorak, the orchestra had the benefit of a world-class soloist, Ralph Kirshbaum, who made the cello line sing sweetly in the slow movement and played the outer movements with unrestrained intensity and drive.”

The New York Times

"Mr. Kirshbaum is a thoughtful and elegant artist, as his performances of the Second, Fourth and Sixth [Bach] Suites on Saturday evening proved once again."

The New York Times

"Kirshbaum's playing was both lean and urgent and, in the score's final pages, deployed a gorgeously nuanced range of shadings."

The Washington Post

"Kirshbaum's performance seemed intended as an homage to that older generation of cellists; it was generous in vibrato and sentiment, and he played with exceptional finish of detail."

The Boston Globe

"Kirshbaum is a musician who knows what he wants, goes for it, and gives it to his listeners straight."

The Herald-Glasgow

"To see cellist Ralph Kirshbaum perform is to witness a person approaching music most seriously. With that intense gaze, Kirshbaum is listening to the composition as a whole, to the composition as a structure, to try to gain insight into its totality."

The Aspen Times

"Kirshbaum's accuracy in the extensive double stops and his amazing facility were matched by his commitment to and involvement in the music; this is a cellist any music lover would want to hear regularly."

The Seattle Times

"Ralph Kirshbaum has taken ownership of Prokofiev's Cello Sonata…"

The Strad

"Ralph Kirshbaum has wonderful tone, utter technical reliability and the imagination to make the music feel both spontaneous and well planned."

Pittsburgh Tribune-Review

"With finesse and forcefulness, Kirshbaum owned the thorny work, not once shying away from its velocity and many modulations."

The Denver Post

"There are more than 20 complete recordings of Bach's Cello Suites currently in the catalogue, and of all those I have reviewed in recent years, few have given me as much pleasure as these new performances by Ralph Kirshbaum."

The London Times

"Each part of the range seems to have its own beauty: intensity tinged with colour and tartness in the upper register and velvety richness of unimaginable depth in the mid and lower notes. There is much more to Kirshbaum's playing than sound, however: he follows lines and builds their shape with imagination and musical intelligence."

The Sydney Morning Herald

"Kirshbaum has dexterity as well as density – listen to him negotiate the thorniest passages in the Prokofiev with utmost ease – and virtuosity as well as intensity – listen to him tackle the fastest pages in the Shostakovich with ineffable grace. In fact, there seems to be nothing Kirshbaum can't do – listen to him sustain the long line in Rachmaninov's Vocalise – and nothing he can't express – listen to him articulate the ambiguous mix of affirmation and resignation in Prokofiev's Sonata."

AllMusic

Features

Ralph Kirshbaum

LONDON CELLO SOCIETY

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Ralph Kirshbaum, Montagnana 1729

"I fell in love with it more and more. It was obvious that this was 'the cello'. I've played many other cellos in my life – great Strads and other Montagnanas – which I can appreciate, but this is the one I love. To have found it and be with it all this time is the greatest fortune I could imagine."

Ralph Kirshbaum, describes his emotional first performance with his Montagnana cello and why he's been faithful to it for over 40 years.

I've owned this Montagnana since 1973. I had some very generous backers who wanted to help me acquire a great instrument. So I let that be known to Jacques Francais, the major dealer in North America at the time. He had a Montagnana in his shop in the fall of 1971, and I tried it but it just didn't feel right physically.

The next fall Jacques sent me a message to say that he had another Montagnana and this might be 'the one'. I played it in his shop and it was a totally different experience. I said, 'Gosh this is an incredible instrument. I'm going to Texas to see my parents for the holidays and after that I have a tour for two weeks and I'd love to take it on tour.' He agreed, so I went home, but on January 7 my mother had a stroke and died. I was due to go back East and play a concert in New Haven, Connecticut, where I was a student, and where my mother was born and raised. We were all shattered and I was on the fence about whether I could play this concert, but in unison my family said 'you have to play' and that gave me the strength to play. I was playing the Elgar, the most elegaic concerto in our repertoire, and I'm sure I've never given a more heartfelt performance of it than I did on that night – my first performance with the Montagnana cello. It was an incredible experience.

Then I took the cello on tour and fell in love with it more and more. It was obvious that this was 'the cello'. I've played many other cellos in my life – great Strads and other Montagnanas – which I can appreciate, but this is the one I love. To have found it and be with it all this time is the greatest fortune I could imagine.

It's gone through transformations of course. Five years later Rene Morel (the luthier in the shop of Jacques Francais) said there were things he'd like to improve about the cello, so he gave it a new bass-bar, a new soundpost and a new bridge. I remember when I first played afterwards it was so different – actually it was a little bit too shrill, too tenor. Before that the tenor part was the weak part,

if there was a weak part, but he said, 'Don't worry, just play it; it'll take six months, but just play it and it will settle down and you'll see that the top of the cello is going to be like a Strad.' If I missed anything in the first five years that I had the cello, it was that the very top seemed a bit tight. And Rene was right, it was like a flower opening up. By month three I already felt the difference in the upper regions of the A string and by six or seven months the whole instrument had adjusted. I didn't think the cello could be any better than it was. And that's the way it's been ever since.

The cello was made in 1729 and it's in wonderful condition. It's one of the very few uncut Montagnanas. It's not particularly long, but it's very broad and the bouts are also very high. It does take quite a bit of physicality to play – it keeps my shoulders limber getting round it.

Piatti played this cello. I believe he had three Montagnana cellos over the course of his life, so he wasn't as loyal as I have been! The Curtis Institute owned this instrument from around 1930, and subsequently sold it some twenty-five years later to Janos Scholz, a Hungarian cellist living in New York. He in turn sold it to an amateur player through Jacques Français in 1970. It was my good fortune that the amateur player found it too difficult to play! The rest, as they say, is history.

Ralph Kirshbaum
theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890
August 2017

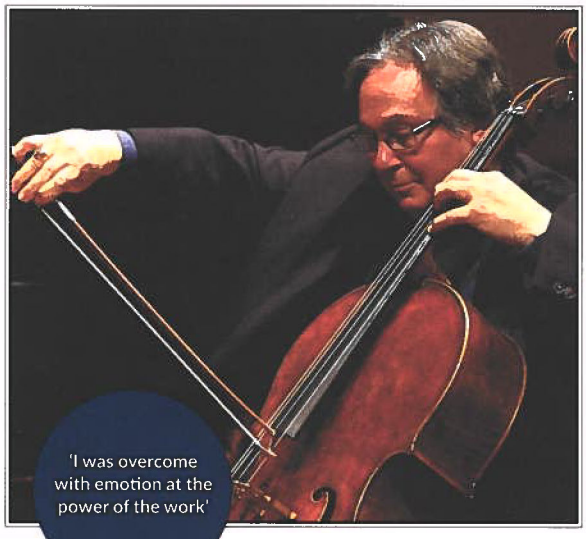
Sentimental *Work*

RALPH KIRSHBAUM

The Elgar Cello Concerto has played an important part in some of the US cellist and pedagogue's most memorable, emotional and significant concerts

The first time I heard the Elgar Cello Concerto in concert was on 14 May 1965, when Jacqueline du Pré made her New York debut. I was in town to have some adjustments made to my cello and as I walked past Carnegie Hall I noticed that she was playing that night, so I bought a ticket. From the opening chord onwards, her performance was breathtaking. She took hold of the piece from that very first chord and wove what felt like an unbroken line through the entire concerto; I was overcome with emotion at the power of the work itself, and her interpretation of it. In those days it wasn't so hard to go backstage and meet the soloist, so I lingered until the people before me had gone, and then went to express my appreciation to Jackie. She was so warm and gracious to me as we sat talking on the steps of her dressing room – it was a wonderful introduction to the work and to her.

Since then, the Cello Concerto has been a work of great importance to me, at various stages of my life and career. When I moved to the UK in 1970 it was the first concerto I performed, with a London-based amateur group called the Informal Symphony Orchestra. The conductor Kerry Woodward invited me to be soloist and the concerto I wanted to play was the Elgar. Then, for 20 years I was artistic director of the Manchester International Cello Festival, and after I decided to move back to the States I arranged for an all-British programme to be performed: Yo-Yo Ma played the Walton Concerto, Natalia Gutman the Britten *Cello Symphony*, Colin Carr the *Oration* by Frank Bridge, and I played the Elgar Concerto. So you could say my whole career while residing in Britain was bookended by performances of that special concerto.



'I was overcome with emotion at the power of the work'

My most personal, emotional and important performance of the concerto was on 14 January 1973 in Connecticut, with the New Haven Symphony Orchestra, whose principal cellist I had been while I was a student at Yale. The engagement had been in my concert diary for 18 months. I was visiting my family in Texas beforehand, and during that time, my mother passed away from a stroke. We were all devastated. As it happened, my mother had been born in New Haven. I said to my father and siblings, 'How am I going to play a concert like that?' They all agreed that it was something I had to do.

What's more, I had to stop off in New York to pick up a new cello, a 1729 Montagnana that was to replace my Guadagnini. I stayed with my aunt and uncle in New Haven for four days, practising for ten hours daily just to get used to the new instrument, and to try to prepare for what would obviously be a very emotional concert. I believe that it was possibly the best performance I have ever given of the concerto; the audience was clearly moved, as we received a standing ovation and played an encore. As for the Montagnana, it's been my principal performing instrument for the past 44 years.

In 1977, twelve years after I'd first heard Jacqueline du Pré's performance, I was booked to perform the concerto myself at the BBC Proms. By that time Jackie had stopped performing, although she still taught. I asked if we could go through the piece together, and we had a wonderful light-hearted session; Jackie's advice generally was to make much bigger gestures, and to exaggerate aspects of a musical phrase more than I was doing. Jackie loved jokes and it was a fun, lively encounter that certainly helped in building my interpretation of the piece.

INTERVIEW BY CHRISTIAN LLOYD

Ralph Kirshbaum

Los Angeles Times

May 10, 2016

Why are 102 cellos in Disney Hall? Ralph Kirshbaum is happy to tell you

By Rick Schultz

Cellist Ralph Kirshbaum, artistic director of the Piatigorsky International Cello Festival, rehearses with pianist Izumi Kashiwagi at his Los Angeles home earlier this month.

The second Piatigorsky International Cello Festival — four years in the making — begins Friday, and though the 26 cellists coming to Los Angeles from around the world include some famous names in the classical world, such as Yo-Yo Ma and Raphael Wallfisch, others are less familiar.

Festival founder Ralph Kirshbaum, who has held the Gregor Piatigorsky Chair in Violoncello at USC's Thornton School of Music since 2008, hopes audiences will discover new artists amid the rich variety of events. The festival, running until May 22, includes performances at Walt Disney Concert Hall and USC in collaboration with theLos Angeles Philharmonic, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and the Calder andEmerson String quartets. The extravaganza also offers master classes open to the public, panel discussions and even a marketplace of exhibitors including instrument and bow makers.

For this edited conversation, Kirshbaum discussed what's new in this second festival and why Piatigorsky, who taught at USC until his death in 1976, is still such a force among cellists.

The L.A. City Council recently proclaimed this Piatigorsky International Cello Festival Week. What made you think you could

build an entire festival around Piatigorsky's name?
Piatigorsky was the first cellist in this country to open the doors for the cello to be considered a solo instrument. He had an outsize personality, wonderful sense of storytelling on the instrument and a beautiful sound. He was a captivating performer and undeniably one of the most important musicians of the latter half of the 20th century. It's one thing to master your instrument, but another to be truly beloved. Piatigorsky was truly beloved.

Did you study with him?
After I performed a concert with the L.A. Phil, Piatigorsky invited me to his home. I was in my 20s. He was my boyhood idol. One of my most influential teachers as a teenager was a Piatigorsky pupil, and I played for Piatigorsky in a master class in Texas when I was 13. There were all these links.

The first L.A. cello festival in 2012 concluded with a concert of 100 cellos filling the Disney Hall stage. How do you top that?
We're doing the 100 cellos again, on a mid-festival Disney Hall concert on May 17 that includes "Threads and Traces," a world premiere by Anna Clyne, a young British composer who has a background as a cellist. We're starting the concert with Schubert's Quintet in C Major, one of the great chamber pieces, featuring two cellos, with myself and the Emerson quartet. Then there's 12 cellos in Brett Dean's "Twelve Angry Men," inspired by the book and film. And we finish with, actually, 102 cellos.

What else is new about this festival?
We have 13 new artists. One thing I try to impress on audiences: They should have the courage and curiosity to come and listen to some of those artists whose names they are not so familiar with. And trust that they're here because they are great artists.

Can you give us an example?
Giovanni Sollima, an Italian cellist and composer. It's Yo-Yo Ma's first time at the festival, and he's performing one of Giovanni's pieces, "Il bell'Antonio," at


Ralph Kirshbaum, whose cello festival opens Friday.

his Disney Hall recital on [Sunday]. And Giovanni's going to be at the USC festival gala opening at Bovard Auditorium, also on [Sunday], featuring Giovanni doing improvisation. We've never had improvisation at the festival.

What can you program only in festivals like this one?
You can hear the Jacques Ibert "Concerto for Cello and Wind Orchestra," Friedrich Gulda's quirky "Concerto for Cello and Winds" and Sofia Gubaidulina's "Canticle of the Sun" for cello and chamber choir. You might hear one, but to hear all three in a concert — that's something you can only do in a festival. We also have a new Quintet+ Series — three concerts in the early evening on the USC campus, in which the Calder Quartet and one of 26 international cellists joins them to play a two-cello quintet.

You just turned 70. Are you doing anything special to celebrate this milestone?
The opening concert of the festival is me performing Ernest Bloch's "Schelomo" from his Jewish Cycle with Leonard Slatkin and the L.A. Phil. That's my birthday present to myself. It wasn't necessarily the intention at the time. I just wanted to play this great work.

The festival closes with Beethoven's complete works for cello, each performed by a different cellist. How important is Beethoven to cellists?
His sonatas have been at the core of everything I've done. Beethoven is a pivotal composer. If you follow his compositional development through the five sonatas, the cello emerged as an equal partner to the piano. Musically

and technically, Beethoven was the first composer who really opened up the next level of possibility for the cello.

Deciding on a career in music is more difficult than ever. Are you optimistic about the future for young, upcoming cellists?

I am. I tend to be an optimist. I had an uncle who studied violin at Juilliard, but he became an engineer. Near the end of his life, he told me one of his greatest regrets was not continuing with the violin. So it's not a new phenomenon. If somebody is passionate, committed, determined and creative enough, they're going to find a way to make a living as a musician.

You have told a story of how Piatigorsky once played a difficult opening movement from a Locatelli sonata for Pablo Casals ...

Casals couldn't quite match his technique. A week later, Piatigorsky went to a Casals recital, which began with this sonata. Piatigorsky told me Casals performed the opening movement perfectly. Casals had found a way to match the sound as written with an alternative bowing. Piatigorsky looked at me and said, "That, Ralph, is art — and that was Casals." This is one great artist acknowledging the artistic breadth of another great artist.

That kind of humility seems to inform the upcoming festival.

That's what this cello festival is about: the ability to recognize and celebrate the artistry of many different cellists from all over the world. To do away with competition, and celebrate those differences. That's what motivated me to develop a festival like this. To find ways of showing the diversity — the wide color spectrum and range of artistry we have in the cello world.

Ralph Kirshbaum

RHINEGOLD PUBLISHING

April 26, 2016

Ralph Kirshbaum receives honorary degree

By Katy Wright

Cellist Ralph Kirshbaum is to be presented with an honorary doctorate in music from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland on 5 July.

Kirshbaum's career encompasses solo performance, chamber music, recording and pedagogy.

He served on the faculty of the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester for 38 years, and recently recently served a five-year term on the United States President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. Kirshbaum is artistic advisor of IMS Prussia Cove, founder/honorary president of the Pierre Fournier Award and honorary president of the London Cello Society. He recently assumed the chair of the string department at the Thornton School.

Ralph Kirshbaum

Chamber Studio

September 10, 2014

Ralph Kirshbaum offers his recipe for making great chamber music

By Ariane Todes

Cellist and pedagogue Ralph Kirshbaum, who coaches the ChamberStudio Masterclass on 5 October, was in a piano trio with György Pauk and Peter Frankl for 30 years. Here he answers questions about the art of chamber music playing, and offers advice on how groups can get the most out of masterclasses

What is the secret of success for a piano trio?
The essence of any good chamber ensemble is working with players whom you respect as fellow musicians and like as individuals. If you have one and not the other it's not a recipe for longstanding success.

Often groups get together as students. How can they know at that stage that they respect each other musically?
I think you know instinctively, and immediately, in my experience. I played in a piano trio with György Pauk and Peter Frankl for 30 years. I had just arrived in London and they were looking for a cellist. In the first instance, because György Pauk was away, I went to Peter Frankl's home and we began playing the first movement of the Brahms E minor Sonata. I knew after the first eight bars that this was a musician I felt total empathy with. Whatever problems there might be in working out the fine details, we breathed music in the same way.
Of course in time you discover other things in working together, but you know whether that instinctive musical spark is there and whether you have a shared musical outlook. It doesn't mean that you're going to agree one hundred per cent in every style and nuance of music, but you sense that basic musical impulse very quickly.

How do you learn to deal with musical disagreements and to resolve things?
That goes to the essence of how two individuals relate in any relationship, not

just a musical one. Either you have mutual respect and deal with each other from that point of view, or you have humour and deal with it from a humorous point of view. Or you insult one another, but that doesn't go very far!

Does that happen?
It does. Sometimes inadvertently, because if you don't know someone well at the outset you might say something that insults them. But at the same time, you have to be able to be honest with each other. You have to respect each other, but that includes respecting everyone's right to say openly and honestly what they feel. That might be something you don't agree with. Are we talking about the music and what we're trying to achieve with a musical idea? Or are we in some way attacking the other person, belittling or insulting them? It's about drawing that distinction.
In my experience people know if what you're saying is in an effort to bring the music alive and to understand what the composer is trying to say. We use interchange like, 'Let's try this or try that', 'Could you try a little bit more of this?', 'What do you think about that?' rather than, 'What you're doing is lousy', 'I don't like that at all', 'That's terrible', where you're inviting aggression. Keep focused on the music and not on personal attack.

You've been a soloist as well as a chamber music player. Is there a difference in the mindsets required?
For me there isn't any real difference. Whether you're the soloist or in a group you have to judge balances and understand the musical architecture and where you fit. There is perhaps a concept of the soloist thinking 'I want to be sure I'm heard at every instant,' but for me the two are much the same in terms of the sensitivity and listening that's required. Sometimes as a soloist you have to be at the forefront in the musical dialectic and to be able to assume that character, or you're not going to be a successful soloist. But there are times when you're not the primary voice. You're secondary or complementary and that requires you listening and knowing your sound, and whether you're playing with a section or an individual and how you adjust. The challenge is not dissimilar.
The dissimilarity might be that because of time limitations a soloist usually has the final say on how to phrase something. In a trio there are three individuals working and rehearsing together for lengthy periods discussing the fine points. Each person is able to enter into that dialectic with total confidence and freedom to express themselves.

Is it possible to combine solo and chamber careers?
Absolutely. Almost everybody does these days. We can thank Stern, Rose and Istomin, because they had significant solo careers as well as their trio. Those were the days when if an artist came in and said, 'I want to play a chamber music project with X, Y and Z', their manager would say, 'Well then, you better find yourself another manager, because if you want to be a soloist you need to be perceived as a soloist.' It was as harsh as that. Those three broke that mould.

Is it easier to achieve that career balance being in a piano trio than in a quartet?
It's more rare to see a soloist playing in quartets, but that's changing. There's the example of Thomas Zehetmair, James Ehnes, Christian Tetzlaff, Jean-Guihen Queyras, Tabea Zimmerman. I haven't heard all of them, but I'm sure they're wonderful because they're wonderful musicians. They do what I did in those years I was playing in a trio. We played around 15 concerts a year and we would have projects. There would be a period of two or three weeks, three times a year that we would devote to trios. The rest of the year we'd focus on our solo careers. That's what these players are doing. We think of quartets as requiring working and living together 365 days a year because of the repertoire, but these players are opening up other possibilities.

Is the role of the cellist different in quartets and piano trios?
I don't think the role is different, because the cellist is obviously providing the bass support. Perhaps in trios there are more moments where the cellist is a soloist, where

the passagework is elaborate and demanding, and the violin is an accompaniment and the pianist provides the overall harmonic basis. But there are incredible places in the quartet repertoire where the cello is elevated to the soloist role.
Sometimes in quartet playing you're working hard to speak as one voice, making decisions in that way, whereas as a trio we felt quite free, although not chaotically so. We discussed things – it wasn't that one person would play a phrase one way and the next another way completely. We'd arrive at what we felt was the phrasing we wanted as it developed through a movement, but in actually realising that phrase we were quite free. I loved that aspect.

How can players get the most out of a masterclass?
They have to approach it as if they're giving a performance and the coach is perhaps going to open up other possibilities in terms of how they conceive of what they're playing. I get annoyed when someone comes and it's obvious they're virtually sightreading. They say, 'It's quite fresh, I've only been working on it for ten days.' That's not the sort of thing to bring to a masterclass – you can take it to your teacher. You want to bring an interpretation to a masterclass. Perhaps all you're after is some fingerings and bowings, but I'm loath to give those out. If I see something isn't working of course I'll make suggestions – usually I'll offer various alternatives, so that they go away and think about it, not like a parrot writing it in. In a masterclass I'm more interested in what they're thinking about musically, what they're trying to say. It's only when something is getting in the way technically that I'll suggest a specific bowing or fingering.

To what extent do you expect students to have studied the harmony and structure of a work and how much do you see that sort of attention?
Usually not enough! When students come and play a concerto I'll ask, 'Who are you playing with in this passage?' and more often than not they have no idea. I'll point out exactly who it is and say that they need to know the score better. You need to practise with the score – so often people learn a piece from their own part, but that's only part of the picture. It's as if you're a window specialist so all you see is the windows, but what about the doors, the brickwork, the rest of the architecture?
I feel strongly that they need a working knowledge of what's going on. They don't have to do a Schenkerian analysis of the piece, but they need to know when a harmony is shifting and the implications for the colour they're using at that point and what the possibilities are. There's not just one way to react, but they have to react to it somehow, not indiscriminately play through it as if nothing had happened. It's important and I do stress this in classes.

What are the ensemble issues that come up most often when you're coaching chamber music?
How do you articulate the character of an upbeat or, indeed, a complete musical phrase? How do you breathe it, conceive it? If you're not conceiving and breathing it in the same way you can practise it over and over but you're never going to arrive at a unanimous viewpoint.
Then there's intonation. It's hard enough to deal with intonation when you're a solo instrumentalist playing Bach or Kodály. When you're playing with someone else, how far do you push a tritone in terms of the tension it's going to create in resolving to the next chord? People hear that differently; they hear leading tones differently. It was interesting playing with György Pauk all those years, because I generally hear leading tones high and he heard them much more pure – he has perfect pitch. If we were playing a phrase in unison and came to a leading tone, it was going to be out of tune. So we had to get inside each other's skin and over time we became sensitive enough that he would slightly raise his leading tone and I would lower mine. We played perfectly in tune without even thinking about it. That's chamber music. You have to make an adjustment. You can't just sit there and say, 'You have to play it the way I play it!' When I'm working with an ensemble there are times when someone is out of tune, but it's just that they're not hearing the harmonic

implication in the same way. Those are interesting things to work on.

If classes are public do you ever feel you have to entertain the audience?
Some people look at it as entertainment and that's fine up to a point, but the question is, what does the group get out of it? That's what it's all about. What can I help them with? If that process isn't entertaining and captivating enough, so be it. I'm not there to use them as a foil to entertain the public.

What parameters do you set yourself in masterclasses for the improvement you expect of students, and how do you know when you've succeeded?
I don't go in with a set plan. I'll go into a class with the score, they play and I react. I rely on my instinct. I can assess quickly the things I think might help them the most and that's what I'll go to work on. I always engage the group in this – it's not me pontificating, saying it has to be like this – I want to know what they're thinking. 'Where do you feel this phrase goes? What kind of character do you want in that triplet? Well maybe you should try this.'
Not every moment is going to be revelatory, but usually in the course of a session with a group there are two or three moments when they suddenly discover something for themselves, and that is meaningful. You hear when there is something about a phrase that a group hadn't considered and now they're considering it. They're not just doing what I'm telling them to do: they're experimenting, and committing to something new.
There's an old dictum about learning, that there's the thesis, the antithesis and the synthesis. You don't always arrive at the synthesis inside 45 minutes, but sometimes you do. Sometimes they've started with one thing, I've provoked them to think about something else and then comes the synthesis that surprises us all. You see the smiles on their faces and the audience hears the difference. That's exciting. When you see and hear those moments it's so special. That's why I love teaching. But one masterclass is a very short moment in time. It's the work they do afterwards that is going to make the real difference.

What is your best piece of advice for a group just starting out?
The most important thing is that everyone in the ensemble studies the score; they come to rehearsals really knowing what's going on. Their ideas are going to change as soon as they start realising the piece, because physically and emotionally you hear it in a different way when you're sitting with the score, but they should at least be conversant with the score. Otherwise you're going to waste a tremendous amount of time in rehearsals and meet a lot of frustrations just because one or two haven't done that and don't know what to listen for. Know the score.

Ralph Kirshbaum

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

March 15, 2012

An Exaltation of Cellists

By Stuart Isacoff

The Russian-born American Gregor Piatigorsky (1903-1976).

The notion of animals gathering together provokes fanciful labels: We have a "gaggle" of geese, a "pride" of lions and an "exaltation" of larks. Unfortunately, the same can't be said of musicians. As a remedy, I propose "a Kirshbaum of cellists." After all, virtuoso Ralph Kirshbaum has been responsible over the years for large migrations of his fellow cellists: first to Britain, where from 1988 to 2007 he directed the Royal Northern College of Music International Cello Festival in Manchester; and now to Los Angeles, where he holds the Gregor Piatigorsky Endowed Chair in Violoncello at the University of Southern California.

It is thanks to Mr. Kirshbaum's tireless spirit that the first Piatigorsky International Cello Festival—dedicated to the legendary cellist who was also a faculty member at USC—is up and running here through Sunday. The endeavor involves four Los Angeles-based cultural institutions, as well as 22 artists and 45 students from around the world who have converged to participate in recitals, orchestral concerts and master classes. Judging from the first two days, last Friday and Saturday, they have created a bit of cello heaven.

No instrument more easily touches the heart—perhaps because, as the Swiss cellist and composer Thomas Demenga reminded us during a conversation here on Saturday, it has the same range as the human voice. (The tangible warmth, reports Mr. Demenga, also extends to relationships between the performers themselves: Cellists naturally gravitate to each other in ways that many other instrumentalists do not.) But as the opening festival performances demonstrated, the cello's sensuous allure is only part of the story; the instrument is also capable of stunning versatility.

The first night, audiences were treated to the propulsive energy of Vivaldi's Concerto for Two Cellos in G minor, with gorgeous chamber-ensemble work under the direction of conductor Hugh Wolff; the classical elegance of two Haydn concertos; the soaring melodies of Saint-Saëns's First Cello Concerto; and the wonderful range of effects found in Mr. Demenga's double concerto, "Relations."

Mr. Demenga's eclectic and original approach included jazzy syncopations

executed over the finger snaps of a percussionist, Middle-Eastern scales, and unusual techniques such as singing and playing at the same time, shouting rhythmic syllables that were taken from the soloist's names, and producing a host of untraditional sonorities. His excellent performing partner was his student Sayaka Selina. Over the course of the initial concerts, audiences could imagine the cello as a giant plucked Spanish guitar, a Romantic crooner or a Balinese gamelan orchestra.

The extraordinarily supportive chamber ensemble comprised principal players from the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, along with student instrumentalists—a mix in keeping with Mr. Kirshbaum's vision. His festival partners include USC's Thornton School of Music; the Colburn School; the Los Angeles Philharmonic; and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. Together they enabled him to program large works and intimate ones, create mentoring situations and expose listeners to some artists who have not performed in this country for 15 or 20 years.

"Most American orchestras feature just one or two cellists a season," he says. "We show the great richness among cellists, the different approaches to the instrument. And we prove that the point of view that there isn't enough repertoire is rubbish."

The genesis of the project goes back to 1986, with the death of French cellist Pierre Fournier. Mr. Kirshbaum organized a festival in his honor, to raise money for the Pierre Fournier Award, which furthers the careers of exceptional young cellists. Thus the RNC Manchester Festival was born. "People were so exhilarated," he reports, "that there came an avalanche of requests for another one." It kept growing until 2007, when Mr. Kirschbaum accepted an offer to join USC. Soon after, he suggested the creation of a new festival to his dean, Robert Cutietta, and to the school's president, Max Nikias.

"I loved the idea," says Mr. Nikias. "I see the arts as the 'secret weapon' of USC as a research university. Our valedictorian a few years ago came to us because she wanted to have a double major in computer science and biology with a minor in theater. And 25% to 30% of students at the Thornton School of Music have a minor in another discipline. We launched an arts and humanities initiative on campus that gives every student the opportunity to develop an appreciation of the arts. It's important because the arts are carriers of messages that tell us who we are. Of course," he reveals, "once I said yes, it was Ralph and Rob Cutietta who did all the work."

A very tired Mr. Cutietta concedes that, "in the beginning, none of us thought it would be this big. But Ralph suggested that we find partners, and I firmly believe that arts organizations live in a tiny niche and need to work together. You'd think it would be hard to get so many people to agree, and to clear their calendars for an idea, but it wasn't. Nevertheless, putting it all together required more than we ever anticipated."

For Mr. Kirshbaum, the exhausting effort required is worth it. "In the end, it's such fun," he exclaims. "I love being around friends and colleagues. We genuinely like and respect each other, and that's precious—it's a lesson for the students. And bringing all of the constituents together has been a joy. Deborah Borda at the Philharmonic came up with the idea of placing some of our artists on her subscription series in Disney Hall. Everyone involved has been incredibly open—we all agree that the arts shouldn't be held prisoner in this pocket or that pocket. The world is so rich—nobody has it all."

Ralph Kirshbaum

March 8, 2012

Meet Ralph Kirshbaum, Who's Bringing World's Finest Cellists Together in L.A. For the Piatigorsky International Cello Festival

Artistic Director Ralph Kirshbaum with bust of Gregor Piatigorsky. Photo by Steve Cohn

Ralph Kirshbaum, world renown pedagogue and performer, recently moved to Los Angeles to take over the Gregor Piatigorsky Endowed Chair in Violoncello at the USC Thornton School of Music. The USC Thornton School is partnering with the LA Phil, The Colburn School, and LACO to bring the world's finest cellists to take part in the PIatigorsky International Cello Festival, from March 9th-18th.

We got to chat with Kirshbaum (who you can catch with the LA Phil on the 15th) about his role as the artistic director for the Piatigorsky International Cello Festival, and the music scene among other things in Los Angeles. The festival will take place at USC, the Colburn School, and at the Walt Disney Concert Hall, For tickets and information, click here.

What was your inspiration for this festival, and why in Los Angeles?

Well, I directed a series of international cello festivals in Great Britain when I lived there and when I came to LA to take the Piatigorsky Chair at USC, it was in a way a natural extension, to propose the idea of an international cello festival here. The thing that was different was that I wanted to make it as all encompassing as possible and partnered with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Colburn School, and Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra.

And what was it like to come from teaching at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester and teaching in London? Any major differences in the schools of playing?

Well I'm American, so it's a return home for me. I lived for over 40 years in Europe, so it was time to come home.
And Piatigorsky being my boyhood idol, it was a great honor to assume this chair and I believe I am the fifth holder of this chair at the Thornton School. Different schools of playing like the Russian, the European, certainly the French have been passed down for generations, it's a wonderful thing. But if you lined up 10 of the greatest cellists, they would all sit differently, hold the cello differently, and sound differently. There has always been a broad spectrum, and sometimes we might think because recorded performance is much more accessible, and that you can hear everyone at the touch of a button, that there would be a standardization of approach, but it hasn't done so. It's the multiplicity of talent that a festival like this can show these differences.

How was the festival curated? In terms of artists and program selection.

As the artistic director for this festival, I think of the sequence of events, and of artists that would enlighten those events and be a real catalyst for the cello and the music of the cello, for this inaugural festival in Los Angeles. The actual works, are many of those that I have in my mind and I also work directly with each artist, in putting together a program that they are happy to be performing.

And more specifically on the program, Alisa Weilerstein (which Kirshbaum performed with LACOrecently) is performing the Rococo and you the Dvorak...

Well with the LA Phil , I'm playing the Dvorak concerto, Mischa Maisky the Shostakovich concerto, and Weilerstein is performing the Rococo Variations and a wonderful companion piece, the Respighi Variations ...and that's what we felt made the most compelling subscription.

So you didn't just call dibs on the Dvorak Concerto?

It's a very unusual thing, that I've never heard of, to have 3 subscription concerts of a world class orchestra like the LA Phil and having a different cello soloist with each concert. We discussed that and what the best order might be, and together we came up with that solution.

I was just joking, since a lot of cellists love and would consider the Dvorak to be the greatest work in the cello repertoire...

Even though Dvorak wrote this piece in 1896 well over 100 years ago ..for me it's still our greatest concerto, so I'm very happy to be performing it. (*ed note: I wholeheartedly agree, and here is my favorite recording because you asked*)

And for the opening concert, there are five cello concerti (both Haydn, Saint-Saëns, Vivaldi, and an American premiere by Demenga). You're also bringing in over 20 world class cellists in a 10 day span, and the finale will include a piece featuring over 100 cellists on stage...the logistics must have been a nightmare, where would you find 100 cellists in LA?

Well most of these cellists are traveling soloists, and some of them arranged their schedule so that they could be a part of this festival and that kind of enthusiasm is great for the festival. Most of them have been doing this for upwards of 25 years, and they are quite used to the travel. Except for maybe Weilerstein and Hakhnazaryan, who are younger. I believe Narek Hakhnazaryan is only 23 years old, he is the recent winner of the Tchaikovsky Competition (*ed note: the Olympics of Classical music*). We could have had double the number of cellists, but the final count is 110 that we can manage on the stage. Most are not based in Los Angeles, quite a few of them are traveling from all

over the world to perform in the masterclasses, and will perform along with 13 of the guest artists in the piece...so it's a very broad based ensemble, which makes it really exciting.

It says in your bio that you love Tex-Mex and American football, things LA is not particularly known for, have you found a substitute here? What do you end up doing?

No I wait until I go to Texas and for football, you can watch that anywhere. I watched the Super Bowl and the matches that led up to it. I have to say though my favorite sport is tennis, that's what I played most of my life and I love watching someone like Federer on the court, he is a true artist. We love to go to movies and you can go at the very beginning of runs of movies (*ed note: European movie releases are often delayed*), but we don't have much time to do it. I somehow imagined that moving here I would have some more free time, but I'm actually busier than I've ever been in my life. Some of it is of my own doing, since i was the one that proposed this festival. There are long days.

And will there be any recordings or broadcasts of these performances?

The opening concert is going to be live on Classical KUSC ,and they are also taping other concerts for later broadcasts. We will be doing some recordings of our own, for documentary purposes.

Sounds great.... I feel that cello music in Los Angeles is very underrepresented.

I think that's true. One of the great things again about events like this, is that every concert is a unique opportunity to hear cellists that they simply would never hear. There's a limited number of cellists or violinists, though many more violinists who would come to an area like Los Angeles in the course of a season. For cellists, you might be talking about a half dozen (*ed note: it's far fewer than a half dozen*) who would come abroad or wherever to play. Here we have over 20 cellists in one 10 day period, many of whom have not played in Los Angeles for a long time. So it's a great opportunity and I hope people really avail themselves to it.

Ralph Kirshbaum

INTERNATIONAL
artsmanager

March 1-14, 2012

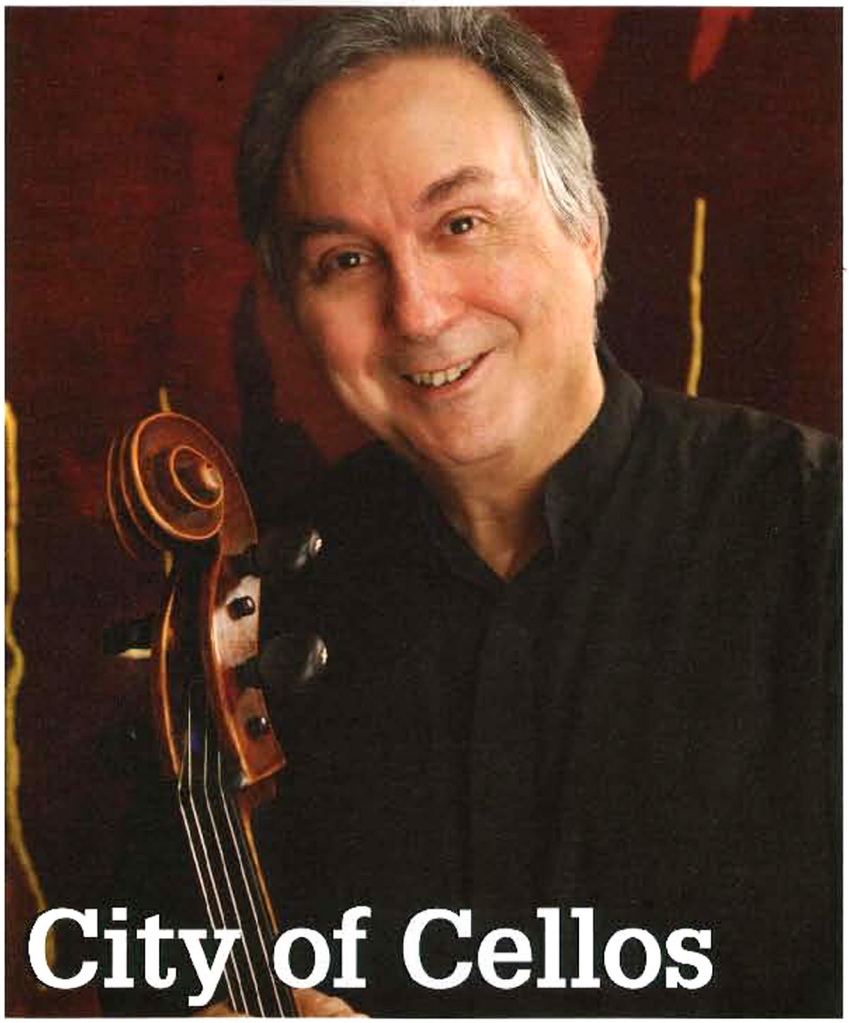


Photo: © Steve Cohn

City of Cellos

Ralph Kirshbaum's LA festival

Artistic director of the Piatigorsky International Cello Festival

'There's one story that involves Piatigorsky during my very first year at RNCM,' recalls celebrated American cellist Ralph Kirshbaum of his 35-year tenure at the Royal Northern College of Music. 'This would be the fall of 1975 when I was teaching in Manchester. I met a student in the hall and I could see that she was a cellist, so I asked if she was going that Tuesday to London to see Gregor Piatigorsky play. She looked at me with a look I'll never forget; it was one of total non-recognition. She didn't know who Piatigorsky was, and he was still alive – this was one of the giants of the cello from any generation. I was shocked, but it was a salutary lesson about fleeting fame, even when one is still alive.'

Ralph Kirshbaum now holds the Piatigorsky Chair at USC Thornton School of Music. An accomplished cellist and maestro in his own right, he is the driving force behind the first Piatigorsky International Cello Festival, which will take place in Los Angeles on 9 March for 10 days. At the opening of the festival, Piatigorsky will be inducted into the American Classical Music Hall of Fame.

The project is the result of collaboration between the USC Thornton School of Music and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, in partnership with The Colburn School and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, and will feature 22 cellists, from 12 different countries who will come together to share stories of Piatigorsky through a series of orchestral concerts, chamber music performances, master classes and interactive events.

The opening concert will feature the American premiere of Thomas Demenga's *Double Concerto* performed by the composer and his brother Patrick, and the appearance of the 2011 Tchaikovsky Competition Gold Medalist, Narek Hakhnazaryan, performing Saint-Saëns' *Cello Concerto No 1*. The festival will also present the American premiere of Miklós Perényi's *Scherzo with Introduction*, continuing the tradition of cellist-composers exemplified by Piatigorsky.

The concluding concerts will form part of a Los Angeles Philharmonic subscription series conducted by Neeme Järvi, with performances of Dvořák, Shostakovich and Tchaikovsky, and a festival finale where 100 cellists will step onto the stage of the Walt Disney Concert Hall for the West Coast premiere of *Rapturedux* by Christopher Rouse.

By now Kirshbaum should be an old hand at programming; throughout his tenure at RNCM, he initiated a series of successful cello festivals: 'In Manchester, over 20 years, we had nine festivals and each one grew larger and more dense in terms of activities than the last.'

He says that the combined experience of musicianship, performance and pedagogy has allowed him to be a sensitive artistic director. 'I think it's good that I'm an active artist and I know what makes an artist comfortable in every regard: from the simplest thing such as what's happening backstage, to how comfortable are they with the timetable, and how we can make it easier for them to get where they need to get – it can be a terrible experience for a musician if you've been told you're going to be picked up, then 20 minutes later you're on the phone and the driver isn't there. It's being aware of little practical things like that.'

The Piatigorsky International Cello Festival in LA has been three years in the planning, a stark contrast to the arrangement of the first cello festival Kirshbaum programmed in Manchester. 'When I began that festival it was literally on six months' notice and came from my idea to do a cello festival. I then started calling my friends across Europe and we found a common weekend we could get together, this was in the fall of 1987.'

But LA, he says, is a whole new world and he has needed time to get to grips with a new musical landscape and culture. 'The scope is larger, we're bringing together four major institutions and a creative team that has been working from scratch.'

His vision is supported by Deborah Borda, chief executive of the LA Philharmonic: 'I felt that if it was going to be a festival that would make a significant impact, we needed the LA Philharmonic to be involved and fortunately she was enthusiastic about the idea and worked very creatively to establish what that relationship would be,' he says.

'Because this is an inaugural festival that bears the name of Piatigorsky I wanted references to him, and so many of the artists that have agreed to come were students of his, or artists like myself that had more tangential relationships with him – visited Piatigorsky one very memorable afternoon when I was in my 20s and we spent a couple of hours together at his home. He was my boyhood idol. From every point of view it makes sense for me to pay homage to him in this way.'

> 'He was my boyhood idol. From every point of view it makes sense for me to pay homage to him in this way'

www.piatigorskyfestival.com

Ralph Kirshbaum

VIOLIN VIOLA CELLO BASS FIDDLE
STRINGS

January 18, 2012

USC Thornton School of Music Hosts a New Cello Fest

By Greg Cahill

Cellist Ralph Kirshbaum remembers the first time he heard a recording of his boyhood idol, cellist Gregor Piatigorsky. “I was literally rooted to my chair,” he says. “I’d never heard a sound like it—so rich, vibrant, and concentrated.”

These days, Kirshbaum is rooted to Piatigorsky through a slightly more metaphorical chair. Since 2008, he has held the Piatigorsky Endowed Chair in cello at the University of Southern California’s Thornton School of Music and is the artistic director and founder of the first Piatigorsky International Cello Festival, to be held in Los Angeles from March 9–18.

“Piatigorsky was definitely one of the greatest cellists of the 20th century,” Kirshbaum says, “and was very influential in establishing the cello as an important solo instrument.”

The festival is a collaboration between the University of Southern California, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Colburn school and the LA Chamber Orchestra. It will feature 22 artists hailing from 12 countries. “My idea was to bring together the musical community of LA,” he says. The festival consists of master classes, recitals, and orchestral concerts, including Kirshbaum performing the Dvorak concerto with the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

This isn’t Kirshbaum’s first festival-founding experience. From 1988 to 2007, he organized the Manchester Cello Festival, held at the Royal Northern College of Music in England. The Piatigorsky festival differs because of its inclusion of the regional musical community and its duration—ten days instead of five.

Some of the Piatigorsky festival’s 22 guest cellists were students of Piatigorsky, including the cellists Mischa Maisky, Laurence Lesser, and Jeffrey Solow. “Because this is the first, I wanted as many direct ties to Piatigorsky as possible,” Kirshbaum says.

It’s great to have this focus on the cello in Los Angeles, says LA Chamber Orchestra principal cellist Andrew Shulman. “Los Angeles is becoming a center for cello here in the US,” he says. “When you look at all the people that have lived here—like Lynn Harrell and Ralph Kirshbaum—there have been great cellists in LA ever since Piatigorsky.”

The festival will conclude with a mass cello ensemble, with more than 100 student and faculty cellists playing works by Bach and Rouse, Kirshbaum says. “The sound is so glorious,” he says, “and I can only imagine this on the stage of Disney Hall.”

Perhaps the greatest impact of the festival will be connecting the younger cello students with the established cellists, Kirshbaum says. “It opens so many doors for further study for students,” he says. “Before, some of these great cellists were just names.”

examiner.com

February 1, 2012

Interview with Ralph Kirshbaum: Piatigorsky International Cello Festival

By Ahdda Shur

Gregor Piatigorsky, cellist

Ralph Kirshbaum, artistic director of the First Piatigorsky International Cello Festival, is passionate about cellists, music students and creating great music events. This new festival is already attracting a considerable amount of people from Europe and Asia, who are coming to Los Angeles, in order to attend the 9 days of concerts, master classes and recitals.

Honoring the legacy of the legendary cellist, Gregor Piatigorsky, the festival takes place from March 9 -18, 2012, in Los Angeles. It is presented by the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music and the LA Phil in partnership with The Colburn School and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra (LACO).

An international cellist and teacher, Ralph Kirshbaum holds the position of Piatigorsky Endowed Chair of Cello, at the USC Thornton School of Music. No stranger to cello festivals, Kirshbaum was the founder and artistic director for many years, of the acclaimed RNCM Manchester International Cello Festival, in Great Britain.

In a phone interview, held on Feb. 1, 2012, Kirshbaum spoke about the diverse and wonderful musical events being planned. Excerpts of that interview are given here.

For someone who is not a musician, or not familiar with the concept, would you explain what happens in a master class. What is the experience like?

That is a very good question. The general public may be intimidated and asking: *what do I know about cello? Why would I want to go to a cello master class for*? First of all, there are 14 master classes, (during the 9 days), each given by masters of cello. Among the 45 master class students, there at least 3 who are top prize winners – it's that level of young artists. Most of them are already playing concerts. These young artists are coming for advice and counsel from these great masters who they look up to.

For the general public to see this meeting of the minds, and to see how the words and

experience of a master can infuse what a young person does, in space of 45 minutes – is a riveting kind of experience. And we're talking about a life experience. This could be in any field.

You hear someone already playing very well, and at a high level, taking this advice from a master cellist, and experimenting with it there on stage, in front of everyone. Suddenly they're playing better. It's something that everyone can hear and recognize, and appreciate the steps that it took. It's a fascinating and often riveting experience.

In interview held with Dean Cutietta, I learned that the master classes have been underwritten. Does this mean they are free to the public?

No, there is a small charge for the master classes: $20 for adults and $10 for students. The overall cost for these master classes, was generously underwritten by the LAPCA, the Los Angeles Philanthropic Committee for the Arts.

Is the inaugural Piatigorsky Cello Festival, modeled after the Manchester Cello Festival that you ran?

Yes it is. But of course, The Piatgorsky festival is adapted to Los Angeles and Los Angeles distances. In Manchester, everything was in one building, and one location and it was only 5 days. Here we have 10 days of festival. Each day's activities are centered in one location or another. We are sharing facilities at USC and the Colburn School – it would have been too much in a city like this, to go from one location to another every day.

I tried very hard to plan it that way. There are 2 master classes each day, a lunch time concert, and a prelude event. So there are up to 5 events per day, but always located in one place or another.

Tell us about how the final concert, that will feature 100 cellos on stage at Walt Disney Hall. How did that come about?

I've done it once before, in a previous festival ten years ago that I directed in Great Brittan. I had 147 cellists on stage of the major concert hall in Manchester. And I was once in Kobe, Japan, and they had three cello festivals running. In a closing concert there, they had 1000 cellists in an arena! (Laughter). I must say that was impressive and they probably used microphones.

But this will be the natural sound of a 100 plus cellos on the stage of Walt Disney Concert Hall. And it's just the most beautiful sound. Because the cello - as many people say, and I agree with - is the instrument closest to the human voice. To hear all those different registers of the cello simultaneously playing, with those numbers, is an experience to remember.

It seems that this closing concert, could be a spectacular kind of experience, **especially for people new to the cello.**

Yes, I agree. But, so are the evening concerts. There's a major recital every night! And the cellists in these recitals are just wonderful musicians and artists. They all have years of experience on the concert platform and they bring that, with their love - I have to say – to a festival like this. And it's a special gift to Los Angeles, and I hope people will embrace it.

Ralph Kirshbaum

The New York Times

April 19, 2009

Cello Teacher With a License To Dazzle

By RALPH KIRSHBAUM

"FOGO." Some enigmatic expletive? Actually, fogo is the Portuguese word for fire.

One of my earliest memories of Aldo Parisot is of his red Karmann Ghia, bearing a Connecticut license plate with the personalized inscription "FOGO." It seemed incongruous: this soft-spoken Brazilian gentleman with the fiery-red sports car, zipping through the country roads surrounding the tranquil village of Norfolk, Conn., where we first met at the Yale Summer School of Music and Art.

That was in July 1964, and I soon came to realize that the connotations of fogo — passion, ebullient color — spoke to the heart and soul of Mr. Parisot, as man, artist and teacher. Today, at 87, he is as full of fire, instinctive wisdom and irreverent humor as he was then.

On Tuesday as part of the series Yale in New York, Mr. Parisot will be surrounded by another generation of students, the latest roster of the internationally recognized Yale Cellos, which he formed in 1983. Though he rarely opens himself up to public adulation, this concert at Zankel Hall will celebrate 25 seasons of the Yale Cellos and 50 years of Mr. Parisot's outstanding achievement as a cello professor at Yale.

As I was fortunate to discover in four stimulating years of study with Mr. Parisot, he is full of contrast but not contradiction: quiet yet bold in his pronouncements; flexible yet demanding; conservative in dress and palate (chicken and rice for dinner four or five nights a week) yet liberal in musical phrasing and color; intolerant of any perceived injustice yet embracing of individuals irrespective of race, creed, color or nationality.

We laugh together today at my stubbornness as his pupil. His inherent judgment and humor were always up to the challenge. If, for example, I obstinately rejected a suggested fingering or bowing, he would send me away to master *four* versions of the same phrase; only then, he counseled, would I have the right to make an informed choice. And when I returned from winning a competition, he cautioned: "Don't get a big head. It is just a drop in the bucket."

Janos Starker, the celebrated Hungarian-born cellist who has taught with great distinction for more than 50 years at Indiana University, said recently: "Aldo Parisot is the best cello teacher I have met in my life. He marvelously combines issues of mechanical problems with musical and performing details."

The two met in 1956, attending each other's recitals in Wigmore Hall in London. After Mr. Parisot's performance, Mr. Starker asked him, "Why do you play Bach so Romantically?" Mr. Parisot retorted, "Why do you play it so dry?" Thus was a friendship born.

Aldo Parisot was born in Natal, the capital of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Norte, in 1921. His mother, a church organist, lived to 102. His father, who died when Aldo was 4, was an engineer, involved in building roads.

How did Aldo come to the cello? As fate would have it, a fine cellist, Thomazzo Babini, moved to Natal in about 1915 to teach at the local conservatory. Some years later, after the death of Aldo's father, his mother married Babini. So at 5, an ideal age to start, Aldo Parisot took up the cello.

He recalls his stepfather as having been an outstanding teacher. Little wonder that Aldo's half brother, Italo Babini, developed into a highly accomplished cellist as well; for many years he was the principal cellist of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

From a young age fire and passion burned brightly in Aldo Parisot. He defied convention and the authorities, manipulating the truth about his age to serve a year in the army and free himself to get on with his career.

He played in a local chamber orchestra, which recorded three 30-minute programs a week for radio broadcast. In addition he recorded a 30-minute cello recital each week, covering movements of concertos,

virtuoso pieces and Classical and Baroque sonatas. This excellent training gave Mr. Parisot a sense of discipline that was to become a dominant theme in his life.

Not surprisingly, his aspirations grew. The United States beckoned. Sadly, he was denied the opportunity to study with his boyhood idol, Emanuel Feuermann, who died at 39 in 1942, three months before Mr. Parisot was to begin studies with him at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Finally, in 1946, Mr. Parisot went to New Haven as a special student at Yale. (No cello lessons.) Feuermann's artistry and technical perfection remained the benchmark for him both in his playing and, eventually, in the development of his students.

Mr. Parisot later became the proud owner of the Feuermann Stradivarius cello, his beloved companion through much of his solo career. He performed with orchestras around the world and made numerous appearances with the New York Philharmonic.

One exceptional series of concerts at the Philharmonic in 1960 featured Paul Hindemith's Cello Concerto conducted by Hindemith, whom Mr. Parisot recently pithily described as "a miserable conductor but a great composer." Some years earlier, as a young, quick-tempered principal cellist of the New Haven Symphony Orchestra, he had had a run-in with Hindemith.

With an apprehension fueled by this memory, Mr. Parisot met privately with Hindemith before the first Philharmonic rehearsal. He played through the concerto with every nuance in place, thanks to six months of feverish and exacting practice. After complimenting him on his perfect playing, Hindemith added, "But Parisot, why don't you play it the way you *really* feel it."

Freed from his self-imposed straitjacket, he did just that. Freedom, color and instinctive phrasing were all hallmarks of Mr. Parisot's playing. When he played Donald Martino's "Parisonatina al'Dodecafonia," one of many works written for him, at Tanglewood in 1966, the reviewer for The Boston Globe wrote, "There is probably no cellist that can equal Parisot's dazzling achievement."

He continued to perform for another 20 years, though at a less hectic pace. He wanted to spend time with his three young sons by Ellen Lewis, his former wife, and he began to cancel concerts. "Managers hated me," he said. An exaggeration, no doubt, but a typically strong and forthright Parisot observation.

So is his explanation of why, in 1988, he decided to stop performing altogether. "My fingers were no longer fast enough," he said. "I wasn't as good as I wanted to be."

With equal candor he described himself, in his early years of teaching, as dogmatic. "But I realized this wasn't productive," he added, "so I changed."

There is no question that Mr. Parisot's directness and impulsive statements, uncensored by political correctness, have at times ruffled feathers. But in my experience heartfelt issues and principles have always been apparent beneath any outburst; his reactions are never capricious. He protects and supports his cellistic offspring in every way, in equal measure and without any sense of favoritism. He radiates warmth, personal charm and an impish sense of humor.

While I was studying at Yale, he announced one morning that he was expecting a call from Broadus Erle, his friend and the head of violin studies at the university. Ten minutes later the phone rang, and a very excited Erle told Mr. Parisot of an audition tape he had just received from a phenomenal violinist named David Weiss. On it Weiss performed the notoriously difficult 24th Caprice of Paganini flawlessly, in a manner worthy of Heifetz. Erle couldn't wait to have him as a pupil.

Mr. Parisot hung up the phone and burst out laughing, tears streaming beneath his omnipresent dark glasses. *He* had made the tape, at half speed on the cello, to sound like a violin when played at full speed. The name David Weiss was a play on the name of the viola professor at Yale, David Schwartz.

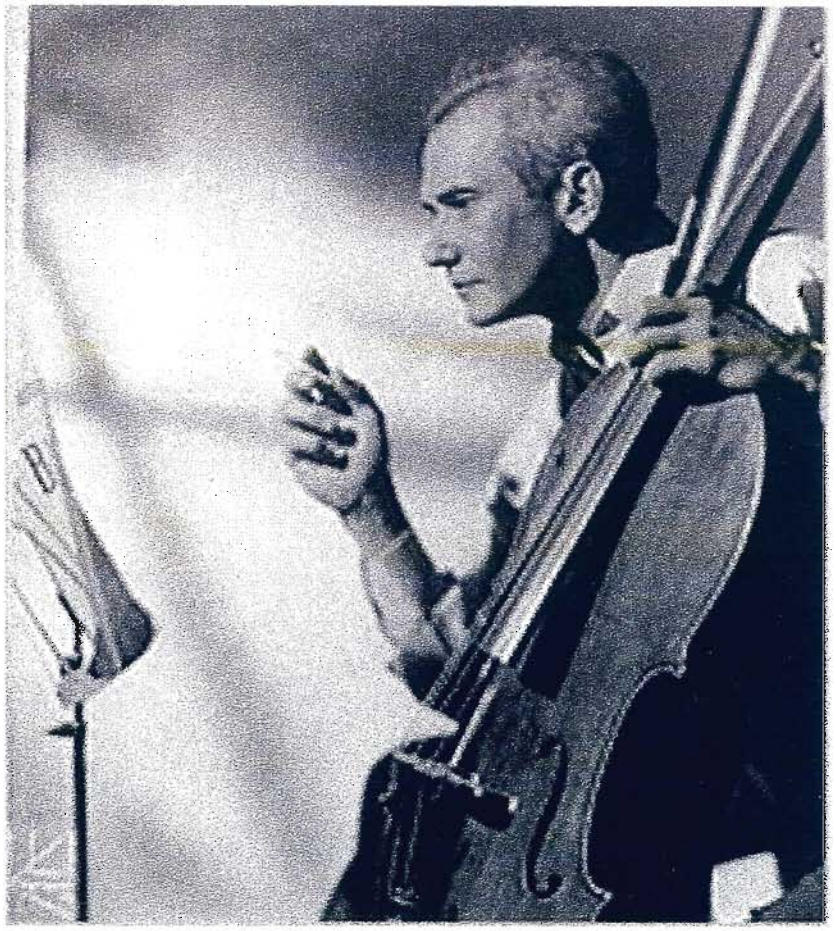
Around the same time, a new dimension unfolded in Mr. Parisot's life. He visited a student art exhibition in Norfolk and was captivated. He bought basic materials and began to paint. A succession of eminent art lecturers who came to Norfolk told him that he had a good sense of color and rhythm. (His favorite artist is Paul Klee.) They also told him, "Don't study, just paint."

He has followed that advice and completed more than 3,000 paintings in an ever developing range of styles. He has been exhibited, but he chooses to sell only at Yale Cellos concerts and special events, devoting the proceeds to a travel fund for deserving students. He has so far raised almost half a million dollars.

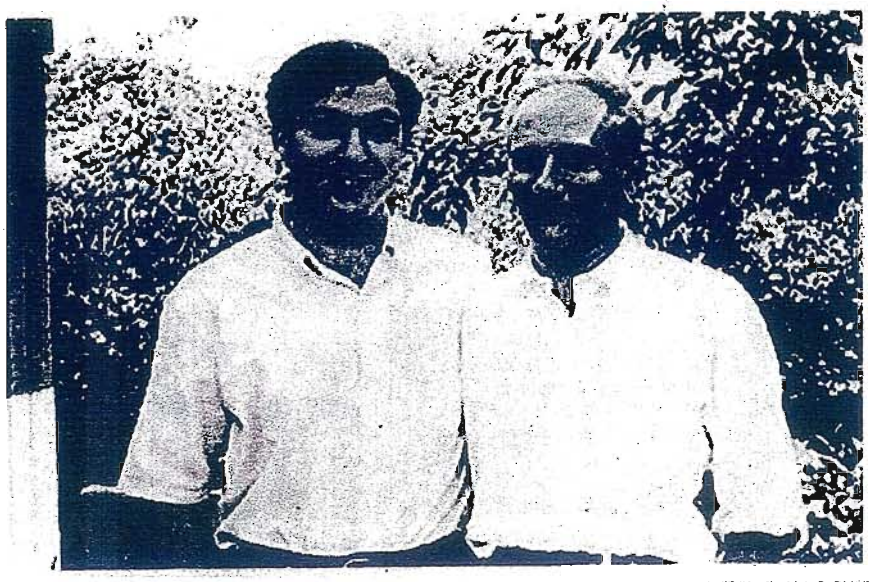
With this characteristic generosity he also discreetly helps students in need. He inspires his pupils, prods them, cajoles them, counsels them. In all of this he is enthusiastically supported by his wife, the pianist Elizabeth Sawyer Parisot, who accompanies his students in classes, auditions and concerts, and is always a cheerful and encouraging presence.

"The secret to staying young," Mr. Parisot says, "is to surround yourself with the younger generation. It is boring to talk to the elderly about their blood pressure and cholesterol levels."

ROBERT LISAK



Aldo Parisot, above right in an undated photograph, at right with Ralph Kirshbaum in 1969 and with his Stradivarius cello in 1987.



COURTESY OF ALDO PARISOT

Ralph Kirshbaum

VIOLIN VIOLA CELLO BASS FIDDLE
STRINGS

June 2011

NEWS BRIEFS

KIRSHBAUM TO HELM NEW CELLO FEST

Cellist and professor **Ralph Kirshbaum** will direct the inaugural **Piatigorsky International Cello Festival** March 9–18, 2012, in Los Angeles. The festival will feature cellists **Mischa Maisky, Steven Isserlis, Jian Wang, Alisa Weilerstein,** and more in orchestral concerts, chamber music performances, and master classes.

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Ralph Kirshbaum

theStrad

VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

April 2011

NEWS

New cello festival for California

RALPH KIRSHBAUM IS TO BRING together some of the world's finest cellists next year for the inaugural Piatigorsky International Cello Festival in Los Angeles. The project comes out of Kirshbaum's responsibilities as the Piatigorsky chair of cello at the Thornton School of Music and picks up where he left off when he stopped organising the UK's Manchester Cello Festival in 2007. Twenty cellists, including Mischa Maisky, Steven Isserlis, Jian Wang and Miklós Perényi, will perform and give masterclasses. There will also be an evening during which Piatigorsky's former students celebrate their teacher, which Kirshbaum described as 'the emotional heart of the event'. He hoped that the great 20th-century cellist would have enjoyed the festival: 'Piatigorsky was larger than life. He loved to tell stories and was fantastic at doing that. The festival is larger than life and will tell an interesting story, so I hope he would be pleased.'

Ralph Kirshbaum, organiser of the new LA event

According to Kirshbaum, specialist music festivals are an important addition to the musical landscape. He said: 'The older I get, the more I realise that the concentration on any subject that brings us more to the heart of the matter of that subject is a good thing. In this case it's the cello but that focus could be brought to bear on any instrument and have that impact.' The festival will run from 9 to 18 March 2012.

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Ralph Kirshbaum

The Well-Tempered Ear

November 19, 2009

Classical music notes: There are more great cellists than Yo-Yo Ma, so today in Madison it's Ralph Kirshbaum Day

By Jacob Stockinger

There are quite a few great cellists playing in the world today, and Madison has done an outstanding job in presenting many of them. That's more of a feat than it might sound.

But let's start with the big event that sparks these musings: the Madison orchestral debut this weekend of cellist Ralph Kirshbaum, an American by birth and education who now is based in the Great Britain.

Kirshbaum will perform with the Madison Symphony Orchestra under John DeMain this weekend.

But TODAY, THURSDAY, NOV. 19, he will also give an interview on Wisconsin Public Radio's The Midday, with knowledgeable hosts Norman Gilliland and Stephanie Elkins, at NOON – 88.7 FM in the Madison area.

Then — also TODAY AT 1 P.M. IN MORPHY HALL — and Kirshbaum will also give a free public master class on the UW campus in the Mosse Humanities Building.

(With the MSO, Kirshbaum will perform Ernest Bloch's "Schelomo" and Dvorak's "Silent Woods." Also on the program, to be conducted by John DeMain, are Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony and Respighi's "Fountains of Rome."

(Performances are in Overture Hall on Friday at 7:30 p.m.; Saturday at 8 p.m.; and Sunday at 2:30 p.m. Tickets range from $15 to $75. Call 258-4141.)

If you've never heard of Kirshbaum — even though only 34 years ago he performed a recital at the Wisconsin Union Theater during the 1975-76 season — that can easily be forgiven.

After all, these days Yo-Yo Ma is the Microsoft of cellists, seemingly playing everywhere and everything, and then recording it or going on TV to broadcast it. Small wonder he probably has a cello market share in the high-90s.

Still, there are some outstanding cellists out there, many of whom Madison presenters thankfully get to come through town. These

cellists include Steven Isserlis, Carter Brey, Alisa Weilerstein (below left, who recently played at the White House's classical music night), Matt Haimovitz, Amanda Forsythe and Alban Gerhardt. Thank you!

I'd also like to see: Mischa Maisky, who often partners with famed pianist Martha Argerich, though I find his Bach playing a bit melodramatic and Romantic; and especially Jian Wang (below right), the outstanding Chinese cellist who as a boy was featured in violinist Isaac Stern's Oscar-winning documentary film "From Mao to Mozart" but whose Deutsche Grammophon recordings of Bach suites and other music from the Baroque and Classical eras, right through Brahms and Dvorak, are terrific.

These are the inheritors to such historic giants and master cellists such as Janos Starker, Pablo Casals, Gregor Piatigorsky, Emanuel Feuermann, Mstislav Rostropovich, Leonard Rose and Pierre Fournier among others.

A comparatively neglected contemporary master is Ralph Kirshbaum. I am particularly fond of his recording of the Bach solo suites, which blends the robustness of modern playing with the sprightly lightness of period instruments and early music interpretations.

The cello is such an appealing instrument, so vocal and resonant, that we really should hear more of the today's Great Ones live – and not just Yesterday's Great Ones on recordings.

Nor, since monopolies or near-monopolies are unhealthy for the Republic of Taste, should one confine one's cellists to Yo-Yo Ma. (Not that there is anything wrong with Ma's playing, but you'd be surprised how exciting other cellists can be.)

Anyway, it is well worth your while to get to know the neglected contemporary cello masters better.

So here is a link to unusual biography of Kirshbaum, who has performed world-wide, won major prizes and made some outstanding recording:

http://www.answers.com/topic/ralph-kirshbaum

And here's a link to an interview with Kirshbaum on the Cello Society's webpage:

http://www.cello.org/cnc/kirshbau.htm

But don't forget that today and this weekend you can also hear him in person, talking as well as playing.

Finally, the Governor, County Executive and Mayor probably won't proclaim it, so I will: Happy Ralph Kirshbaum Day!

Ralph Kirshbaum

THE DENVER POST

APRIL 9, 2010

Classical music

A champion on the cello

Today- Sunday. Symphonic music. After a 35-year tenure at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, England, Texas- born cellist Ralph Kirshbaum recently took an endowed position at the University of Southern California. When he is not teaching, he is performing all over the world. He will join guest conductor Douglas Boyd and the

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Ralph Kirshbaum

VIOLIN VIOLA CELLO BASS FIDDLE
STRINGS
August/September 2008

news & NOTES

Kirshbaum Cache

University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music boasts of a new era, and it turns out the school is justified. Violin virtuoso and education-outreach specialist **MIDORI** is settling into her third year as chair of the strings program, and world-famous Israeli recitalist **HAGAI SHAHAM** will also serve as bait for eager violin students. But the biggest feather in the school's cello wing—not to mention the West Coast's burgeoning classical-music scene—is the appointment of **RALPH KIRSHBAUM** to the Gregor Piatigorsky Endowed Chair in Violoncello.

The cellist's appointment means big things for LA.

Kirshbaum has appeared with just about all of the best conductors and orchestras, and in the most prestigous festivals. The 52-year-old American will be leaving his post at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, England, where he taught for 32 years, and his 20-year-old, award-winning RNCM Manchester International Cello Festival, making his migration to the Golden State bittersweet. "I'll miss the fantastic interaction I had over the years with the most wonderful friends and colleagues I had in the [British] cello community," says Kirshbaum, who was born and raised in Texas.

"Making this move to California—the potential there is enormous. I've got some wonderful colleagues there. And I'm very pleased with the administration of the school starting with the dean [Dr. Robert Cutietta], who's an exceptional man, has a wonderful vision, and handles people very well."

Kirshbaum is also pleased with the many developments of the nearby Colburn School and the classical-music community in Los Angeles. "I see every reason to think that

there will be—certainly in the world of cello—great possibilities for collaboration and for the development of a healthy and very talented group of cellists throughout Los Angeles," he says. "It's great for Los Angeles to have a school like the Colburn School, which is bringing in students from all over the world, and, indeed, the Thornton School doing same. What can be better?"

But Kirshbaum adds that it's not just the recent growth at LA's music schools that he finds exciting. "The new appointment of [27-year-old conductor Gustavo] Dudamel as the future music director at the Los Angeles Philharmonic is a very exciting one. And James Conlon, whom I have known for many years, being so much involved with the musical scene in Los Angeles. And Jeffrey Kahane who is at the LA Chamber Orchestra. It's an exciting time.

"I don't know many communities that—in that breadth of the musical world—have so much happening all at once."

—RORY WILLIAMS

Ralph Kirshbaum

theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

July 2008

AWARDS IN THE STRING WORLD

Cellists united under Ralph Kirshbaum's eye at Manchester's 2007 festival

The Manchester International Cello Festival's final event in 2007 has won a Royal Philharmonic Society award. The long-running festival, held under the auspices of the Royal Northern College of Music, came to an end after its ninth season last year following the departure of its artistic director, cellist Ralph Kirshbaum. He said of the award: 'It's recognition of a festival that began in the simplest way and grew and developed into a truly international event. It's wonderful to have it recognised as such.'

A viola da gamba made by Tobye Le Vaillant

Tobye Le Vaillant and Tim Cogger, both students at London Metropolitan University, have been jointly given the Tom Jenkins Award for excellence in musical instrument making.

The Young Concert Artists Trust has selected its artists for representation after several rounds of auditions. They are 23-year-old Australian cellist Pei-Jee Ng and the Heath Quartet, which is composed of Oliver Heath, 28, from London, Rebecca Eves, 24, from Winchester, Christopher Murray, 24, from Newcastle and 25-year-old South African Gary Pomeroy.

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August 2007

Festival founder Ralph Kirshbaum receives applause for his performance of the Elgar Cello Concerto at Manchester's Bridgewater Hall

CHRISTOPHER LAW

FESTIVAL REPORT

NORTHERN SOUL

When ARIANE TODES went to the RNCM Manchester International Cello Festival, she discovered a whole new world of famous faces, communal spirit and intense emotion

I CONFESS. AS A VIOLINIST I WAS A LITTLE NERVOUS ABOUT going to the Manchester Cello Festival. Five days of cello masterclasses, cello premieres, cello chamber music, even cello comedy.

At least the faces are familiar to me, and there were plenty of these in evidence on my arrival at the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM), where the festival was held. Mischa Maisky walking through the lobby, David Geringas on his way to a rehearsal, Thomas Demenga drinking in the café: it was a feast of cello star-spotting comparable to the Oscars. This constant flow of celebrity is largely down to the bursting 'little black book' of festival organiser Ralph Kirshbaum, who started the event in 1987. It wasn't just senior stars either: the younger generation were amply represented, as were teachers and amateurs.

And so to the first cello-charged concert, in the RNCM's Haden Freeman Concert Hall. In line with the festival's theme – *From Britten to Britain* – Frans Helmerson, Mihaela Martin and Nobuko Imai played Tippett's Triple Concerto; Alexander Rudin performed John Casken's Cello Concerto; and we heard the UK premieres of Colin Matthews's *Berceuse for Dresden* from Raphael Wallfisch and Anatolijus Sendrovas's *Concerto in Do* with David Geringas, both given committed performances. A personal highlight was Maisky playing Strauss's *Don Quixote*, in which he lived every moment of the opening orchestral music with Chaplinesque drama and put equivalent imagination into every episode. It felt like being at the cinema for its narrative clarity. Maisky also triumphed on the fashion front, with a beautiful

Issey Miyake parody of the tailcoat form that avoided the usual shoulder-pads-around-the-ears syndrome.

I was becoming accustomed to picking out different qualities of cello playing but soon realised that it was invidious to compare players, each of whom has a distinct sound and musical personality. And it simply wasn't in the spirit of the event, one in which world-famous cellists were to be found enjoying each other's concerts, classes and company. I also wondered whether five of the best violin players in the world would ever offer themselves on the same programme like this, let alone play pieces for which three of the composers turn up to take applause. It's inconceivable. Is there something about the cello personality that makes players so companionable?

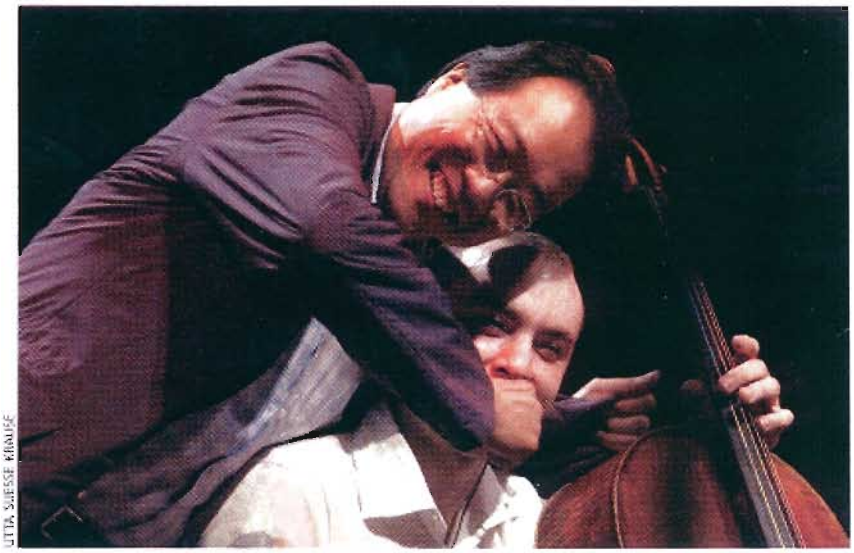
The next day brought my first masterclasses. With two conflicting classes scheduled both morning and afternoon it was nigh-on impossible to decide where to go. Anner Bylsma or Alexander Rudin? David Geringas or Colin Carr? Tsuyoshi Tsutsumi or Yo-Yo Ma? How to choose? So like most other people I waited until a suitable moment an hour into each class and scurried to the next one, often literally bumping people who were doing the same thing in the opposite direction.

The range of teaching styles was fascinating, some focusing on technique, some philosophy; some talking a lot, some not at all. Unsurprisingly, Anner Bylsma took a musicological view of Bach, advising one student 'Throw away any edition that doesn't have original bowings.' He also offered some handy metaphors: to think of particular semiquavers as if 'dusting the mantelpiece', or for one particular up bow, 'Someone asks you for money and you tell them to go away with this gesture.'

Rudin and Tsutsumi talked less, listening intensely to the performer and suggesting useful possibilities for bow speed or dynamics, while Natalia Gutman produced results with limited English but sheer force of personality. Geringas was the entertainer, whether impeccably imitating a drunkard, a lion, or someone walking in the dark, to elucidate Schnittke. 'There are many points in music where we can take sounds from life,' he explained, and then, 'You are rushing – lions never rush!'

Yo-Yo Ma went for a more psychoanalytical approach. His first question to a student who had just played a Beethoven sonata was, 'How do you feel?' The student didn't speak English very well and was slightly nervous, so was a bit non-plussed by this and the question that followed: 'What do you feel about the music?' Despite these niceties, the real breakthrough came when Ma explained the harmonic structure of the movement through reference to the piano part, showing where it resolves to the tonic in the coda. He explained, 'If you're aware of this it will come out in the timing and the sound even if the audience is not aware of it.' Lo and behold, the student's concluding performance had a much clearer sense of purpose and structure. Not everyone approved of his life-coaching approach, though: two elderly ladies behind me remarked that it was 'very American'.

Following the mental strain of watching masterclasses on Thursday I took a dose of coffee to perk me up for a 6.30pm concert of Beethoven cello sonatas with Miklós Perényi. I had never heard him before other than by his reputation as 'the cellist's cellist'. The coffee proved superfluous as the performance was riveting. Perényi played with absence of show, his head firmly in the music, and with a gruff



UTTA SJESSE KRAUSE

Yo-Yo Ma asks awkward questions of one of his masterclass students

CHRISTOPHER DWY

Peter Maxwell Davies presents Natalia Gutman with the festival's Award of Distinction

sound, but there was immense wisdom to it, and his partnership with pianist András Schiff was one of a deep sense of each other and the music. The passionate response from the audience confirmed his reputation.

Thursday evening saw another super-powered concert: Haydn from Thomas Demenga and Ivan Monighetti, and Rubbra's *Soliloquy* from Wallfisch. Li-Wei gave an impressive performance of Edward Gregson's *A Song for Chris*, dedicated to his sick friend Christopher Rowland, former leader of the Fitzwilliam Quartet, who was able to make it to the premiere. (Rowland succumbed to cancer just over a month later.) The surprise of the concert was Enrico Dindo's performance of Roberto Molinelli's *Twin Legends*, a Latin jazz-inspired romp that had Schiff chuckling behind me and Geringas rapt on the edge of his seat in front. Dindo pulled it off with a macho teeth-bearing, gum-chewing performance, a strong, sweet sound and a natural feel for the idiom.

On Friday evening came the bombshell. During an extended break in the gala concert (which included Gutman playing Britten, Maisky Rachmaninoff, Ma Piazzolla and some of the younger ▸

Twin Legends had András Schiff chuckling behind me and Geringas rapt on the edge of his seat in front

EMMA FINLAY

Taking to the floor to judge at *The Strad* Cello and Bow Making Competition

CHRISTOPHER DAVY

Music and emotion: cellists pay tribute to Mstislav Rostropovich

stars premiering Peter Maxwell Davies's *A Little Trowzie Music*) Kirshbaum gave awards to Ma and Gutman and with tears in his eyes announced that this was to be the final festival. He described the 'Quixotic' journey of the festival and explained that he had wanted to bow out on a high note, such as this year's event was proving. Apart from shock and sadness from the audience, this drew glowing tributes from colleagues, including Helmerson, who hit the nail on the head in describing the paradox of the way the festival created a sense of togetherness while consisting of the distinct musical personalities of each of the artists. Afterwards rumours went round about other people taking the festival on (none of which I have yet determined to be true) and then it was business as usual, with a performance of John Tavener's *O Holy City* by Monighetti and Geringas playing Strauss's Cello Sonata.

If my ears weren't tuned to the detail of cello sound yet, they certainly were by the end of *The Strad* Cello and Bow Making Competition the next day, Saturday. Following eye-wateringly complicated behind-the-scenes activity that saw Charles Beare oversee the whittling down of contestants to the final eleven cellos and nine bows, we piled into the Bruntwood Theatre to hear each of them in the hall, itself a novel feature for a making competition. Gregor Horsht and and Enrico Dindo were entrusted with demonstrating and it was fascinating to hear how they each produced different sounds from the same instrument. They also talked about how tone colour changed depending on where they were playing – judging room or hall. It's a complicated business, this tone judging. I had the final winner marked as my second choice, which made me reasonably proud, but with judges such as Roland Baumgartner, Hieronymus Koestler and René Morel, as well as the players themselves, the makers had better ears to rely on. The winner was the 29-year-old Berlin-based Ragnar Hayn (for full results see News, July 2007).

The players then used their own cellos to demonstrate the bows, the contrast between the old Italian instruments with the freshly minted ones providing an unkind reminder of the competition young makers face. In describing the bow contest Beare compared the gradual rise in standards of cellos over the competition's years with the way the bows have 'shot up' this year: the prize went to 35-year-old Frenchman Boris Fritsch.

Saturday evening was rounded off by a trip to the Bridgewater Hall to hear Bridge's *Oration*, Britten's Cello Symphony, and Walton's and Elgar's concertos, played respectively by Carr, Gutman, Kirshbaum and Ma. To hear one of these great works in a programme would be meat enough; to hear all four verged on excess. Yet the packed audience, mainly locals, lapped it up, which goes to show that people's capacity for good music played well should never be underestimated.

The last event I caught was inevitably the most emotional: Mstislav Rostropovich had intended to be at this year's festival but died nine days before it, and in tribute several of his former students gathered on stage to remember him. Georgian talked of the bond they all had through the intensity of the experience they'd shared, while Maisky told tales of Rostropovich's generosity. There was also a short video made by biographer Elizabeth Wilson, which brought the great cellist back to life as he spoke about the festival in 1996 and answered my question about why cellists are prepared to gather in this way. 'Maybe it's because life is not so easy for us,' he explained looking out at us from the big screen. 'We suffer more than violin players.' With a raised eyebrow he added: 'We drink alcohol much better than violinists.' His students were joined by some younger stars for a performance Alexander Knaifel's *The Comforter* and at the end there was an intense, Rostropovich filled silence, and plenty of tears.

I went home exhausted, but with the feeling that I'd discovered a whole new world, both in sound and in philosophy. The first concert I went to back in London? Steven Isserlis playing the Dvořák Cello Concerto. It seems I've caught something. ■

Ralph Kirshbaum

The New York Times

May 13, 2007

Remembering Rostropovich, The Master Teacher

By MICHAEL WHITE

MANCHESTER, England

IT is a truth upheld by many in the music world if not universally acknowledged that pianists are neurotic, violinists vain and cellists ... well, cellists are nice. Straightforward. Sociable. They'll tell you so themselves.

Whereas other solo-status instrumentalists tend to come together only in competitions, cellists swarm like bees at big international meetings. The Kronberg Festival in Germany is one. And for the last two decades another has been the Manchester International Cello Festival, where Ralph Kirshbaum, the American head of the cello department at the Royal Northern College of Music, has pulled in star players every two of three years to perform, teach, talk and stay up until 3 a.m. comparing Strads, spikes and Piatigorsky stories.

Last weekend the festival was back in business, with Yo-Yo Ma, Mischa Maisky, Colin Carr, Thomas Demenga, Natalia Gutman and some 40 other participants jostling like angels on a pinhead in endurance concerts that began at 7 and ran till after midnight. Students, amateurs and aficionados packed the halls. Good times were had.

But there was a ghost at this feast, benign but insistent. It was the ghost of Mstislav Rostropovich, who had planned to be in Manchester too but died the week before.

From the beginning Mr. Kirshbaum said he didn't want the festival to turn into a wake; the scheduled theme was English music, and it wasn't to be hijacked by this death. But as Mr. Ma said of Mr. Rostropovich in an interview:

Jon Super for The New York Times

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Top, from left, Gemma Rosefield, Ralph Kirshbaum and Li-Wei at a tribute concert to the late Mstislav Rostropovich, right, at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, England.

Cellists at a gathering in England celebrate a life and legacy.

"There can scarcely be a cellist here, or anywhere, who wasn't affected by him. He was supreme. He was loved. He was a wake-up call for every one of us. You can't get away from that."

And there was scarcely a cellist of distinction here who didn't claim to be some kind of student of the great man, or a student of a student. Most impressive was the number who had actually participated in his legendary classes in the 1960s at the Moscow and Leningrad conservatories: Ms. Gutman, Mr. Maisky, David Geringas, Karine Georgian, Ivan Monighetti. An elite corps, they were honored here like surviving next of kin.

"It's true," Ms. Gutman said. "We were his family. We have lost a father." And their collective testimony made it clear that, in the words of Mr. Maisky: "He was a great cellist but perhaps an even greater teacher. This was his ultimate gift."

For obvious reasons Mr. Rostropovich's teaching was less well known to the world than his concert work. But a biography just published in Britain, by Elizabeth Wilson, herself a Moscow Conservatory student from the '60s, emphasizes its importance. And in hindsight it can be seen as central to his sense of self as a musician.

Mr. Rostropovich began to teach at 15, taking over from his father, a distinguished cello teacher who died young. Then for 25 years, from 1948 until he left Russia in 1974, he taught in both Moscow and Leningrad, with a particularly famous class in Moscow: Class 19.

At a time in the Soviet Union when speech was guarded, opinions were monitored and life was gray, Mr. Rostropovich's Class 19 was provocative, energized and, Mr. Geringas said, "a ray of light, opening up possibility." His students called him Sunshine. And 40 years later they talk of the experience as if it had happened yesterday, with vivid recall of events and recurring images of natural upheaval — torrent, hurricane, tsunami — to describe the impact on their lives.

Less closely involved students, the ones who knew Mr. Rostropovich only through master classes in the West, tend to describe his influence on them in technical terms. Mr. Ma talks of "the will to make a phrase last"; Mr. Kirshbaum of "the plasticity of a left hand moving so fast it encompassed new levels of difficulty"; and Mr. Demenga of "a bowing arm so agile it was like a snake, the bow a natural continuance of the arm, flesh melting into wood."

But for those who were with him in Russia in the '60s the memories are more emotional, overwhelmed by the huge, driven, scrutinizing personality that swept them up and left them reeling.

"Such power, such intensity," Ms. Gutman said. "He could look at a person and see so clearly what was hidden within. It was the genius to awaken genius in others."

For Mr. Maisky it was a question of attitude: "He taught us to remember that the cello, or any other instrument, is only what that word implies: an instrument to reach the ultimate goal of music, not the other way round. Musicians are under such pressure to succeed — to play louder, faster, more brilliant — that the music becomes a way of showing how wonderfully you play. This, for Rostropovich, was wrong. What matters is generosity of spirit, to open your heart. And his spirit was so great, his heart so open, this is what he gave us in his classes."

Not that they were easy. All of his students talk of being required to learn a concerto in two days or to come back and play the Bach cello suites from memory in a week. No excuses.

"Let's be honest," Ms. Georgian said. "We were quite afraid of him. For the first two years I was terrified. It's strange to look now at the photos taken at those classes and realize that he was a relatively young man, still in his 30s. To us he was a god. We hung on his every word, and it wasn't always kind. I never forget him saying to me when I played Brahms in his class, 'You haven't cried enough tears in your life to play this music.' Actually he was right. I hadn't. But I learned."

For Mr. Maisky the price of attending Class 19 turned out to be more than just tears. It was one and a half years in a labor camp, resulting from his habit of taping everything Rostropovich said.

"The class was so incredible, and he worked at such speed, it was impossible to absorb," Mr. Maisky said. "So for years I took along an old secondhand tape recorder, and eventually I needed to replace it. But these things were hard to get: only from the special shop with special certificates."

Jon Super for The New York Times

From left, foreground, the cellists Ivan Monighetti, Thomas Demenga, Gemma Rosefield and Li-Wei at a Rostropovich tribute concert rehearsal in Manchester, England. Ralph Kirshbaum stands second from right.

Getting the certificates involved a black-market currency deal for which Mr. Maisky was arrested and put on trial. "The whole thing was a setup," he said. "They'd been watching me because my sister had emigrated to Israel, and they expected me to do the same. It was their revenge. But one and a half years was lucky. I could have got eight."

Whether Mr. Rostropovich was instrumental in getting the sentence reduced is not clear. Mr. Maisky thinks not. "Because this was 1970," he said, "when his influence had collapsed because of his support for Solzhenitsyn. Until then he had power. He could ring up Brezhnev. After Solzhenitsyn his power was lost, so there was nothing he could do for me, except in personal terms. In that sense he was like a father. He sent money, he maintained my spirit, so many things."

Mr. Maisky was in a hotel in Munich when he heard of Mr. Rostropovich's death. "It came up on the TV news, and I was devastated," he said. "The only thing I could think to do was take my cello out and play a Bach suite. For him."

But for all of that, did Mr. Rostropovich generate a discernible school of playing? He himself avoided talk of schools; and although he could trace a direct musical ancestry back to Karl Davidov, the founder of the so-called Russian tradition, he was by general agreement such a giant personality and such a universal figure that he outgrew any allegiance.

"It isn't meaningful to talk of schools these days," Ms. Georgian said. "I'm never sure what

people mean when they speak of the Russian school beyond something that's loud, Romantic and more from the heart than the head, which is not necessarily a compliment. With Rostropovich there was no school. And though we are in many ways close, there are big differences in the playing of his students, no?"

Listening to everyone in Manchester, one could hardly disagree. The hard, compacted, unadorned intensity of Ms. Gutman bore little obvious resemblance to the mellow sheen of Ms. Georgian; still less to the liquid brilliance of Mr. Maisky. Could these people really be the family they claimed to be?

"Yes, definitely," Mr. Maisky insisted. "Different as we are, we have a shared blood transfusion that doesn't determine how we play or present musical ideas but does affect basic quality of sound, which for Rostropovich was the most important thing."

The Rostropovich sound is hard to put in words. Mr. Kirshbaum called it "powerful, with an inner life that sustained its intensity even at the most delicate and soft dynamic." And regardless of the terminology, it has certainly inspired successive generations of young cellists. For Natalie Clein, one of Britain's rising stars here last weekend, "it was the sound I searched for through my teen years: electric, incandescent, large but never forced, the sound that brought me to the cello in the first place."

Bringing people to the cello ranks high among the legacies Mr. Rostropovich leaves behind. He raised the profile of the instrument; he raised the standard of performance. And for Ms. Georgian he single-handedly rescued the cello from its also-ran status as a solo instrument that lagged behind the violin and piano, largely because of the shortage of first-rank repertory.

It was the constant complaint of cellists that they had no Beethoven or Brahms concerto to themselves, and no Mozart at all, while pianists and violinists had so much. Mr. Rostropovich begged, pestered and bullied composers of distinction to write for him. Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Britten, Lutoslawski, Bernstein, Penderecki, Schnittke and Walton (the list runs on) obliged him with what amounts to a near-comprehensive catalog of 20th-century cello music.

Mr. Rostropovich gave the premieres of 224 new works, large and small. "And that means we cellists owe him maybe 40 percent of our current repertoire," Mr. Ma said, "which for me is the greatest legacy of all."

One other item on the checklist of bequests is the very fact that massed events like Manchester exist. They're just the kind of thing Mr. Rostropovich loved and fostered. He encouraged cello clubs. He liked the camaraderie of fellow players. And in a short filmed speech made for a previous Manchester festival and poignantly replayed at this one, he commended (with his heavy Russian English) the "enormous, brilliant friendship, very rare" of cello gatherings. He even offered a reason for the friendliness of cellists: "We carry heavy instruments and suffer so much planes and trains. This makes us sympathetic people."

Participants here offered other explanations. Ms. Clein thought it had to do with spending your life playing bass lines. "You're supportive," she added, "always helping someone else to shine."

Whatever the reason, cellists manifestly do enjoy one another's company. And if Mr. Rostropovich's death weren't bad enough, the participants were hit with more bad news when rumors that this year's festival would be the last were confirmed.

"Things have their time frame," said Mr. Kirshbaum, the director, "and the festival has grown so much it's reaching saturation point. Back in 1987 it was meant to be a one-off. I never imagined I'd still be doing it 20 years later. And now, after 36 years of living in Britain, I'm thinking about moving my base, quite possibly back to the U.S."

Could someone else pick up the ball? Any successor to Mr. Kirshbaum would need to have an international profile big enough to lean on friends and call in favors. And the owners of big international profiles tend not to have the time for such ventures.

What Manchester needs, clearly, is a Rostropovich. So far there are no contenders.

Ralph Kirshbaum

BBC music MAGAZINE

April 2007

MUSIC THAT CHANGED ME

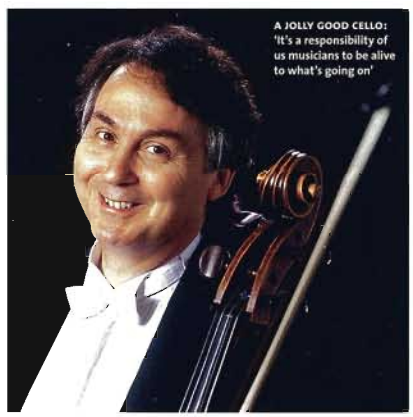
RALPH KIRSHBAUM
Cellist

I grew up in Tyler, Texas where my father was the conductor of a small semi-professional orchestra. I remember a concert there when I was seven back in 1953. The cello soloist was Raya Garbousova. She came from Russia and had a very active career during the 1940s and '50s. That evening she played Haydn's G major Concerto. I was sitting with two other seven-year-old boys who weren't quite so interested and they were crinkling their programmes. Just before she entered she reached over the platform and went 'shh!'. Her bow was pointing right at me. Some 17 years later I met Raya in London and I told her the story – she howled with laughter. 'You're laughing now, but you traumatised me,' I told her.

When I was 11 I started going to Dallas for lessons with a wonderful teacher called Roberta Guastafeste. Then I studied with Lev Aronson – he also taught Lyn Harrell. The main thing I learned from Lev was an appreciation of sound and colour. It was the first time that someone had talked to me in a sophisticated way. Every Saturday my father would drive me 100 miles for those lessons. With Lev, it was the first time I played Bach and it was then that I heard the recordings of Pablo Casals playing **BACH'S SUITES FOR SOLO CELLO.** Intellectually I was moved in many ways. When I put on those recordings they still speak to me – I love them: the heavy breathing and all.

I went to Yale when I was 17; while I was there I put on a recording of Gregor Piatigorsky playing in Richard Strauss's **DON QUIXOTE,** which I think was with Charles Munch and the Boston Symphony. Piatigorsky had been Lev Aronson's teacher. The moment he came in – from the very first note – I hadn't heard the cello played like that before. I kept going back to the beginning and putting it on again. It made a big impression on me and affected my sense of sound.

So did **ELLA FITZGERALD.** I began listening to jazz when still at Yale and I heard Fitzgerald sing 'Summertime' for the first time. The sound, the voice, the phrasing, the musicality – I was overwhelmed. With Ella Fitzgerald there were things



A JOLLY GOOD CELLO: 'It's a responsibility of us musicians to be alive to what's going on'

American cellist Ralph Kirshbaum was born in 1946 and made his professional debut with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra at 13. After studying in Paris, Kirshbaum won the International Cassadó Competition in Florence in 1969 and then, importantly, the 1970 International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. In 1988, he founded the RNCM Manchester International Cello Festival, which he now runs every three years. This year the festival runs 2-6 May and focuses on music for cello by British composers.

that struck home when I heard her voice for the first time – like opening a sound to have a phrase bloom in a certain way just by what you do with the amplitude of sound and with vibrato.

I moved to London in 1971 – along with New York, London seemed to me to be musical capital of the world. While I was there I heard Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic in **BRAHMS SYMPHONIES** at the Festival

Ralph Kirshbaum

San Antonio Express-News

February 8, 2008

Texan comes home for symphony concerts

Photo: Henry Fair

By Jennifer Roolf Laster

When Ralph Kirshbaum was growing up in Tyler, he was given his choice of instruments to play.

His father, Joseph, was a violinist and conductor, and believed it was important that "we have music in our lives," Kirshbaum says.

First, the young Kirshbaum tried the violin, but it didn't really take off. His heart, he says, was pulling him to the cello.

As he puts it, "I'm a Texan at heart. Bigger is better."

That instinct — to go for the big prize — paid off in spades. These days, Kirshbaum is one of the world's most respected cellists, a celebrated recording artist and frequent guest performer around the globe.

The native son will return to the Lone Star State this weekend for two concerts with the San Antonio Symphony. Under the direction of Douglas Boyd, a respected oboist and principal guest conductor for the Colorado Symphony, Kirshbaum will perform the much-loved Cello Concerto by Dvorak.

The evening will open with the overture to Mozart's "The Magic Flute," then move to Brahms' Symphony No. 3 in F major.

The Dvorak piece is "probably our greatest cello concerto because it is perhaps the most complete in its use of the solo instrument and its very creative use of the orchestra," Kirshbaum says.

"I've been playing for 55 years, and I've never regretted it," he says. "The cello is just the closest thing amongst stringed instruments to the human voice; it's this natural and reverberant sound."

Kirshbaum, a resident of London since 1971, is looking forward to getting back to his Texas roots.

"It's a warm homecoming in a sense for me," he says. Some of the attraction lies in the friends he has scattered across the state, in Houston, Austin and San Antonio. But some of it, he says, lies in the culinary offerings.

"I love Tex-Mex. I love ribs. I love fried chicken," he says. "All of that."

"It uses the full range of the cello's abilities."

Noted cellist Ralph Kirshbaum, now of London, grew up in Tyler.

In a career that has seen him take the stage with the world's greatest orchestras, Kirshbaum has, naturally, performed the Dvorak concerto many times. But he says every time is a new experience.

"I love the piece," he says. "You might think that with familiarity comes indifference. On the contrary, the excitement of playing a piece like that only grows. It does not diminish with time."

He has never second-guessed his childhood choice of instrument, either.

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Hall. I had never heard a sound like that from an orchestra: the sheen of the sound, the integral nature of it, the homogeneity of it, the warmth and beauty – I was blown away. Subsequently I heard many recordings, but being there in the hall and having that sound washing over me was amazing.

In the mid 1990s I had the great opportunity to play **LUTOSLAWKI'S CELLO CONCERTO** with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra – Lutoslawski was conducting. It's a responsibility of us musicians to be alive to what's going on in the contemporary world of music. Not that we can play everything, but we need to be aware of those things that touch us. Lutoslawski had performed the concerto with about 16 cellists before me – often composers find someone who they believe in and trust and they'll take them everywhere to play that particular piece. But he was happy to have many different cellists, including Mstislav Rostropovich and Heinrich Schiff, and pass it round. That's the reason so many significant cellists of my generation now play that work. ■

Interview by Oliver Condy

RALPH KIRSHBAUM
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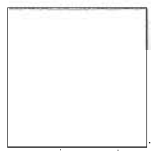

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Ralph Kirshbaum

CLASSICAL music
The news magazine of the classical music profession

March 17, 2007

Texas ranger

Robert Beale reports on how Ralph Kirshbaum's career has taken him from Texas to running the RNCM Manchester International Cello Festival, via Yale where he shared a college with George W Bush

Ralph Kirshbaum has just passed his 60th birthday – but you would never guess it. The London-resident father of three is performing worldwide as much as ever, teaching at the Royal Northern College of Music and giving masterclasses in London, IMS Prussia Cove and the Juilliard School in New York, and is about to greet 32 of the world's greatest cellists in Manchester at the triennial International Cello Festival he founded nearly 20 years ago.

It is only triennial now because he found he could not fit in the work involved when it happened every two years – which was the case from 1998 until the turn of the millennium.

Kirshbaum is a Texan, born in a small town called Denton, near Dallas, and brought up from the age of six in Tyler, which is 100 miles away – in Texan dimensions, that is still 'close'.

His father taught at North Texas State University, and was music director of the East Texas Symphony Orchestra. His mother played the harp – in the orchestra when needed.

'She didn't practise that much,' he says. 'She could go sometimes six or eight months without touching the harp, knowing that when she was needed she could start to practise again until she was up to standard.

'Even as a child I realised how much work went into playing an instrument well.' So why did he choose to be a cellist? 'My father took me into his studio when I was six. He held up a violin, a viola and a cello. The cello was the biggest and most impressive, and I chose it.' (There speaks a true Texan.) 'After a few months, I just grew to love the whole sensation and sound world of the cello.'

He had tried to get sounds out of a violin even before this, and his father – a violinist himself primarily – was his first teacher, 'I held the bow like a violinist: I've spent the next 50 years trying to correct it!'

A born cellist: Ralph Kirshbaum

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At the age of 11 he began proper lessons with Roberta Guastafeste – now a good friend – in Dallas, with his father taking him on the 100-mile journey every weekend. 'She was a pupil of Josef Schuster and adopted a German, highly disciplined approach, which was really perfect for that time of my life.'

It certainly worked. At the age of 14 he began lessons with Dallas Symphony principal Lev Aronson (a Latvian who had spent the war years in a concentration camp and got his post just six months after moving to America).

'That was a totally different approach. He was more concerned with the sound world, colour and imagery. That was pretty hot stuff for a 14-year-old Texan boy.'

It gave him the passion that he has never lost. 'I started to practise really seriously, and I won a competition which meant I had to play a concerto with the Dallas Symphony, which was enough to put the fear of God into any teenager.

'But, to be honest, I didn't know what I was going to do with this. Young people today are so much more aware of what a career means – and what being a soloist means. They have the experience of hearing concerts at a level I could only dream of.

'My father told me later he always knew I was going to be a cellist – but my parents had the wisdom not to put excessive pressure on me. Of course my dad invested his time and energy in that weekly 100-mile drive, and we got to know each other pretty well during that time.

His two older brothers went into law and his sister, Shirley, became a concert agent in New York and now represents him – though everyone in the family began playing an instrument.

Ralph was accepted by both Harvard and Yale Universities, but chose Yale. He became a member of the Davenport residential college – along with a certain George W Bush, of whom he has little to say. 'There were a lot of very distinguished people there,' he says.

'My first real dilemma came in my final year – before I had finished my degree. I was asked to be solo cellist with the Dallas Symphony – along with which came a "professorship" at the university. I'd never even contemplated that sort of role for myself, as my principal inclination was to be a soloist.

'Now I've been back many times to the Dallas Symphony to play solo, but I've never doubted I made the right decision.'

His seemingly charmed existence could have come to a shuddering halt with the Vietnam War and the 'draft' – national service, for which all young men of his age were liable.

He had won a Fulbright Scholarship to study in Paris, but it was 1968 and there was a very real possibility he would be conscripted. Some of his contemporaries left the country.

He had to turn his Fulbright Scholarship down and face the draft board. When his turn finally came for his physical examination, fate decreed that he should be seen by an English doctor on an exchange visit.

'And that was where my relationship with this country began,' he says. 'I had put on my form that I was a concert cellist. He asked me to draw a cello to prove it – and I said "I'm a cellist, not an artist!"

'So he looked through all the regulations, while I sat there in my underwear, noted that I had flat feet and suffered from hay fever, and then walked me to the door, saying: "I hope you weren't counting on a career in the military, because you're not going to have one." He put my physical status down as 4F (this for a man who had captained his college in tennis), and that was that.'

He did get to Paris, with a grant from the French government, and spent a year and a half there. Then, with help from his Yale teacher Aldo Parisot, he moved to England in 1971 and found an agent. His career was launched.

'This is where I've made my home since that time. We [he is married to Dublin-born Antoinette, with whom he has a son] have an apartment in New York, but our home is definitely London.'

Kirshbaum took private pupils from the outset of his performing career – in fact, he had taught from the age of nine, as his father had him help other children and Parisot encouraged his students to teach. But in 1975 John Manduell, principal of the then recently established Royal Northern College of Music, asked him to join its staff.

'I said I felt I should do it for one year, because of my schedule – even in those days,' he says. 'I didn't want to be an absentee or irresponsible teacher. I said if we pick the right students, the system can work.

'Thirty-one years later, I can say it has worked. I see a lot of my students – but on an irregular basis. If a student is strong enough, they will be able to review ideas on their own, and they know I'm always on the end of the telephone if they need to talk to me.'

He also teaches at Prussia Cove and in London and Verbier – and Malaysia (recently), and he has just finished a session at the Curtis Institute in the USA.

I asked whether he had a big unfulfilled ambition. 'I'd love one day to play with the Berlin Philharmonic,' he says. 'I've played with Simon [Rattle] on many occasions, and I've played with most of the great symphony orchestras – most recently the Boston Symphony. And I'd like to record the Beethoven sonatas and variations: I've played them regularly for over 30 years. But I can't say I'm frustrated or unfulfilled.'

Kirshbaum plays a Domenico Montagnana cello of 1729, which once belonged to Alfredo Piatti, the great 19th-century virtuoso. As such, it must know its way to Manchester unaided, as Piatti was one of Charles Hallé's close associates in the early years of his chamber concerts in the city and visited regularly later.

It is an instrument with a huge, warm tone, but it has a personality, too, and Kirshbaum says it takes some coaxing to bring that tone out. As Piatti was one of the last cellists to play without a spike to prop his instrument up, I asked if he had ever tried seeing how it sounded spikeless.

'Never deliberately,' he says. 'But there was one concert when the spike came loose and I had to grip the cello with my knees just to get through to the end of the concerto. It sounded OK to me.'

The RNCM Manchester International Cello Festival runs 2-6 May, with this year's theme 'From Britten to Britain'. This year, for the first time, Mstislav Rostropovich will be present, along with almost every other well-known player in the world.

The festival has grown from relatively small beginnings:

there were fewer than a dozen guest cellists at the first in 1988, and 14 at the second (1990). In 1992 the first cello-making competition was added: in 1994 the RNCM's massed ranks of players enabled a performance of Villa-Lobos's *Bachianas Brasilieras* No 1 by 32 of them together – an unforgettable experience. In 1996 there had to be a sound relay for 200 outside the RNCM concert hall because of the number trying to hear the final concert, and in 1998 the highlights concert was held in the Bridgewater Hall. And so it went on.

This year the festival welcomes 32 visiting cellists, 13 pianists, two orchestras, three quartets, and 42 masterclass students of over 20 nationalities, and will feature two world premieres and three UK premieres. Furthermore, ten cellos will have travelled in style, with their own seats booked on flights (accompanied by their respective cellists).

"It's developed into a wonderful emotional and inspirational experience for all of us"

Kirshbaum dreamed up the idea of the festival in 1987. 'I organised a concert at the Wigmore Hall to honour Pierre Fournier – and it raised some money to start a fund. His widow thought it was a wonderful idea to endow a prize: it was the only one to be given in his name.

'A colleague here said why didn't we have the event at the college – and I said we should not just do a concert but have a festival. I thought it would be fun, and nothing like it had ever been done in this country, at that time. Then people said, "When is the next one?" By 1998 it had grown so large that I decided I could not continue with it unless it was every three years – and so it has been since then.'

So what is the secret that makes the international festival so special? 'There's the mutual respect my colleagues and I have for each other. Also they know they're going to be treated well here in every respect – not in terms of fees, but that they know that everything they do will be something they want to do, and they are all equal in prominence. Everyone pitches in together. It's developed into a wonderful emotional and inspirational experience for all of us.'

This year's festival is a special one, says Kirshbaum, because it is the first to have had a British theme. 'And we have Slava [Rostropovich] – and Yo-Yo [Ma] and most of the loyal friends who have been here regularly. And a new feature is the afternoon performances of cello quintets, with the Chilingirian and Michelangelo quartets.'

He pays tribute to his former administrator Alison Godlee, and the present team led by Sally Smith at the RNCM: 'It's like a big family when we're all together.'

RNCM Manchester International Cello Festival: tel 01625 571091; email sally.smith@rncm.ac.uk. www.cellofestival.co.uk

Ralph Kirshbaum
MUSICAL Opinion
September-October 2005

RALPH KIRSHBAUM

Judith Monk converses with this distinguished cellist

Cellist Ralph Kirshbaum enjoys the affection and respect not only of audiences world-wide but also of his many eminent colleagues and his students: this affection and respect is clearly reciprocated by him. Ralph Kirshbaum, who is rapidly approaching his 60th birthday, found time to talk to me in between a rushed breakfast and an important appointment!

"What attracted you to the cello?" I asked. "This may seem like an apocryphal story but it really is true. My Dad gave me a choice by holding up first a violin, then a viola and finally a cello. Well, what red-blooded male of any age wouldn't opt for the biggest one! I also liked the idea of holding this instrument close to your body, feeling its vibrations and drawing out those wonderful sounds. I came from a very musical family; my father was a violinist and conductor, my mother a harpist and my siblings played the violin, viola and piano respectively."

"Who was the primary musical influence in your life?" "My Dad was a very important part of my early musical life, closely followed by my first teacher. Roberta Guastafeste, who imbued my playing with a German discipline. She had trained under a cellist of Russian descent, Joseph Schuster. Schuster was Principal in Berlin before coming to New York in 1936 as the Philharmonic's first cellist. After Roberta I trained with Lev Aronson who had studied under Gregor Piatigorsky, bringing a Russian influence. Then at Yale University I studied with Aldo Parisot who based his ideas on the playing of Emanuel Feuermann."

Kirshbaum studied in Paris for two years from 1969 and in 1970 won a top prize at the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. In the same year he made his London debut at the Wigmore Hall.

In 1988 he founded and became Artistic Director of the RNCM Manchester International Cello Festival. This, until the1998 Biannual Festival, now Triennial Festival, gathers together his many friends amongst the world's great cellists in a celebration of the Cello, its music and musicians. The eighth Festival took place in May 2004; the next is from 2 to 6 May 2007. I asked him if it wasn't sowing the seeds of his own destruction by promoting new cellists through his Festival? "I take the greatest pleasure in new cellists wherever they come from and I'm very encouraged that there is this exciting group of gifted cellists emerging. I spend many hours working with young performers and in fact I now have several Godchildren through my former students, giving me a much loved extended family."

This neatly led to me asking him what advice he would give to young cellists at the start of their musical journey?

"When someone has made a choice to follow a musical career I suggest that they honour and respect that choice, work conscientiously, and continually try and broaden their horizons as a musician. When I think back over my 30 odd years at the RNCM, I have had students who didn't have the greatest gift but more than made up for it with their enthusiasm, energy and passion. I have also had students with exceptional talent who have wasted it."

Ralph Kirshbaum continues to delight in the pleasures of chamber music and ensures space in a busy solo schedule to continue in particular his long associations with György Pauk, Peter Frankl and Pinchas Zukerman. In 1997 Kirshbaum, Pauk and Frankl celebrated the 25th Anniversary of their collaboration with a major series of recitals and Master Classes at the Wigmore Hall and concerts at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, in Spain and Denmark. The preceding year Ralph celebrated his 50th birthday with two concerts at the Wigmore Hall, one with his students and one with his beloved Bach *Suites*, and a concert at the Barbican with the LSO where he performed the Dvorák Concerto and the Brahms Double Concerto with Pinchas Zukerman.

We spoke too about Ralph's many recordings, including the world premiere recording of Tippett's Triple Concerto for Philips which received the prestigeous1983 Gramophone Magazine *Record of the Year*. Of his recording of the Walton Concerto for Chandos the composer wrote: "It is most heartening to hear a performance in which everything is just right: it is excellent and moving". Most recently he recorded the Brahms Double and Beethoven Triple Concertos for BMG Classics with Pinchas Zukerman, John Browning and the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Christoph Eschenbach. It was his 1994 recording of the unaccompanied Bach *Suites* for Virgin Classics in which he takes most pride, telling me: "I was very personally involved in all the decisions about how they were to be recorded. It was my wish to perform each *Suite* in its entirety in front of the microphone. All the timings for

May 9, 1994
TIME

ANDREW MOORE—KATZ/SABA FOR TIME

AMONG CELLISTS: A unique fraternity including, from right, Pergamenschikow, Starker, Ma, Tsutsumi and Kirshbaum, the festival's founder

FESTIVALS

Not Second Fiddle

In Britain a galaxy of the best showcases the glitter of a golden era of cello playing and the esprit of its masters

By **BARRY HILLENBRAND** MANCHESTER

YO-YO MA LEANS BACK IN HIS chair, flashes an elfin smile that promises both mischief and enlightenment, then asks the student, "Can you make the audience *feel* red?" Ole Akahoshi ponders the question and, without saying a word, puts the bow to his cello. Out comes the familiar theme of Haydn's *D major Cello Concerto*. The audience listening to Ma's master class in the concert hall of Britain's Royal Northern College of Music is delighted. Ma's face lights up again. The music has enough passion in it to qualify as red, proclaims Ma, and Akahoshi has definitely conveyed his feelings to the audience.

Last week Ma and 19 other prominent cellists were busy splashing buckets of musical color and loads of feeling over the enthusiastic audiences attending the biennial Manchester International Cello Festival. The festival's success reflects the stature that the cello—once considered a mere orchestra workhorse—has achieved in the past 20 years. The five-day nonstop celebration of the cello featured a galaxy of stars, master classes, concerts, workshops, a cello- and bowmaking competition—plus much endless congenial chatter among the hundreds of cello students, teachers, ordinary players and fans who flocked to Manchester to attend.

The instrument's virtuosos are a congenial lot. "This close friendship among cellists is almost unique," observes Hungarian-born Janos Starker. "With the possible exception of tuba players, no other group of instrumentalists has formed this kind of fraternity." Part of the bond is due to the nature of what they play, says London-based cellist Ralph Kirshbaum, founder and artistic director of the festival. "Cellists share a kind of kinship which comes from the deep richness and warmth of the sound of the instrument."

Producing that sound is not easy. The cello is notoriously challenging to learn, much less to master, and so players tend to huddle together to commiserate. "We share the same cross," says Kirshbaum. Most of the best in the field teach. "We all struggle to manage the instrument, and so we want to pass on what we know," says American Steven Doane.

Until recently, cellists have suffered obscurity as musicians. For centuries they played, well, second fiddle to violinists and pianists, who luxuriated in an enormous repertory that allowed them to be on center stage. Thanks to the popularity of Pablo Casals and Gregor Piatigorsky in the first part of this century, the cello gradually began to develop into an important solo instrument. The emergence of a generation of charismatic players like Jacqueline Du Pré, Mstislav Rostropovich and Ma coaxed orchestras into scheduling more cello pieces. Composers began writing new works for the instrument and rearranging old ones. Students are now flocking to study the instrument. "Today there are hundreds of outstanding, gifted young cellists," says Starker, 69. "The kids in the conservatories play far better than the so-called renowned cellists of yesteryear. This is the golden era of cello playing." Starker notes that one of the particular joys of the Manchester festival is that it allows him to meet so many emerging talents.

In turn, the draw for the hundreds of cello aficionados who swarmed to Manchester for the festival was the rare convergence of the biggest names of the cello world: Ma, Kirshbaum, Starker, Austria's Heinrich Schiff, Britain's Steven Isserlis, France's Phillipe Muller, Japan's Tyuyoshi Tsutsumi and Russian-born Boris Pergamenschikow. They played solos, and they played together; when they were not performing, they sat in the audience listening to one another. "This could never happen with violinists," says Charles Beare, the eminent London instrument dealer who judged the cellomaking competition. The egos in the violin world are just too fierce. But great cellists seem unfettered by petty jealousies.

The music at Manchester was sublime. The master classes were largely devoted to the cello chestnuts of the repertory like the Haydn concertos or the Bach suites, but the concerts were studded with infrequently played works like Lalo's *D minor Concerto* and a host of 20th century compositions. Kirshbaum premiered a new work by Yehudi Wyner, professor of composition at Brandeis University in Massachusetts. Ma played *The 'cellist of Sarajevo,* written by David Wilde, a British composer. Wilde was inspired by the story of Vedran Smailovic, a Bosnian cellist who would visit the site in Sarajevo where 22 people had been killed by a grenade in 1992 and, wearing full evening dress, play in their memory, oblivious to sniper and mortar fire. When Ma finished Wilde's haunting, sad lament, the audience sat stunned into momentary silence. Then Ma gestured to the back of the hall. Smailovic, who escaped from Bosnia last year, came to the stage to share the applause. "It was the first time I heard the work," says the composer, a great bear of a man with a droopy mustache. "The melody is the cry of the people of Sarajevo. We must not forget them." If cellists have their way, they will not be forgotten. ■

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CLASSICAL music

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Mellow cellos

Cellists from all over the world are on their way to Manchester for the RNCM's biennial festival, which this year has an American flavour and boasts a record number of commissions. Catherine Monk unveils the programme

From its humble beginnings in 1988, the RNCM Manchester International Cello Festival has fast become the *sine qua non* of the cello-playing fraternity. The event has doubled in length to encompass five days, and this year's festival (2-6 May), will see performances by no fewer than 35 solo cellists, by far the biggest number to date.

Ralph Kirshbaum, artistic director of the festival and professor of cello at the RNCM, initially arranged a concert at the Wigmore Hall in June 1986, to honour the memory of French cellist Pierre Fournier, who had died earlier that year. From the proceeds of the concert was founded the Fournier Award, which aimed to promote a debut recital at the Wigmore Hall for a young cellist of exceptional talent. 'A friend suggested I put on a similar concert in Manchester, but I didn't just want to repeat myself,' explains Kirshbaum. 'The great facilities at the RNCM lent themselves to something much bigger, so I came up with the idea of a cello festival – and then I realised I'd landed myself in it!'

Kirshbaum's ready sense of humour combined with his obvious passion for the instrument and dedication as a teacher have obviously contributed greatly towards the subsequent success of the festival. He confesses: 'I am always amazed how many eminent cellists keep that time of year free and turn down other engagements in order to participate.' Perhaps even more surprising is that they do so for expenses only. This fact alone provides a significant insight into the benevolent, uncompetitive cameraderie which is a defining feature of each festival.

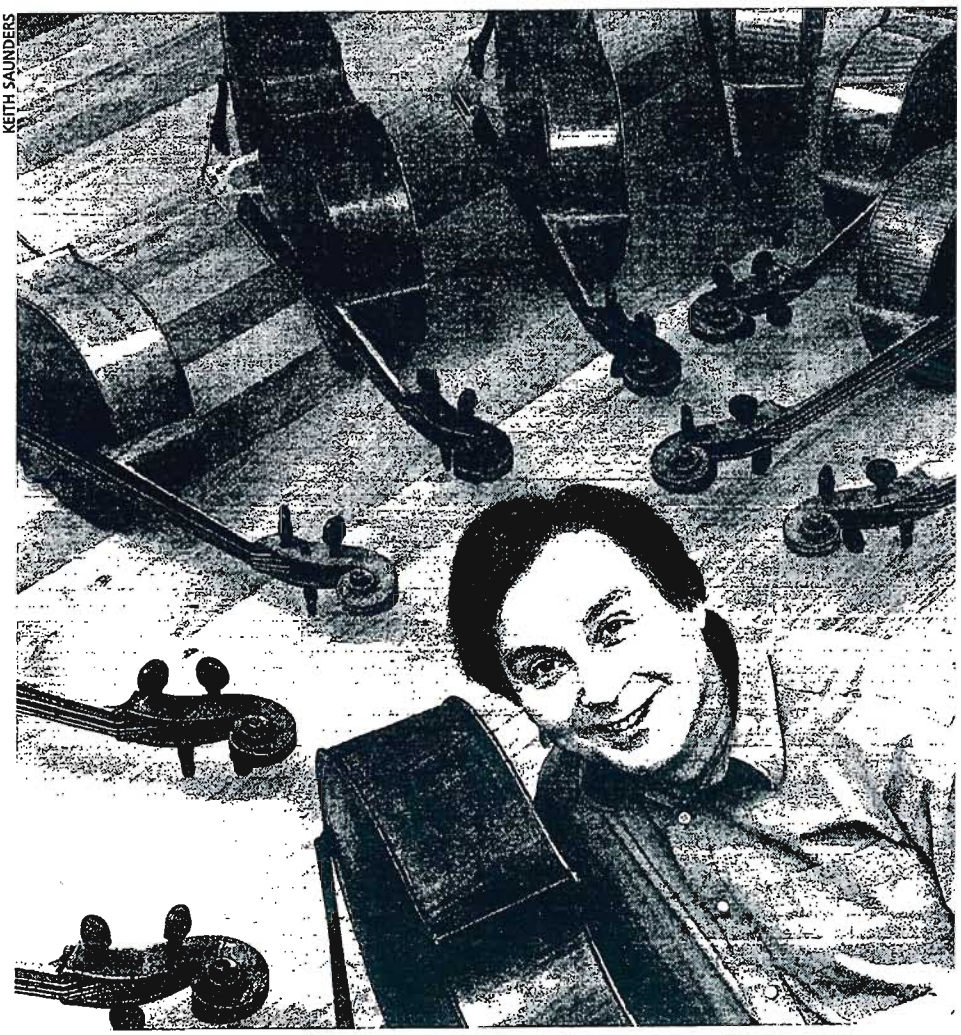
This year, the festival takes 'Exploring the American Influence' as its theme, a choice which reflects Kirshbaum's own nationality as well as linking the New World with the first festival of the new millennium. (The last one took place in 1998, and although usually a biennial event, last year's plans were postponed due to the World Cello Congress which was held in the USA in May 2000.) 'This year's American theme means we will have a lot of transatlantic visitors,' explains Alison Godlee, who has been festival administrator since 1999 and who works closely with Kirshbaum in all matters relating to the event. In fact, two-thirds of the visiting artists this year have close American ties, either through birth, formative study, or permanent residence. Both the recipients of this festival's Award of Distinction – Erling Blöndal Bengtsson from Denmark and Aldo Parisot from Brazil – arrived in America at an early age and subsequently built successful international performing and teaching careers from an American base.

And then there are the Yale cellos. Comprising some 20 cellists, the group is made up of past and present students of Aldo Parisot, who has taught at Yale for the last 40 years. Under his direction, the group will first present an evening concert on 3 May featuring arrangements of well-known works by Corelli, Bach, Popper, Ravel and Joplin, as well as the European premiere of *Simões* by Ezra Laderman. But the highlight of their visit will be a late-night concert scheduled for 5 May at Manchester's Bridgewater Hall, when they will join forces with festival artists, masterclass students and staff and students from the RNCM and Chetham's School of Music to perform one of this year's five festival commissions, *Rapturedeux* by Christopher Rouse. An estimated 150 cellists will take part, an exciting prospect, but one which requires considerable coordination.

'I am always amazed how many eminent cellists keep that time of year free and turn down other engagements in order to participate.'

'Obviously we want to rehearse the work thoroughly as it is new to us all, but finding a time when everyone would be free was extremely difficult,' explains Kirshbaum. 'The only time available was early in the morning, before the masterclasses begin.' Alison Godlee adds: 'We haven't seen the score yet, but I'm told it's in the post!'

Fortunately, the other world premieres of



KEITH SAUNDERS

works commissioned for the festival do not entail this extent of forward planning. The commissions further develop the American theme, with three of the five composers (Christopher Rouse, Mark Neikrug and Robert Stern) being native Americans, while British-born Nicholas Maw and Swiss composer Christophe Neidhöfer are both now resident in the USA. Three of the works will receive their first performances in a concert on 3 May, entitled 'New Horizons'. Cellist Gary Hoffman will perform alongside the composer in Neikrug's *Petrus*, a work jointly commissioned by the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival; Kirshbaum himself will play Neidhöfer's unaccompanied *(S)olo*, commissioned by Pro Helvetia for the festival. Other works in the programme will include Baker's *Singers of song – weavers of dreams* for cello and percussion, to be performed by Karine Georgian and Tristan Fry, while Demenga will play Carter's *Figment for solo cello* and his own composition *New York Honk*.

The fifth festival commission can be heard the following day in one of the popular Young Artist Recitals, when Matt Haimovitz will perform Stern's *Recitative (Yom Teruah)* for solo cello. The Young Artist Recitals were first introduced in 1998 and aimed to provide much-needed performing opportunities for talented young cellists. This year the recitals will encompass works ranging from Schumann, Debussy and Rachmaninov to Ligeti, as well as the European premiere of an arrangement of Piazzolla's *Le Grand Tango* which will be performed by Antonio Lysy with the RNCM string quintet and pianist Simon Parkin. Cellists taking part include Marie Bitloch from France and Alexander Chaushian from Armenia, both of whom were awarded incentive grants following this year's auditions for the Fournier Award. They will share a concert with the 1992 Fournier Award winner, Hannah Roberts, who is now on the teaching staff at the RNCM. She will perform alongside her husband Simon Parkin, one of the many distinguished pianists in this year's line-up. Others include Ian Brown, Martin Roscoe, Kathryn Stott and Carole Presland.

Young cellists can also be heard in masterclasses given by eminent musicians such as János Starker, Georgian, Bengtsson, Tsuyoshi Tsutsumi, Colin Carr, David Geringas, Parisot, Boris Pergamenschikow, Timothy Eddy, Frans Helmerson, Hoffman and of course, Kirshbaum himself. He likens the logistics of these classes to 'a giant chessboard'. Students participating are nominated by the leading conservatories, specialist music schools and the visiting artists themselves. Students are then allowed to list their four preferred teachers as well as a minimum of three works to be studied. It is then Kirshbaum's job to make all the pieces of the jigsaw fit together.

'It's like having guests in my own home. I want to make them welcome.'

One of the more unusual aspects of these sessions is that the listener is able to wander freely between events, since the structure of the building itself provides an ideal framework for the simultaneous programming of diverse activities. There is the added advantage that each of the large rooms opens on to the foyer, where one inevitably encounters former teachers, pupils and friends. Conversation is accompanied by a background of concerto excerpts as students eagerly try out the many instruments on display.

Indeed, the festival provides a rare opportunity for a number of cello and bow makers to exhibit their work to a captive audience. The Strad Cello and Bow Making Competition has proved one of the most interesting ventures and one which has highlighted the work of both established and lesser-known craftsmen. A group of specialists is brought in to assess the entries, and this year's panel will include Charles Beare, Rene Morel, Roger Hargrave, Patrick Robin and Bernard Millant. Two playing judges are invited to perform on the instruments selected for the semi-finals; this year, Maria Kliegel and Raphael Wallfisch.

The remarkable combination of makers, performers, teachers, students and enthusiasts under one roof for such an extended period of time, helps create the unique atmosphere. There is no sense of hierarchy here, only an open interchange of ideas. The ambience is further enhanced by the enthusiastic support of students at the RNCM who not only assist with page-turning and programme-selling, but are also assigned to a particular artist. As well as being on hand to sort out any practical concerns the performer may have, the students have a rare opportunity to get to know leading members of the profession.

Kirshbaum also says that visiting artists always comment on Godlee's warmth and friendliness. 'She has played a fantastic part in the development of the festival,' he adds. 'I feel very comfortable bouncing ideas off her and respect her feedback.' Godlee herself clearly enjoys working with Kirshbaum, and along with her assistant administrators Diane Syddall and Sally Cusworth, describes the group as 'a very happy team'.

In planning the concerts Kirshbaum explains that his role is 'to provide a broad-brush idea; the performers suggest specific works'. This obviously leads to an eclectic choice of repertoire, yet the underlying theme of each festival prevents it from becoming merely a disparate series of events. However, there remains plenty of scope for individuality.

In the 1998 festival Christophe Coin described himself as 'the black sheep of the family', being the only baroque cellist taking part. Coin will return this year to run a workshop on Bach as well as to take part in an unusual performance of the Bach cello suites. Each of the six suites will be performed by a different cellist (Demenga, Natalia Gutman, Eddy, Carr and Anner Bylsma and of course Coin), bringing the festival to a triumphant finale.

Demenga and Bylsma will present workshops on the composer/performer in the 21st century, and Boccherini and Vivaldi. Bernard Greenhouse will focus on Beethoven, Joel Krosnick on contemporary American music, while Laurence Lesser will discuss the development of cello playing in America and Eugene Friesen returns with his innovative improvisation workshops.

As if this were not enough to whet the appetite, an exhibition entitled 'Pau Casals: Music for Living' has been brought over from Spain, along with its curator, for the duration of the festival. Last, but by no means least, the BBC Philharmonic will give two concerts, the first of which will take place on the opening night conducted by János Fürst, and the second at the Bridgewater Hall on 5 May under the baton of Yan Pascal Tortelier. This evening will feature performances of Barber's concerto with soloist Liwei Qin, Bloch's *Schelomo* with Kirshbaum, Dvořák's concerto with Gutman, and a European premiere of a work by Kernis, played by Truls Mørk.

It is remarkable that Kirshbaum manages to juggle the roles of cellist, teacher and organiser during such a prestigious event, but he claims: 'The incredible energy level that is spinning around sustains me! It is a great pleasure to play. Cellists really seem to appreciate the atmosphere of intense concentration and intimacy.' Kirshbaum summarises the very essence of the festival when he says, 'It's like having guests in my own home. I want to make them welcome.' Fortunately there is no guest-list;entry is open to all.

RNCM Manchester International Cello Festival, 2-6 May 2001. Tickets 0161 907 5278/5279, email box.office@rncm.ac.uk

Ralph Kirshbaum

The New York Times

May 27, 2001

147 Cellists in Need of a Repertory

By MICHAEL WHITE

MANCHESTER, England

PUT seven cellists in a room together, and you get a keen debate about the virtues of bent endpins (as opposed to straight ones), gut strings (as opposed to steel) and new developments in pizzicato technique. Put 147 cellists on a stage, and you get "Rapturedux," a piece by the American eclectic Christopher Rouse. (Influences: Bruckner, Berlioz and Led Zeppelin.) And when "Rapturedux" had its premiere here recently, it provided a numerically impressive if sonically impenetrable climax to five days of talking, playing, learning and exposure to a cavalcade of virtuosity that was the Manchester International Cello Festival, directed by Ralph Kirshbaum in its seventh biennial season.

Michael White is a former chief music critic of The Independent in London and a commentator on BBC.

Mr. Kirshbaum, 55, grew up a Texan, as you might suspect from his distinctive performance style: he doesn't so much play his instrument as ride it. But as one of the outstanding cellists of his generation, he is now a citizen of the world, living in England and teaching here at the Royal Northern College of Music, which, largely thanks to his involvement, has become a leading European center for advanced string studies.

As the home of Mr. Kirshbaum's festival, its blandly boxlike 1970's building on the southern fringes of Manchester is beseiged by cellists. Famous, not so famous, young and old, they come in planeloads, generating chaos in hotels and taxi queues with tangled barricades of cello cases. This year, on an average visit to the college cafeteria, you might have found yourself sharing a greasy table with the likes of Truls Mork, Anner Bylsma, Raphael Wallfisch, Boris Pergamenschikow, Natalia Gutman, Gary Hoffman, Christophe Coin, Matt Haimovitz, David Geringas, Janos Starker, Karine Georgian—— The list runs on, including for good measure the cellophile conductor of the Manchester-based BBC Philharmonic: Yan Pascal Tortelier, the son of the master cellist Paul Tortelier.

Keith Hammett

A'do Parisot leading a rehearsal for the recent premiere of Christopher Rouse's "Rapturedux."

In fact, most of the visiting cellists, and certainly most of the music, came from the United States, in response to this year's festival theme, "The American Influence." Hence the Rouse commission, together with others from Marc Neikrug, Robert Stern, Nicholas Maw and Christoph Neidhofer, which all had premieres during the five days. But consider those names, and you'll realize that "American" was broadly defined here to include Europeans with American residence. Mr. Maw was born in England, Mr. Neidhofer in Switzerland. And if there was one story to be told by this festival, it was that of the New World giving house room to the migrant cultures of the Old.

For British audiences, the biggest draw was probably the living legend Mr. Starker, who arrived in the United States from Hungary and France in 1948 and has for the last half-century run the world's most celebrated cello class, at Indiana University. At nearly 77, he remains formidable in both the good and the bad senses of that word. Decades away from Hungary have scarcely softened the staccato of his Central European accent, which accompanies a daunting presence. And in Manchester, after an elegant but cool account of Dohnanyi's "Konzertstück" in the opening concert, he resurfaced the next day for master classes with three plucky students and an audience of the kind you find at horror movies: scared but captivated.

Mr. Starker's master classes are unquestionably scary. While the student plays, the master sits and stares, either impassively or, worse, wiping his face with his hand. Then he speaks, so quietly that the audience can barely hear. He waves aside the offer of a microphone. "If I talk quietly," he says, "you can assume it's not important." Which is no consolation to several hundred people with open note pads, poised to take down every word of wisdom.

But from what we could hear, it was clear that

Continued on Page 25

Mr. Starker's wisdom had little to do with interpretation. Almost all his comments were about technique: about holding the bow lightly ("There is just one rule of bowing: Don't grip"); about extracting maximum tone from full use of the bow ("As Mr. Rostropovich says, 'If you don't use all the bow, why don't you cut the end off?' "); and above all, about posture. "Stand up," he said to one student, who turned out to be the height of several policemen. "I thought so. You're too tall for that stool. Next time, sit on a telephone directory. Maybe two telephone directories." And so it went. This was public teaching of the old school.

But since almost every celebrated cellist in the festival was giving master classes, there were other, less intimidating methods to observe. Like Mr. Kirshbaum's own, which stressed personality and broad musicianship.

He explained in conversation: "I think it's great to watch Janos at work. He's a master analyst, he's spent a lifetime doing it, and it's why at 77 he can still play cleanly. And of course he's right. If a player sits or holds the bow in a patently wrong way, it creates a tension that you have to address. But for me, the mechanics of playing aren't so central. I don't just want my students to play five notes evenly. I want them to make shape, color and nuance in the phrase. And most important, it should be *their* nuance, not mine. I want to help them find that."

One of Mr. Kirshbaum's pupils playing in the festival, the fast-rising young Korean cellist Yoohong Lee, confirmed his point: "Ralph's teaching is holistic. He helps you to find the moment when you know you're making music rather than just playing to an audience, when everything comes into focus. I can't put it into words, but you know that moment when it comes."

Mr. Kirshbaum's own mentor, the veteran Aldo Parisot, who teaches at Yale and the Juilliard School and was (almost needless to say) in Manchester for the festival, talked in similar terms: "Some people analyze, others enjoy. And I know which I'd rather play for. Thank God, professional musicians make up only 2 percent of an average audience."

But at Manchester, the relentless day-and-night turnover of performances was scrutinized by audiences as "professional" as they come. When Mr. Mork, Mr. Geringas and Mr. Hoffman and their colleagues weren't on stage, playing, they were in seats, observing. And with programs like the grand finale, where six star instrumentalists shared the six Bach unaccompanied cello suites among themselves, it was hard not to sense competition creeping into an event conceived as noncompetitive. But not, apparently, for Mr. Kirshbaum.

"Call me naïve, but I really think people come here to celebrate expertise rather than mark it out of 10," he said. "Take the opening concert, something you wouldn't hear anywhere else in the world: five different concertos played by five different cellists, one after the other. Maybe you'd say X played with a good legato, Y with strong attack. But I don't think anyone here is judging X against Y. We're too much friends and colleagues.

Friendship was the festival's great leitmotif. "You couldn't have a gathering like this with violinists or sopranos" was a standard comment: "Too much ego." Cellists, it was generally agreed, do not have ego. Or if they do, it's of a more attractive kind. Cellists, as the official festival T-shirt didn't say but might as well have, are nice people.

"And there's some truth in that," Mr. Kirshbaum said. "When I started playing, at the age of 6, I was attracted to the instrument by its size. I loved the feel of it, the vibration, the warm tone. It's extremely sensuous. And that attracts a certain kind of personality. Not that we aren't driven — cellists have careers like anybody else — but we get on together. Which is why you get cello ensembles. I don't think any other single instrument does that. At least, not in our sort of numbers."

Ah, yes, the 147 cellos. In fact there was a good deal of ensemble playing to be heard in Manchester, mostly provided by Yale Cellos: a group of dazzlingly well disciplined if earnest protégés of Mr. Parisot. They played arrangements of Mussorgsky and Ravel. And frankly, it was a mite kitschy, although Mr. Kirshbaum leapt to their defense.

"O.K., the musical content of these ensemble arrangements may not be illuminating, but the sense of color and phrasing you get from Yale Cellos is fantastic, and you can learn a lot from that, as the players do themselves," he said. "Aldo Parisot is one of *the* great teachers. He's an inspiration to us all."

Happily, the death of national schools of cello playing hasn't meant a loss of personality.

As his pupil, Mr. Kirshbaum would inevitably say so. Cellists have a singular respect for the historic hierarchies of who taught whom, as though it were a priestly laying-on of hands. Someone at Manchester compiled a family tree that mapped the pedigree of every notable performer of the 20th century. It proved a subject of obsessive interest and pride for any who could trace their teacher-pupil lineage back to Feuermann or Piatigorsky or the other cello royalty of the past. And as always, it was interesting to note how many of that royalty, from whichever corner of the world, were drawn to live and work in the United States.

The concentration of great cellists in America has in fact hastened the death of national schools of cello playing in the last few decades. With so many masters from diverse traditions close at hand, students have played the field, stylistically. So it means less and less to talk of a Russian method, a French or a German. What survives is international American eclectic.

But that hasn't also meant the death of personality. To hear, successively, the muscular aggression of Ms. Gutman, the incisive clarity of the superb (American-based) Japanese Tsuyoshi Tsutsumi, the vinous resonance of Mr. Hoffman and the sharp, dark-chocolate tone of Mr. Mork was to hear diversity alive and flourishing. And it's a mark of *how* distinctive individual players are these days that the Manchester program managed to include an hour of standup cello comedy (if that is not a contradiction in terms), with a comedienne impersonating Yo-Yo Ma and Mr. Rostropovich. Recognizably.

Cellists being nice people, the laughter was, of course, affectionate. There seemed to be general agreement at Manchester that Mr. Ma and Mr. Rostropovich were largely responsible for the recent popularity of the cello, as confirmed by several surveys that identify it as the fastest-growing instrumental interest worldwide. Rostropovich eulogies flowed fast and free, not least from Mr. Mork, who describes him as "a dominating infuence in my life."

"The huge dynamic register, the combination of power and control that makes that massive sound," Mr. Mork said, "these were things I was raised on, and they are still, for me, a benchmark."

One other point of agreement was that recent years have seen an increase in the quality as well as the quantity of cellists. Bernard Greenhouse, formerly of the Beaux-Arts Trio, was an early champion of Elliott Carter's demanding Cello Sonata. "It took me three months to come to grips with it," he said. "My students today learn the entire score to performance level in two to three weeks. Things have improved."

The only respect in which things *haven't* improved for cellists — apart from airline traveling arrangements, which remain an endless source of sorry tales — is the solo concerto repertory. It is small and always has been, with just four mainstream Romantic works — the Dvorak, Schumann and Elgar concertos and Tchaikovsky's "Rococo" Variations — that come around persistently, and a second tier of the two Haydn and two Shostakovich concertos, the Walton and the Barber, and Prokofiev's "Sinfonia Concertante," which surface from time to time. "This is where we envy pianists and violinists," Mr. Mork said. "They have so much more that general audiences want to hear: the Mozarts, Beethovens, Rachmaninoffs. If we had all these things——"

I waited for him to tell me cellists would be even nicer people, but he didn't.

"If we had these things, life would be richer." And I think he meant a different kind of richness from the sound of 147 cellists making sonic treacle courtesy of Mr. Rouse. □

Ralph Kirshbaum

The New York Times

July 24, 1994

CLASSICAL MUSIC; An Accidental Cellist Adrift? Don't Believe It for a Moment

By James R. Oestreich

With another artist, you might have dismissed it as a marketing gimmick. With Ralph Kirshbaum, you had to take the experiment seriously, last December, when he applied special stage lighting to his presentation of the Bach cello suites at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, altering the focus and intensity to set a new tone for each work. Though too subtle to be damaging, the effect proved superfluous in the end, and Mr. Kirshbaum seldom lays himself open even to so mild a charge.

"Of the cellists in his age group, he speaks the language of music with the least theatrics," said the venerable Janos Starker of the 48-year-old Mr. Kirshbaum, taking obvious pains not to overstate. "He is probably the most distinguished player of his generation."

The Bach performances were in any case excellent, as may be judged from Mr. Kirshbaum's recording of the six suites, just released on Virgin Classics. And Mr. Kirshbaum can be heard again on Friday and Saturday evenings at the Mostly Mozart Festival in Avery Fisher Hall, playing Haydn's D-major Concerto as part of a weeklong survey of works composed or performed in Vienna during 1784.

Cello aficionados hereabout may hope that this flurry of performances heralds a greater New York presence for Mr. Kirshbaum, who was born in Tyler, Tex., but has lived and thrived in London since 1971. He has performed elsewhere in the United States with some regularity, and he keeps an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Yet he seems disinclined to encourage such hope.

"I've had so little to do with New York through my entire life," he said recently. He was relaxing in the modestly furnished apartment on a quick hop to the city, amid artifacts evoking his wife, Antoinette, and his 5-year-old son, Alexander, whom he had left in London.

"It's been a kind of flirtation throughout my life and career," he continued. "I increasingly enjoy coming to New York as I grow older, as I appreciate more, culturally, what a great city like this has to offer. So it's nice to come back, increasingly as it were."

As it were? So much for the flirtation of the moment. Clearly, there is no grand plan at work, nor has there ever been in Mr. Kirshbaum's career, he insists. In fact this most rational and prudent of musicians makes himself sound at times like an accidental cellist, adrift in benevolent musical seas.

"There definitely are manufactured careers," he explained. "There are people who are very good at that. But it's not my nature in that sense to calculate something to that degree. So I've been very pleasantly surprised by the things that have happened in my career."

He made one move after another, he pointed out, with no particular plan in mind, seizing opportunities as they arose. After earning his degree from Yale, where he worked with Aldo Parisot, he went to Europe for further study. He found his way from Italy to France to England, and simply stayed, as his career blossomed.

"Occasionally I'm asked, of course, 'Why have you stayed so long in Europe?' " he said. "Even now, I don't have an answer for it. Again, it wasn't something by any means that was calculated. When anyone asked me in those first years how long I was going to stay, I would say, 'For the foreseeable future.' It seemed a very safe thing to say. But even in this open-ended view of things, I never imagined that I would be there almost 25 years later."

In 1988, Mr. Kirshbaum founded the Manchester International Cello Festival in England, which has quickly, in four biennial outings, become one of the most prestigious events of its kind. It grew out of a simple scheme to raise money for a memorial award in the name of the French master Pierre Fournier.

"There was a kind of groundswell for the festival that generated a life of its own, and I feel kind of like a midwife," he said. "It's the same theme of my life: it was a happening. There really was no planning ahead of time to do something like this, and I'm almost as fascinated that I'm still doing it as I am that I still live in Great Britain."

But no career of the stature of Mr. Kirshbaum's is founded on passivity, and by now even he seemed amused to hear himself repeating the same formula. So he began to find another, more active thread: "What tends to spur me on is a challenge."

That notion arose as he described his Texas boyhood and his first musical employ: from age 7 or 8, he said, he was the cello teacher in Tyler. It was a case of a prodigious gift well nurtured. Mr. Kirshbaum's father taught music at Tyler Junior College, played violin and founded and conducted the East Texas Symphony, and his mother was a professional harpist. At 4, Mr. Kirshbaum played a small violin, and at 6, in a family rite of passage, he was taken to his father's studio and invited to choose violin, viola or cello for study. His eyes lighted up when he saw the cello, he said, probably because of its sheer size.

"I rather fear that if he had shown me the double bass, I might well have chosen that," he added. "I have a feeling he engineered it, and he wanted me to play the cello, because my eldest brother plays the violin and the middle one a viola, and he needed a cellist for the string quartet."

This concentrated musical upbringing, for which Mr. Kirshbaum is now grateful, had its drawbacks. Like any typical Texas boy, he wanted to be a football hero, and he mildly regrets that he was never allowed to test his vaunted passing arm, which also

happened to be his bowing arm, in the heat of battle.

Mr. Kirshbaum's cautious manner of speech and his tendency to rely on formulas initially suggested that he might have embraced the English penchant for understatement. But when he finally explained that a profound respect for privacy (PRIH-vacy, he pronounced it in one of his frequent Britishisms) was one of England's major attractions to him in the first place, it seemed small wonder that he would treat an intrusive reporter with reticence.

Where his reserve broke down was on the subject of his instrument, a 1729 Montagnana, owned in the last century by the renowned Italian Alfredo Piatti. He loves it for every musical reason, and more. Before purchasing it in New York, he had arranged to try it out on a trip to the United States that began with a visit to Tyler at Christmas of 1972. During that stay, Mr. Kirshbaum's mother died of a stroke, and immediately thereafter, he fulfilled a prior engagement to play the elegiac Elgar Concerto in New Haven, his mother's hometown.

"I got the cello two days before the concert and just played, obviously sorting out a lot of feelings, expressing a lot of emotions and getting to know this cello. A lot of things were happening emotionally at the same time. I decided to buy it, and we've been together ever since. It's very much like a marriage."

Mr. Kirshbaum told of a visit to the great Gregor Piatigorsky, who played one of the Stradivariuses he owned but not the more famous one. When Mr. Kirshbaum asked why, Piatigorsky replied, "It's the one cello in my life that ever had a personality stronger than my own."

Mr. Kirshbaum commented: "A great instrument has a very definite personality. It makes demands on you. And as in a marriage, if you are prepared to be flexible, to compromise, to listen, you actually learn a great deal from your instrument. With a great Italian instrument, you can't really force your will on it. You have to let it breathe. Otherwise there are going to be rows. The instrument will simply balk."

AS FOR THE HAYDN TO BE performed this week, Mr. Kirshbaum said he prefers it to the C-major Concerto even though it is more difficult. Or perhaps because it is more difficult: that challenge, again.

"His Haydn is stylistically wonderful," said Pinchas Zukerman, who conducted a recording of the D-major with Mr. Kirshbaum for future release on BMG. "It is warm but not bland. He doesn't shy away from feeling."

Then Mr. Zukerman, who is, of course, also a violinist and violist, embarked on a quaint tangent: "I always tell cellists that they're upside down and stuck to the floor, so no wonder they go into all kinds of hysterics. But Ralph doesn't. He just plays, and it's terrific."

Disc Reviews

Ralph Kirshbaum

BBC MUSIC

April 2017

CHAMBER

Alice Neary and *Benjamin Frith* bring crisp elegance to Mendelssohn and his intriguing contemporaries; *Fretwork* and *I Fagiolini* prove ideal for the profundity and wit of Peerson; and *The Prince Regent's Band* brings 'velvet tones' to revive music of the once celebrated Distins

BBC MUSIC CHAMBER CHOICE

Wisdom meets Youth

Stephen Johnson admires Kirshbaum and Wosner's artistry in Beethoven

WIT AND HUMOUR: Ralph Kirshbaum taps into Beethoven

BEETHOVEN

Complete Sonatas and Variations
Ralph Kirshbaum (cello), Shai Wosner (piano)
Onyx ONYX 4178 133:32 mins (2 discs)

The thrill of new discovery can be uplifting in a performance; so too can the depth that comes from long experience – especially in repertory like this. Somehow or other, Ralph Kirshbaum and Shai Wosner manage to combine a sense of both. It would be easy to say that Kirshbaum brings the mature wisdom, Wosner (who can't have had so many opportunities to play these works) the relatively youthful freshness. But like everything else in these remarkable accounts, those qualities are shared. Sometimes it's like listening to two people excitedly bouncing ideas off each other; at others it's like a love duet, or even the kind of intense parting conversation in which every word counts to an almost painful degree – the final stages of the slow movement of Op. 102 No. 2 are a breathtaking example of the latter.

Few accounts get so close to the complex truth of this music

Even the relatively slight variation sets sound as though they've been weighed to the last note. But if that suggests heaviness, it couldn't be further from the truth. The wit and childlike humour discovered in, for instance, the *Variations on Mozart's 'Bei Männern'* then feeds back into the Sonatas themselves, and not just the early ones. The transition from the slow movement of Op. 102 No. 2 to the finale (Kirshbaum and Wosner are marvellous at transitions) brings a sudden release – rarely has a late(ish) Beethoven fugue sounded so light of heart. There are more extrovert, more dazzlingly charismatic versions, to be sure, but few that get so close to the complex truth of this music.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

ON THE WEBSITE
Hear extracts from this recording and the rest of this month's choices on the BBC Music Magazine website
www.classical-music.com

Ralph Kirshbaum

theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

March 2017

BEETHOVEN Complete Sonatas and Variations for cello and piano
Ralph Kirshbaum (cello)
Shai Wosner (piano)
ONYX 4178 (2 CDS)

Kirshbaum picks Romantic Beethoven for his 70th-birthday celebration

These discs were recorded in London's Wigmore Hall concurrently with two concerts given there early last year, to mark Ralph Kirshbaum's 70th birthday. Kirshbaum and Wosner first performed their Beethoven cycle in 2014 after six years of preparation and went on to perform the works extensively on concert tours leading up to this recording. Strangely there is no mention of any of this in the booklet, which contains nothing more than programme notes.

It is the rugged, Romantic side of Beethoven that is to the fore in these interpretations. Pure and precise they may not always be – there is the occasional imperfection of intonation, especially on the A string, and a little forcing of tone – but they are full of authentic feeling. From the touchingly hesitant opening of the F major and the heart-on-sleeve emotion of the C major's Tempo d'andante to the forceful aggression in the gritty, biting sforzandos that abound in these works, these are seasoned performances that ring true.

I found Kirshbaum's interpretation of Beethoven's crescendos ending in sudden pianos especially moving – sighs of resignation after moments of hope – and the pair bring a magical sense of calm and stillness to the D major's Adagio con moto, the set's only extended slow movement. The three variation sets, interspersed between the first three sonatas, add a different, lighter perspective and contain much joyful playing, plus impressive virtuosity from Wosner.

The recording, in the warm, intimate Wigmore Hall acoustic, admirably brings out the richness of Kirshbaum's 1729 Montagnana cello and the bright clarity of the piano sound.

JANET BANKS

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GRAMOPHONE
THE CLASSICAL MUSIC MAGAZINE

February 2017

BEETHOVEN Cello Sonatas Nos. 1-5 (complete). Variations

By Harriet Smith

What better way to celebrate an important birthday than with the Beethoven cello sonatas? It's hard to believe that Ralph Kirshbaum is 70 and, certainly in the company of Shai Wosner, these sonatas – recorded last year at London's Wigmore Hall – have an infectious exuberance.

Highlights are many: the opening movement of Op 102 No 1, for instance, which is unerringly paced and nicely balances the muscular and the skittish, and Kirshbaum never less than beautiful in the high-lying writing. Naturalness is a key feature of these readings – a tribute to Kirshbaum's long relationship with the pieces. Just sample the way in which the introductory *Adagio sostenuto* of the First Sonata unfurls before your ears, leading into a playful account of the *Allegro*. They relish equally the bustling rondo that forms the second and final movement.

The minor-key starkness of the Second Sonata is underlined by the fact that they place it after the 'Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen' Variations. This is one of the most compelling things in the set, the slow opening given with due depth of feeling and dramatic light and shade. The following *Allegro* has an understated strength that is very effective. Phillips and Guy are notably quicker here, as they are in the finale of this sonata, while Queyras and Melnikov delight in the subversive, combined with a huge range of colours not quite matched in this new set.

I'm slightly less convinced by Kirshbaum and Wosner in the Third Sonata: few can match the questing spirit of Isserlis and Levin at the start. And their Scherzo is just a little on the deliberate side. But it is in the *Adagio cantabile* that I have most reservations – it simply sounds too ponderous, especially compared to Queyras.

The great slow movement of the final sonata, on the other hand, contains much beautiful playing from Kirshbaum, with Wosner the most empathetic of fellow travellers. The way they link from this movement to the fugal finale, whose opening upward scales are imbued not just with perkiness but elegance too, is another highlight. Of the three variation sets, 'Bei Männern' works particularly well.

As a whole, this is a more 'traditional' approach to the sonatas than the comparisons listed below, but if subversion and reinvention are not top priorities, it's well worth exploring.

Ralph Kirshbaum

theguardian

December 8, 2016

Beethoven: Complete Cello Sonatas and Variations CD review – here's how to make Beethoven's huge structures work

★★★★☆

By Erica Jeal

Here are two musicians a generation apart, feeding off each other's energy. Ralph Kirshbaum and Shai Wosner's long tour of Beethoven's complete works for cello and piano culminated earlier this year at London's Wigmore Hall, where this album was recorded. Wosner keeps the piano line crisp and buoyant; Kirshbaum spins long, broad phrases that look convincingly into the far distance. Together they make Beethoven's huge structures work, but the details can be striking too: listen for the sense of desolation at the end of the Adagio in the first movement of the Sonata No 2, or the way in which the ethereal beginning of No 3 comes gradually into solid focus. In the heavier passages of the earlier sonatas the phrasing can sound laboured, but only fleetingly. All three of Beethoven's sets of variations – two on Mozart, one on Handel – is arguably overkill, but it's good to hear them played with so much life.

Ralph Kirshbaum

Classical MUSIC

January 2017

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Beethoven: Sonatas & Variations for cello & piano

Ralph Kirshbaum (vc), Shai Wosner (pf)

Onyx 4178 (2CD)

Listeners fortunate enough to hear this duo in this repertoire in concert in London recently will know what a treat they are in for. Kirshbaum, 70 years young, is in fine form with distinctive rich-yet-lithe tone and deeply intuitive phrasing. No detail is overlooked, yet each piece is allowed to unfold organically. His partnership with Wosner is inspired, the pianist as refreshingly supple as he is insightful. With excellent recorded sound, this makes a fascinating must-hear alternative to the recent Isserlis-Levin set (Hyperion)

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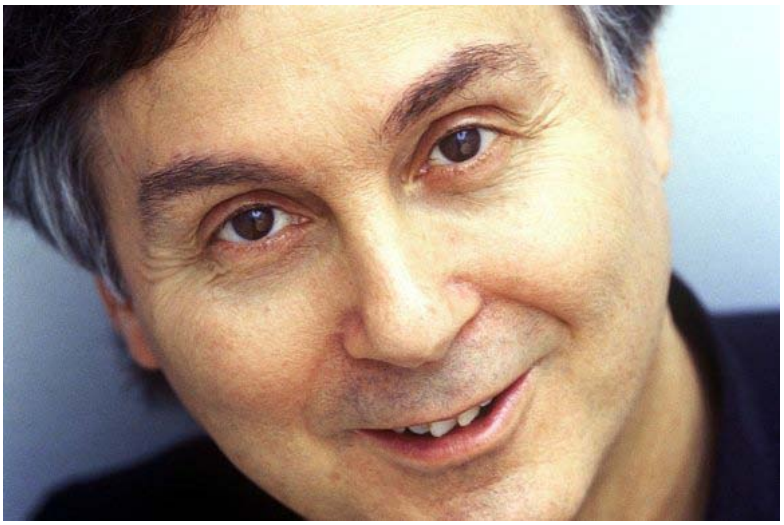
Ralph Kirshbaum

THE SUNDAY TIMES

October 28, 2012

Pick of the week

Schubert — String Quintet D956; String Quartet D703 ('Quartettsatz')
Takacs Quartet, Ralph Kirshbaum



A Schubert quintet from arguable the greatest string quartet before the public today will have been long awaited, and it is characteristic of the Takács that they have held off until now, presumably after many performances with the chosen cellist colleague, Ralph Kirshbaum. The recording — wonderfully vivid and "present" — is all that one expects from the producer, Andrew Keener, and the quality of the playing and musical insights is superlative. Written during the last year of the composer's brief life, this awesome work remained unpublished and unperformed until 22 years after his death — like the "Great" C major Symphony, an "Alpine" peak that none of Shubert's contemporaries dared to climb. Lasting five minutes short of an hour, it remains one of the largest of chamber works, and most dramatic in conception: the ailing composer seems riven with turbulence in the opening allegro ma non troppo and the defiant scherzo, yet calmly serene in the outer section of the sublime adagio. The sonorities the Takács players and Kirshbaum bring to this great music are quasi-orchestral, but they convey the intimate pages of the score in a manner that is both soul-baring and deeply moving. The famous Quartet Movement from an unfinished work in C minor has rarely been delivered with such febrile intensity.

Ralph Kirshbaum

BBC music

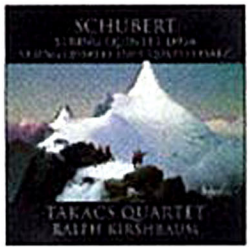
BBC Music Recording news

Christmas 2012

THE OFFICIAL CLASSICAL CHART

The UK's best-selling specialist classical releases

Chart for week ending 3 November



★ NEW

7 Schubert String Quintet
Takács Quartet *Hyperion CDA 67864*

Cellist Ralph Kirshbaum joins the Takács for a recording of Schubert's String Quintet, alongside the quartet's interpretation of the 'Quartettsatz'

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Ralph Kirshbaum

November 5, 2012

Schubert's String Quintet

By Andrew Stewart

Schubert's sublimely melodic, transcendent String Quintet is one of the cornerstones of the classical repertoire. Andrew Stewart is enchanted by the Takács Quartet's new recording of the work.

Label: Hyperion

Rating: ★★★★★

This ranks among the best of the best

While Beethoven pushed at the limits of human achievement in his late chamber compositions, Schubert found fresh things to say about self-expression in his. The Quintet for strings, completed within six weeks of the Viennese composer's early death in 1828, combines surface beauty with deep insights into the fleeting nature of feelings and thoughts. It also contains two of the most intense meditations in the history of western music, in the Adagio and the trio (middle section) of the third movement, prolonged passages of utter stillness and arresting calm. If that's not enough to hook newcomers, Schubert touches the heart with an unbroken stream of sublime melodies and sensuous sounds from his inventive combinations of two violins, one viola and two cellos.

The Takács Quartet, in company with cellist Ralph Kirshbaum, realise an emotionally rich interpretation of the work, one that is passionately in tune with the score's creative vitality. These performers revel in every dramatic and expressive contrast in Schubert's writing. They treat his melodic lines like wordless songs, finding a persuasive character for each and blending their colours and gestures within the bigger picture of the work's musical argument. What lasts long in the memory is the impression of music being made in the moment, with full attention by the full ensemble, to every note as it unfolds. Nothing here sounds lifeless or undervalued. There are well over 70 recordings of the Schubert Quintet in the book. This one, coupled with a majestic performance of the 'Quartettsatz' (Quartet Movement) of 1820, ranks among the best of the best.

Ralph Kirshbaum

Positive Feedback ISSUE 53
january/february 2011

pf music REVIEWS

Notes of an Amateur: David Matthews; Music@Menlo 2010

By Bob Neill

Music@Menlo Live 2010, 1-8. Maps and Legends. www.musicatmenlo.org

It's January, so it must be Music@Menlo time again! A 'live' chamber music festival in a box for those of us in the provinces without access to such a richness. Still run by cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han, who are also co-direct the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Still engineered by deserving "Six time Grammy winning" Da-Hong Seetto. Still performed by an audibly top-notch roster of professional musicians, some with familiar names (to me), some newcomers. This music, as always, was performed and recorded in the summer preceding release.

Festivals must, it seems, have themes: thoughtful listeners will make the connections here without the program notes, though as always they are germane and well written. The Paris in the Twenties CD, Volume 5, is especially successful in this respect.

This is the eighth annual Music@Menlo festival and set of releases and I gladly own them all. I save them for cold snowy/rainy weekends in front of the wood stove and just feed the CD's in one after the other letting the musicians

have at me. Because the individual CD's amount to recital programs, listening is a good deal less 'studied' than usual for those who tend to listen to one composer at a time. You can get individual CD's or all eight, at the festival website: www.musicatmenlo.org, where individual program details are spelled out.

One of the most surprising performances is of Vivaldi's Four Seasons on Disc 1, in which the solo violin part is passed among Erin Keefe, Ani Kavafian, Philip Setzer, and Jan Swenson. We've all heard many versions of this great chestnut, but I'll have to say this is the freshest one I've heard in years. Forgive me, but it really is like hearing it for the first time, perhaps in part because of how distinct each of the soloists is. Whatever the reason, this Four Seasons breaks free of our expectations and truly lives—on modern instruments for a nice change. For me, this performance is the highlight of the festival. The Disc 1 program concludes with a (literally) stunning performance of George Crumb's Music for a Summer Night, dancing far out toward the periphery of music but still in sight of Vivaldi. I doubt most of us have heard this work since the old Nonesuch LP.

Other highlights: Meeting new Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen on Disc 8 playing a program of themes and variations by Mozart, Grieg, Handel, Brahms, and Couperin.

Brahms' String Sextet No. 2 on Disc 3, played by Erin Keefe, Joria Fleezanis violins; Lily Francis and John Largess, violas; and Ralph Kirshbaum and David Finckel, cellos combines richness of tone and clarity of articulation in one of the best Brahms performances I've heard.

The Miro Quartet's characteristic tight as a drum style takes enough of the varnish off Elgar's Piano Quintet, Opus 84 on Disc 2 that even Benjamin Britten, whose little Charm of Lullibies is also on the disc, might have enjoyed it. Inon Barnaton joins the Miros forcefully on piano in the Elgar. I'm no more a fan of the old British gentleman than Britten was, but the clarity and power displayed here gave me second thoughts, as good performances often will. Romanticism's last passionate moment on the stage. This kind of performance is precisely what the Menlo festival is for.

Listening to or watching the nineteenth century turn into the twentieth in the arts can be a fascinating business, in music especially so if the musicians really get it. Alessio Bax, piano; Arnaud Sussman, violin; and Laurence Lesser, cello, really get it in Ravel's Piano Trio on Disc 6. This work is interesting because it is transitional, speaking a musical language that is both traditional and new, but it's also engaging because it has an emotional life independent of its role in music history. The musicians capture sophistication and irony along with power and passion, the latter something that performances of this music often miss. We recognize the complex mood as the one we have lived in since the arrival of modern times. It speaks to us in a more direct and immediate way than pre-modern music can. This is easily the best performance of Ravel's Trio I've ever heard. This disc also introduces us to the Jupiter Quartet, who play another famous transitional work, Debussy's String Quartet.

There's much more music in this set than I can touch on here. If you've enjoyed this series in the past, have no fear. The festival's still going strong.

Ralph Kirshbaum

allmusic

March 2007

Shostakovich, Prokofiev: Cello Sonatas

by James Leonard

Review

Cellist Mischa Maisky has a big tone. Cellist Mstislav Rostropovich has an even bigger tone. But cellist Ralph Kirshbaum has the biggest tone of all. Indeed, the sheer density and intensity of his tone seem too massive to be coming from a mere cello -- if one didn't know better, one might swear he was playing a bass. And yet, as he shows in these breathtaking performances of Prokofiev and Shostakovich's cello sonatas with an encore by Rachmaninov, Kirshbaum has dexterity as well as density -- listen to him negotiate the thorniest passages in the Prokofiev with utmost ease -- and virtuosity as well as intensity -- listen to him tackle the fastest pages in the Shostakovich with ineffable grace. In fact, there seems to be nothing Kirshbaum can't do -- listen to him sustain the long line in Rachmaninov's Vocalise -- and nothing he can't express -- listen to him articulate the ambiguous mix of affirmation and resignation in Prokofiev's Sonata. Ably supported by pianist Peter Jablonski whose debut recording of Shostakovich's First Piano Concerto on Decca is still fondly recalled by the piece's many fans, Kirshbaum turns in a recording that while it may not be a first choice -- there are the canonical recordings of the Prokofiev by Rostropovich and Richter and of the Shostakovich by Rostropovich and Shostakovich -- will still amply reward those who already know the music. Altara's sound is sometimes a bit too distant, sometimes a bit too close, but, somehow, always very present.

Ralph Kirshbaum

THE BUFFALO NEWS

December 10, 2004

Bach

Unaccompanied Violin Sonatas and Partitas and Cello Suites performed by violinist Christian Tetzlaff and cellist Ralph Kirshbaum

[Virgin Classics]

Both ★★★★

Very little in the world of music connects to Kepler's harmony of the spheres as does Bach's music for unaccompanied string instruments. It's a kind of religious music for all religions — music that somehow seems to proclaim the holiness of the human place in the universe, even if you're an atheist. All the great cellists and violinists record them — often, like the great cellist Janos Starker, many times over the course of a lifetime. Here are some extraordinary ones.

Starker's magnificent first recording of them — newly released in Super Audio (compatible on ordinary stereos) is from the early '60s. Though he recorded them again often, these performances of the greatest music ever written for the cello will last anyone a lifetime.

Quietly spectacular though is the four disc Virgin Classics box that puts together great contemporary performances of the Unaccompanied Violin Sonatas and Partitas and Cello Suites by performers who, despite a lack of general name recognition, are as good in this music as you will ever hear — 28-year-old German violinist Christian Tetzlaff and 58-year-old Texas cellist Ralph Kirshbaum. The disc notes are admittedly skimpy but otherwise this box may be an ideal way to become acquainted with some of the greatest solo music ever written for nonkeyboard instruments.

—Jeff Simon

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Ralph Kirshbaum

Fanfare

The Magazine for Serious Record Collectors
November/December 1994 • Volume 18, Number 2

BACH: *Six Suites for Solo Cello.* Ralph Kirshbaum, cello. VIRGIN 7243 5 45086 2 2 [DDD]; two discs: 66:56, 73:48. Produced by Andrew Keener.

Suites: No. 1 in G, BWV 1007; No. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1008; No. 3 in C, BWV 1009; No. 4 in Eb, BWV 1010; No. 5 in C Minor, BWV 1011; No. 6 in D, BWV 1012.

This recording represents an outstanding achievement for Ralph Kirshbaum. True, he does not offer any ground-breaking or idiosyncratic interpretations, but his playing is still thoughtful and subtle. The recording quality is lush; there is tremendous resonance in the lower register. Kirshbaum gets to show off a huge range of tone colors and articulations, of course—these suites are nothing if not études for cello—but there is one quality that unites his readings of these very individual works, and I would call it elegance, a beautiful smoothness and depth of tone that are dropped only as a special effect. Kirshbaum's playing is tasteful—no Romantic lingering or sentimentality—but it is not the least bit aloof. His musical choices always seem sound: the right tempo; the right amount of *rubato* in the right place, just enough to make a note or phrase speak but not enough to destroy the prevailing meter; rhythmic and dynamic gestures used to clarify the counterpoint implicit in Bach's solo writing. Technically, Kirshbaum is completely secure with this challenging music, which speaks clearly and comfortably even in the fleetest passagework or the highest register. (Incidentally, he does not retune the top string from A to G in No. 5, as Bach requests.) His command of overall form in the larger movements, like those in the great C-Minor and D-Major Suites, is also impressive: he makes satisfying dramas where Bach has written only successions of notes. His ornamentation is discreet. He adds little beyond what is notated, and then usually only at cadences; he tends not to use ornaments to characterize a mood or melody. Kirshbaum's goal was obviously to present these suites as naturally as possible, with a minimum of fuss, and yet with great vitality and depth of expression. He has done so. You can't go wrong using these performances to gain insight into this great music. Highly recommended. **Kevin Bazzana**

Ralph Kirshbaum

The New York Times

Solo Flights in a Flock of Bach

By ALLAN KOZINN

BACH'S SUITES FOR UNACCOMpanied cello live an almost unnatural double life in modern times. Although there are daredevils who play the complete set in concert (several have done so in recent New York seasons), most cellists play one suite on a program, surrounded by works in different styles. Indeed, Bach might have looked askance at anyone willing either to play or to hear all six works in a sitting or two.

But on recordings, resistance to the compendium approach is largely futile. The medium imposes the expectation that works of a feather will flock together, concert hall esthetics notwithstanding. Besides, the suites fit handily on two CD's and make powerful calling cards for cellists. And there's a machismo issue. Barring extenuating circumstances, a recording that offers only selections from the series is tacitly regarded as an installment toward a complete traversal or a sign that the musician who made it is an eccentric or a wimp.

This approach puts a strain on cellists' imaginations, which is not necessarily a bad thing. As remarkably varied as these suites are once one looks into them, they are similar in their externals. And however fondly one regards the sound of the cello, it can become monotonous in the two and a quarter hours it takes to play the suites. The challenge for a cellist, therefore, is to magnify the variety Bach wrote into the set.

Two American cellists, Ralph Kirshbaum and Nathaniel Rosen, now add their thoughts on the suites to a discography that is hardly lacking in weighty competition. Both recordings are flawed in ways that keep them from displacing any in a handful of personal favorites, a list that includes

J. Henry Fair

Ralph Kirshbaum—Sonic lushness and personalized phrasing are his priorities.

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versions by Yo-Yo Ma on Sony (irresistible for its ear-caressing tone and semi-Romantic drama), Pablo Casals on EMI (unbeatable for its patrician elegance), Anner Bylsma on Pro Arte (a vigorous period-instrument account) and Misha Maisky on Deutsche Grammophon (an iconoclastic view).

Still, each performance has compelling aspects, and there are marked differences between them. Mr. Kirshbaum (Virgin Classics 7243 5 45086; two CD's) stakes his claim

Two American cellists present their calling cards: very different and often compelling sets of the unaccompanied suites by Bach.

in the ground between Mr. Bylsma and Mr. Ma. Baroque style is clearly in view, but sonic lushness and a personalized shaping of phrases are the real priorities. Mr. Kirshbaum adds few novel embellishments, but those, and the ornaments in the score, are smartly and cleanly executed.

Especially pleasing is the variety of his responses to Bach's scoring. In the preludes of the First and Fifth Suites, for example, chords are played with an impressive solidity; elsewhere they are rolled. In some suites Mr. Kirshbaum gives the courantes an almost staccato bounce, but he plays others (that of the Fifth Suite, for instance) with a dark intensity. The illusion of independent contrapuntal voices is a consistent attraction in the fast movements, which at their best (the Prelude and Gigue of the Sixth Suite) are electrifying. And the sarabandes are lingered over with a touching warmth.

Virgin's recording captures the weight and variety of Mr. Kirshbaum's tone and surrounds it in an appealing ambiance. Yet the clarity of the sound is a double-edged sword, for along with the enlivening nuances of Mr. Kirshbaum's readings, the microphones caught and magnified his breathing, which parallels the music in intensity. At normal volume, it is merely a raspy overlay; crank up the level, and you may think (as I did on a first listening) that someone is gasping for air in the next room. What a pity that something so extraneous should diminish the pleasure these fine performances give.

Mr. Rosen's recording (John Marks JMR 6/7; two CD's), which puts the cello in a more distant perspective, presents no such problem. But hearing the two side by side, one misses here the focus, heft and sheer beauty of Mr. Kirshbaum's sound.

Mr. Rosen takes a fundamentally different approach. His tone is spartan, even acidic at times. But he does offer occasional touches of portamento and broad shifts in coloration, articulation and balance when these effects yield a dramatic point.

Mr. Rosen's interpretations are daring and free-spirited, an approach that is evident nearly from the start. In the Allemande of the First Suite he adopts a remarkably fluid approach to tempo and dynamics, liberties he takes to greater (and more effective) extremes in the Prelude of the Third Suite. He tends to exaggerate the contrasts between the first and second in each pair of minuets, bourrées or gavottes. And if his sarabandes are rarely as sweet as Mr. Kirshbaum's, and his gigues sometimes seem oddly weighty, there is something persuasive about the broad strokes in which he paints.

For all they have to offer, though, both of these sets fail a significant test. All the older recordings mentioned above — particularly Mr. Ma's — draw the listener in so com-

THE NEW YORK TIMES

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 1995

Ralph Kirshbaum

THE TIMES

SATURDAY JULY 16 1994

Hilary Finch

■Bach
Six Cello Suites
Ralph Kirshbaum
Virgin Classics S 45086 2 ***

THERE are more than 20 complete recordings of Bach's Cello Suites currently in the catalogue, and of all those I have reviewed in recent years, few have given me as much pleasure as these new performances by Ralph Kirshbaum.

This is light, airborne playing, sometimes understated, always free of point-making and cliché, and always quick to remember that this music springs from dance. Kirshbaum's bow dances on its points in the courante movements: in the Third Suite, its zinging impetus frisks between one rhythmic formation and another with such high mischief that I immediately wanted to hear it all over again.

Unlike the violin sonatas and partitas, the Cello Suites live in the element of melody rather than counterpoint or even implied harmony. Kirshbaum's opening prelude to the very first suite is acutely aware of this: its gentle, undulating wave movement sets the tone for so much of what is to follow. Within this easy flow of melody he creates an extraordinary subtlety and variety of articulation. Solemn sarabandes are drawn in finely-graded, broad charcoal lines, gigues spring along with taut, concentrated energy.

Kirshbaum's sophistication is never effete. The contained quality of the final gigues may lead the ear to expect certain *préciosité* in bourrée or minuet. Far from it. The vigorous clasticity of rhythm in these dances in the Third Suite, the mischief in their contrasts of pitch and dynamics, are matched by a brilliance of movement throughout the Sixth Suite, its high voice ringing out and its courante moving at the speed of bright white light.

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Reviews

Ralph Kirshbaum

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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A Cello Brigadoon in Los Angeles

The Piatigorsky International Cello Festival collected a healthy clutch of great cellists and their acolytes, giving equal time to master classes and intimate recitals.

By David Mermelstein

Giovanni Sollima

Cellists of the world unite! That could easily have been the motto of the second quadrennial Piatigorsky International Cello Festival, which ran here from May 13 through 22, primarily at the University of Southern California. The festival, which collected a healthy clutch of great cellists and their acolytes, is the brainchild of Ralph Kirshbaum, a noted, Texas-born soloist who has taught at USC since 2008. These gatherings began in 1988, when Mr. Kirshbaum was teaching in Manchester, England, and when he returned to the U.S. he brought the festival with him—rechristening it to honor the celebrated Russian (later American) cellist Gregor Piatigorsky, a dominant force in classical music in the middle decades of the 20th century. (In his later years, Piatigorsky assumed a teaching position at USC, and Mr. Kirshbaum now occupies the chair named for him.)

Unlike most music festivals, which are dominated by large concerts, this one gives equal time to master classes and intimate recitals, and places some 40 promising young cellists (called fellows) in close proximity to established artists. This year, 26 "international artists" of varying celebrity were on hand—13 returning to the festival and 13 new to it. And though Yo-Yo Ma made only a brief appearance, in a recital at the nearby Walt Disney Concert Hall on May 15, most of the other big names (well, big in the cello world, anyway) remained longer, teaching and appearing on multiple programs.

The atmosphere was decidedly insular, yet nonprofessionals were welcome to attend (all events were open to the public). Some

programs, like those on the opening weekend involving the Los Angeles Philharmonic at Disney Hall, were clearly geared toward mass appeal, with each concert featuring a different cello concerto and soloist: Ernest Bloch's "Schelomo" (Mr. Kirshbaum), Elgar's Cello Concerto (the Norwegian Truls Mørk), and Bohuslav Martinů's Cello Concerto No. 1 (the Argentinean Sol Gabetta). The Martinů, a beguiling hodgepodge of influences, was new to the Philharmonic's repertory, and Ms. Gabetta winningly managed its many undulations. But Mr. Mørk's anguished account of the usually rhapsodic Elgar Concerto lingered most in the memory.

This past Saturday, a reduced contingent of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra entered the fold, joining four esteemed cellists in five little-known Baroque concertos at USC's Bovard Auditorium. There were no dull moments, as each soloist revealed individual strengths, but Giovanni Sollima—uncommonly animated even for an Italian—was by far the most demonstrative, wielding his bow like a cutlass in a work by Leonardo Leo. (On Thursday, Mr. Sollima led an improvisation workshop for the fellows in which the rudiments of Baroque music suddenly morphed into Nirvana's "All Apologies.")

The concert's hero, though, was Jean-Guihen Queyras, age 49, who played music by Giovanni Platti and C.P.E. Bach with glowing tone and enviable élan. Born in Montreal and raised in Algeria and France, Mr. Queyras was an object of fascination at the 2012 festival, and time has only enhanced his allure, making his master class *de rigueur*for aspiring artists. He also gave one of the two most impressive performances on the festival's final program, on Sunday night (the 37th event in 10 days), which featured Beethoven's complete piano-and-cello music—five sonatas and three sets of variations—the spoils distributed among eight cellists and five pianists. Mr. Queyras and Jeffrey Kahane concluded the concert with a vigorous but supremely tasteful reading of the Sonata in D (Op. 102, No. 2), marked by subtle rhythmic inflection and moments of profundity. The evening's other high point came from the Englishman Colin Carr and Bernadene Blaha, who delivered an exciting and lyrical account of the Sonata in A major (Op. 69), with Mr. Carr's glinting sound and stylish phrasing amplifying the work's merits.

Yet to focus on individual achievement, however laudable, may be to miss the festival's larger point: its accumulation of talent and adventure in a fixed spot for a limited time—a cello Brigadoon, if you will. Comparing, say, Thomas Demenga, a Swiss of uncommon grace and probity, with David Geringas, a fierce and magnetic Lithuanian who studied under Mstislav Rostropovich, is to risk diminishing their abundant individual merits. And, indeed, to see both in performance at the festival (each also gave a master class) is to realize that the cello can easily accommodate a wealth of approaches. Some musical verities are unarguable, but the rest are subject to acts of persuasion. Mr. Kirshbaum's festival afforded cellists and other music lovers the chance to consider many things—repertory, interpretation, pedagogy. Drawing conclusions was optional.

Ralph Kirshbaum

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CELLO NATION

The Piatigorsky Festival, in Los Angeles.

By Alex Ross

A hundred cellists gathered at Disney Hall for an Anna Clyne première
.ILLUSTRATION BY GUIDO SCARABOTTOLO

"I wish I'd studied the cello" was a common lament among the crowds at the Piatigorsky International Cello Festival, which drew a hundred cellists to Los Angeles in the middle of May. I said it myself, recalling tense childhood negotiations with the oboe. Outsiders like to think that the cello, the most uncannily human-sounding of instruments (it approximates a vocal range from low male to high female), would provide limitless companionship

and consolation. We imagine ourselves playing Bach as dusk descends, savoring pensive joys and sweet sorrows. That the fantasy is unrealistic in the extreme—a regal contralto timbre arises only from a combination of freakish talent and thousands of hours of labor—hardly detracts from the vicarious pleasure of watching a master cellist give public shape to a private world.

The cello is a relative latecomer on the concert platform, having achieved true star status only in the nineteenth century. Its autumnal voice seduced the Romantics: the pioneering concerto is Schumann's, which begins not with a heroic display but with a great meandering rumination. At the start of the twentieth century, Pablo Casals brought Bach's suites to a wide public, and an even deeper well of gravitas opened. In part because of Casals's moral force as a foe of Fascism and nuclear arms, the cello took on an oracular accent, an aura at once beatific and brooding. Mstislav Rostropovich played a similar role during the Cold War, and Yo-Yo Ma now carries on this tradition of public citizenship, his presence almost mandatory at scenes of global disaster.

Yet the Piatigorsky Festival—a ten-day affair, divided between the University of Southern California and Disney Hall—was not the place to muse on the cello's reputation for solemnity. A try-anything atmosphere prevailed, with a hint of late-night collegiate shenanigans sneaking in. Cellists sang, shouted, and banged gongs during performances. The renegade Italian cellist-composer Giovanni Sollima led exercises in improvisation, from Baroque styles to avant-garde noise-making. The repertory ran the gamut from Gesualdo (the SAKURA cello quintet arranged his madrigals) to Radiohead (Matt Haimovitz and Christopher O'Riley played the band's "Pyramid Song"). The festival seemed intent on maximizing that familiar sense of the cello's humanness: in every imaginable way, the instrument became a proxy for the person behind it.

The festival is named for Gregor Piatigorsky, the golden-toned, big-hearted Russian virtuoso, who moved to L.A. in 1949 and later took a position teaching at U.S.C. The Piatigorsky chair at U.S.C.'s Thornton School of Music is now held by the veteran American cellist Ralph Kirshbaum, who launched the festival, a quadrennial event, partly to create a meeting place for touring musicians whose paths seldom intersect. This year, he enticed twenty-five of his colleagues to perform and conduct master classes, alongside several dozen student fellows. Like some other sectors of classical music, the cello world suffers from a gender imbalance; only two of the lead players were women, and neither gave a master class. It would have been much healthier to have female voices sharing in the handing down of edicts.

Telling differences emerged as the festival went on. Sometimes these echoed the old national schools of cello playing: the pristine tone and smooth legato of the French school, exemplified by Pierre Fournier; the flexible precision of the German school, associated with Emanuel Feuermann; the booming resonance of the Russian school, embodied by Rostropovich. These labels have long been of limited usefulness, but a given player often leans in one direction or another. Ma, for example, has a tinge of Frenchness, as he showed in a recital at Disney Hall, giving a silken sheen to the Shostakovich Sonata in D Minor. By contrast, Mischa Maisky, who studied with both Rostropovich and Piatigorsky, gave a startlingly violent reading of the Britten Sonata in C, infusing it with the bite and fury that Ma had omitted from the Shostakovich.

Above all, the question is how a proficient player can become a distinctive one. At one master class, the Swiss cellist and composer Thomas Demenga, a musician of piercing intelligence who appears rarely in this country, cross-examined Coleman Itzkoff, a graduate student of Kirshbaum's at U.S.C. Itzkoff essayed the Prelude of Bach's Fifth Suite,

exhibiting a flawless technique and keen musicality. As Demenga pointed out, the interpretation was “shall we say, a bit Romantic”—sanding away the sharper corners of Bach’s language. Demenga wanted more naturalness, more grit. “Don’t be afraid to play these notes too harshly,” he said at one point. When a low C appeared beneath an upper line, he urged, “Don’t connect!”—he wanted the voices kept separate instead of integrated into a single flowing line. He asked for one held note to rise and fall in volume like a ball thrown in the air. After forty-five minutes, Itzkoff had emerged with a more idiosyncratic, articulate reading.

That same day, Laurence Lesser, a Piatigorsky pupil who serves as the cello sage at the New England Conservatory, advised Annie Jacobs-Perkins, another Kirshbaum protégée, on Martinů’s Second Sonata. Jacobs-Perkins delivered the desolate Largo with hypnotic lyricism, causing listeners to forget where they were for a moment. Lesser made a technical suggestion, asking her to bow more evenly across the first falling phrase. He also pushed her to give the entire opening melody an archlike shape, so that it sang toward a climax, then subsided. Some people in the audience may have wondered why Lesser was tinkering with an already gorgeous rendition, but he offered a credo: “When someone plays as beautifully as you do, it’s easy for me to be fussy, because no matter how far we are there’s always more.”

The sonic spectacular of the festival was a gathering of a hundred cellists at Disney Hall, with Kirshbaum and his colleagues filling the front rows of the orchestra. The young conductor-composer Matthew Aucoin led the première of Anna Clyne’s “Threads & Traces,” for the full ensemble. Clyne’s score maintained soft dynamics, and the ensemble shimmered with harmonics and fragmentary modal melodies. Anyone who felt deprived of maximum noise could take satisfaction in the heaving chant of Villa-Lobos’s “Bachianas Brasileiras No. 1.”

There was much else to celebrate in the series. The young Argentine cellist Sol Gabetta was sinewy and sonorous in Martinů’s First Concerto—one of three concerto performances with Leonard Slatkin and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Zuill Bailey slalomed furiously through Piatigorsky’s Variations on a Paganini Theme, which contains parodic portraits of fellow-musicians, including Jascha Heifetz on a high-register tear. David Geringas gave an exacting, elevated account of Sofia Gubaidulina’s “Canticle of the Sun.” (This was the piece in which the cellist doubled on gong.) On the final night, eight cellists joined forces to play Beethoven’s complete works for cello and piano, capturing different sides of the Master’s personality: Demenga brought intellectual mischief to the Sonata Opus 102 No. 1; Jean-Guihen Queyras relished the cantilena of Opus 102 No. 2; and Colin Carr animated every turn of the great Sonata Opus 69.

The performance that will stay longest in my mind, though, was of the Elgar concerto, with the Norwegian cellist Truls Mørk. No player at the festival produced a handsomer tone: Mørk had the benefit of a magnificent instrument, a 1723 Domenico Montagnana, and he made it sing with unforced splendor, his expansive, Russian-inflected bowing and vibrato insuring that quiet passages floated into the far reaches of the hall. As an interpreter, Mørk avoided the noble-minded protocol—the high-school-graduation tread—that is too common in Elgar. Unmannered rubato gave a sense of moment-to-moment improvisation, of a halting search for honest expression. What emerged was a monologue set against a landscape of shadows: the cellist as Shakespearean actor, uneasy with the crown of power.

Ralph Kirshbaum
musicalamerica
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Cello Love-in at the Piatigorsky International Festival

By Thomas May

LOS ANGELES—"Of all the titles applied to me, I like 'teacher' best of all," the cellist Gregor Piatigorsky once said. And of the many angles that might be used to describe the festival devoted to his instrument and named in his honor, the most salient is a passion for sharing knowledge—not just musical knowledge, but the wisdom gathered from a life devoted to performance. More than anything else, the Piatigorsky International Cello Festival, which took place in Los Angeles between May 13 and 22, became an ode to omnivorous curiosity as the lifeblood of genuine musicianship.

That eagerness to expand understanding of the cello was equally apparent among the international roster of renowned cello soloists and the emerging artists they taught in master classes. It also informed the programming choices for the busy schedule of recitals, chamber programs, and concert events, which juxtaposed familiar repertoire with an intriguing range of rarely encountered works. (A total of some 90 pieces was performed throughout the course of the festival.)

Mostly anchored on the University of Southern California campus near downtown Los Angeles (with a few excursions to Walt Disney Concert Hall), this was the second edition of what has to date been a quadrennial festival since Ralph Kirshbaum launched it in 2012 — four years in the planning each time, beginning with his arrival at the USC Thornton School of Music in 2008 to fill the Piatigorsky Chair in Violoncello. (Born in Russia, Piatigorsky eventually settled in California and taught at USC until his death in 1976.) In addition to being one of the leading mentors in the field, the Texas-born Kirshbaum has enjoyed a distinguished solo career and was among the 26 eminent cellists from around the world who performed during the ten-day festival.

"It struck me that so many students knew the names of great cellists teaching around the world but had never encountered them," Kirshbaum—who turned a youthful 70 in March—said in an interview midway through the festival. "So I wondered, what if they were all able to gather together under one roof and bump into each other every day and just ask whatever was on their mind?"

He was describing the earlier incarnation of the idea he would import to USC: the Manchester International Cello Festival, which Kirshbaum founded in 1988 and led through 2007. "Young cellists could then have a basis for making a decision about who to study with. A lot of marriages were made."

As a sort of extended introduction, the opening weekend (which I was unable to attend) included three concerts "off campus" with Leonard Slatkin conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic, each featuring a different cello concerto (with soloists Kirshbaum, Truls Mørk, and Sol Gabetta), a recital with Yo-Yo Ma, and a gala concert with choreography and visuals at USC. It was Slatkin, as it happens, who conducted the premiere of another major new cello commission in January with the Detroit Symphony: *Desert Sorrows* by Mohammed Fairouz. The cello's allure for a composer today was described to me at the time by Fairouz: "Both mystical and visceral, the cello constantly pushes my writing hand in directions previously unknown to me." That appeal was everywhere apparent among those who have devoted — and who hope to devote — their lives to perfecting their connection to the cello.

A series of intermissionless afternoon recitals and quintet concerts in the early evening that featured the Calder Quartet and selected cello soloists was held in the intimate Alfred Newman Recital Hall. These events ensured plenty of close-up exposure to varying philosophies and styles of how to construct a program. Robert deMaine (May 16), principal cellist of the LA Philharmonic, was one of several standouts, eloquently introducing his varied

menu of Hindemith and Gaspar Cassadó, a student of Casals, as well as a handful of captivating Études-Caprices penned by deMaine himself. Later in the week, Israeli cellist Amit Peled (May 21) brought along one of Casals's own cellos to an unusual program that included *La Suite dels Ocells*, a new piece by Lera Auerbach that riffs off the legend of Casals. The festival boasted plenty of such undercurrents and cross-connections.

Kirshbaum also emphasized what he was determined for the festival *not* to be. "Competitions have their place in musical life," he said, but the atmosphere these rites of passage tend to encourage is antithetical to the festival's spirit of shared discovery. "Of course we all have egos as musicians, but cellists leave their egos to the side here."

That observation rang true especially during one of the Disney Hall concerts (May 17), when the "star" cellists joined forces with scores of other musicians to form a vast orchestra of cellos for the first of Heitor Villa-Lobos's *Bachianas brasileiras* (109 cellos total, we were told) and for the world premiere of Anna Clyne's *Threads & Traces* (106 cellos), commissioned by the LA Philharmonic for the festival.

Brief but potent, Clyne's piece balanced novel sonorities with an arrestingly archaic flavor. Here and in the Villa-Lobos, the sea of cellos plausibly replicated the fullness of a string orchestra, plush but cleanly textured in density. This was the culmination of a steady expansion of forces throughout the evening: the Emerson Quartet joined by Kirshbaum began with a luminous account of Schubert's late-period Quintet in C major, and the cello quintet SAKURA with seven guests presented *Twelve Angry Men*, a fitfully narrative piece Brett Dean originally wrote for the Twelve Cellists of the Berlin Philharmonic.

It was easy to imagine the thrill for a young cellist to have this opportunity to play alongside the likes of Truls Mørk, Colin Carr, and David Geringas in the impromptu cello orchestra. And the in-depth encounters that took place across the festival's 12 master classes were filled with stimulating moments that will likely be replayed over a lifetime, with the kind of fondness evident in a panel discussion with Piatigorsky's own former students.

Moderated by radio host Gail Eichenthal, the panel featured four cellists — Lawrence Lesser, Mischa Maisky, Jeffrey Solow, and Raphael Wallfisch — who collectively drafted an impressionistic sketch of their legendary mentor's sophisticated humanism and life-affirming wit. The most enduring lesson they absorbed had nothing to do with technique — all pointedly recalled Piatigorsky's notorious distaste for practicing — but centered around his endless hunger to learn more.

"These master classes are at the heart of what the festival is all about," Kirshbaum pointed out. About three dozen young artists had been chosen to participate in the festival as "Fellows" after being recommended by teachers around the world, each receiving one-on-one attention during a master class segment. Certain nuggets of wisdom shaped up as recurrent leitmotifs: "Would it be possible to play *not* so beautifully?" "Make the music sound like it *has* to be that way." Pointers ranged from physical interaction with the instrument, the implications of bowing gestures, and how to interact with the audience, to psychological observations about the importance of giving up the desire for control of every aspect of a performance.

Through a pithy choice of examples in his master class, Swiss cellist and composer Thomas Demenga underscored the inexhaustible interpretive potential of Bach's Cello Suites. The Lithuanian virtuoso David Geringas entertained like a stand-up comic while doling out profound aphorisms about the musical thinking of Prokofiev and Schumann.

It was also fascinating to compare performances by these acclaimed cellists with their insights as teachers. Mørk offered a deeply memorable interpretation of his compatriot Grieg's Cello Sonata (May 22), which, during his class the next day, he likened to the constant changeability of Norwegian weather. During two evening concerts at USC's handsome Bovard Auditorium (May 18 and 19), Geringas gifted the audience with some of the most adventurous music-making in a festival that set the bar very high indeed. His rendition of Schnittke's Cello Sonata No. 1 opened an entire new vista on the instrument following the first half of a program in which the Argentine phenomenon Sol Gabetta had enthralled with her Chopin. Sofia Gubaidulina's *Canticle of the Sun* transformed the imposing Geringas into a shaman who continually pressed up against the extreme barriers of his instrument in an effort to communicate the ineffable.

The Gubaidulina carried forward a dimension of theatricality that reappeared throughout the week and that was inherent in the styles of certain soloists, such as the charismatic Sicilian

Giovanni Sollima. His afternoon workshop with the Fellows on improvisation became a joyful excursion into the vitality of Baroque patterns, later illuminating his performance of an obscure concerto by the transitional composer Leonardo Leo (1694-1744) during a concert with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra (May 21). Sollima and three of his colleagues took turns leading the LACO from the soloist chair. Jean-Guihen Queyras, also known as a member of the Arcanto Quartet, compressed several master classes' worth of acumen into his delectably varied and elegant interpretations of concertos by Giovanni Platti and C.P.E. Bach.

As the climax of this lovefest for the cello, the final event was a marathon concert at Bovard Auditorium presenting all of Beethoven's works for solo cello (May 22). Eight different cellists (and five pianists) took their place on stage in succession to perform the five sonatas and three sets of variations.

Here another liberating lesson was put into practice: the amplitude of perspectives that the great works at the center of the repertoire can contain. Thomas Demenga turned the C Major Sonata No. 4 into a daring avant-garde study, while Colin Carr offered one of the most thoroughly satisfying performances of the entire festival with his richly characterful Op. 69 Sonata.

Including the variation sets proved excessive amid an embarrassment of riches, but in the final minutes, Queyras generated such an exciting charge with the concluding fugato section of the Sonata No. 5 that the epiphanies stretching across the festival seemed to flash at once before ears and eyes — all in a gloriously polyphonic fabric.

There's no space to do justice to the numerous other splendid performances and noble attempts heard in the festival, let alone to the many other musicians — particularly at the keyboard, in performances and master classes alike — whose contributions were essential. But being in the limelight was hardly the point of the whole enterprise. As the Piatigorsky Festival's founder Kirshbaum remarked: "When I started out, people talked about the dearth of cello repertoire. We've given the lie to that. This is a celebration of the many ways this instrument continues to inspire us."

Ralph Kirshbaum

Los Angeles Times

May 24, 2016

109 cellos and one obsession in Walt Disney Concert Hall

By Mark Swed

Cellist Mischa Maisky performs Beethoven Sonata Opus 102, No. 1, at USC's Bovard Auditorium on Sunday in the closing concert of the International Piatigorsky Festival.

Before a concert at Walt Disney Concert Hall last week, I stopped at the Colburn School across the street for a quick salad. Every outdoor table of the café was crowded with a dozen or more animated teenagers dressed in black for a performance. Tall cello cases took up the remaining space. The young cellists barely paid attention to their sandwiches and chips or showed the slightest evidence of stage fright.

They seemed, instead, consumed by the cello the way other compulsive teens might be by comics or rap or sports or Snapchat. The 10-day Piatigorsky International Cello Festival, which ended with two sumptuous cello marathons over the weekend, was for them.

The official tally of cellos on the Disney stage was 109, gathered for the premiere of Anna Clyne's "Threads & Traces," a Los Angeles Philharmonic commission for the occasion. The kids, whether tall or short, whatever their gender, nationality or race, seemed pretty much alike. They showed the intent seriousness of, say, a tyro equestrian subsumed in the all-encompassing effort of mastery.

The young musicians were joined in the Mass Cello Ensemble by several noted soloists, elders who, on the other hand,

revealed vivid personalities. Even regimented in this cello mob, each was a mentor having a ball.

The festival was founded at USC by Ralph Kirshbaum in honor of Gregor Piatigorsky, one of the 20th century's most celebrated cellists and a larger-than-life personality. Like the inaugural festival four years ago, this second version included a boot-camp-like concentration of master classes, concerts and all-around cello camaraderie.

Such camaraderie among musicians is hardly uncommon. Next week, the International Trumpet Guild is holding a five-day conference at the Hyatt Regency Orange County, which will include a lecture concert on Thai composers and nearly 50 trumpets tackling the Triumphal March from "Aida." The trumpeter's last day, June 4, is the first of the monthlong SongFest training program for singers at the Colburn School.

I was not able this year to make the daytime public master classes or many of the recitals, where the transformation from cello geek to artist begins. And though the trumpeters in Garden Grove and the vocalists at Colburn will surely seem like different beasts in some ways, with their individual musical neuroses, my guess is that the master classes may not be very different.

The massed cello evening was, of course, all about the cello, but it was also about more than the cello. The massed cello evening was, of course, all about the cello — and even that was about more than the cello. The program began with Kirshbaum joining theEmerson String Quartet for Schubert's Quintet in C, one of the great glories of chamber music. But neither he nor the Emerson's cellist, Paul Watkins, dominated in this stately and gracious performance the way Mstislav Rostropovich and the Emerson's former cellist, David Finckel, did in the quartet's effusive 1992 recording of the score.

Brett Dean's "Twelve Angry Men" for a dozen cellists (three here were women) offered a nicely contentious contrast in a performance lead by Sakura, a feisty ensemble of young cellists who studied with Kirshbaum. Clyne's massed cello score is not contentious. She quietly threads melodic lines, as though fearing a violent herd mentality. Matthew Aucoin, who conducted, then let the 109 rip in Villa-Lobos' "Bachianas Brasileiras No. 1," which was basically what everyone had been waiting for.

The concluding marathon concerts Saturday and Sunday in USC's Bovard Auditorium were designed to best show several of the festival's soloists' individuality. However much the cello was once more the center of things, what was most interesting was how pliable the instrument proved.

The Saturday night program was part of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra's Baroque Conversations series, with the cello soloists also conducting baroque concertos. Jean-Guihen Queyras began the evening with an obscurity, Concerto in D Major by Giovanni Platti, which at its best sounded like a Michael Nyman film score and at its most bland like a thousand other Baroque concertos.

Queyras' vivid chamber music approach, which was later spectacular in a C.P.E. Bach, stood in contrast to Thomas Demenga's more inflowing, understated manner in a Boccherini concerto. But the great comparison was between Colin Carr's cautious Vivaldi and Giovanni Sollima's flamboyance in Leonardo Leo's Concert No. 3 in D Minor.

It was hard to separate the Sicilian cellist, who is also a fanciful composer and improviser, and the obscure Neapolitan composer. Who could tell how much of this little-known score was Leo and how much Sollima? He led the LACO strings on an emotional roller coaster, asking for every gesture to be a matter of emotional life and death, and then he showed them how on his instrument. Whatever it was, it was fabulous.

The festival's closing gala turned into a three-hour-plus traversal of Beethoven's music for cello and piano, the five sonatas and three sets of variations. With eight cellists, there were eight different approaches.

The late Opus 102 sonatas were handled with sophisticated elegance by Demenga (with pianist Bernadene Blaha) in the first and sophisticated flair by Queyras (with pianist Jeffrey Kahane). Carr (also with Blaha) was far more dramatic in the Opus 69 sonata than he had been in Vivaldi the

night before. In the early Opus 5, No. 1, Ronald Leonard (with pianist Kevin Fitz-Gerald) was restrained. In Opus 5, No.2, Mischa Maisky was not.

A flashy figure who is often partnered with Martha Argerich, Maisky is a flamboyant free spirit. Here his pianist was Lily Maisky, a penetrating and percussive pianist who came across as a daughter doing everything she could to keep her father from being embarrassing. She did, and brilliantly, in a riveting performance with a huge amount of perfectly contained excitement.

The variations are of lesser interest, but Laurence Lesser, Andrew Shulman and Matt Haimovitz covered the spectrum from measured to unfettered.

There are more role models than these, especially with a young generation of fearlessly passionate experimenters, such as Séverine Ballon, whose solo Monday Evening Concerts recital in March was a fearless display of cello physicality. But perhaps the festival's most important lesson to the young obsessives, and one true to Piatigorsky's legacy, is that as much as the cello may be the center of a great cellist's life, for musicians to express life, they have to live.

Ralph Kirshbaum

Manchester Evening News

September 24, 2015

Manchester Chamber Concerts Society at the Royal Northern College of Music review

By Robert Beale

There's nothing quite like the autumnal glow of Brahms's late chamber works to warm the heart, and they were a timely part of the opening concert in Manchester Chamber Concerts Society's 79th annual season.

It was a delight, too, to have the society's artistic director, Martin Roscoe, himself appearing on the opening bill, in a piano trio with clarinettist James Campbell and cellist Ralph Kirshbaum.

Brahms was balanced with Beethoven in their programme, opening with the latter's Clarinet Trio in B flat op. 11.

It began with perfect manners on all sides, self-effacement almost the order of the day, which is probably Martin Roscoe's trademark as a musician as much as anyone's (and to be admired).

But that didn't detract from the music's impact, and when it came to the slow movement both clarinet and cello brought pure magic to the restful melody that leads it.

Canadian James Campbell is an amazing player – poised, unaffected and eloquent, and Ralph Kirshbaum is still a favourite with Manchester music-lovers after his long association with the RNCM here in the past.

His singing tone in the upper register of the cello is something you don't easily forget: we heard it to best advantage in the other Beethoven piece, his Cello Sonata in A major op. 69. That had a touch of manic quality in its scherzo and wonderfully positive ending.

The Brahms works were the second Clarinet Sonata of op. 120, tender and captivatingly lyrical in James Campbell's rendering, with a finely judged shade of passion at the highpoint of its finale, and the Trio in A minor for clarinet, cello and piano, which ended the evening.

It's a little gem of nostalgic writing (one of the last things he created), and this interpretation captured its atmosphere to the full, with gracefulness and mellow expression sustained through to the end.

The MCCS's programmes continue this autumn with the Escher String Quartet (October 12) and a recital by tenor James Gilchrist (November 9), before Nicholas Daniel and the Britten Oboe Quartet appear on December 9.

Ralph Kirshbaum

The New York Times

March 16, 2012

California Concerts, Awash in Cellists

Piatigorsky International Cello Festival at Walt Disney Concert Hall

By James R. Oestreich

Ralph Kirshbaum performing with the Los Angeles Philharmonic at Walt Disney Concert Hall.

LOS ANGELES — On its face, the Los Angeles Philharmonic's subscription concert at Walt Disney Concert Hall on Thursday evening might have seemed routine. The program, conducted by Neeme Jarvi, followed an old formula — overture, concerto, symphony — and the repertory was familiar: Dvorak's "Carnival" Overture and his Cello Concerto, with Ralph Kirshbaum as soloist, followed by Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony.

But far from being routine, the program called further attention to a new vitality in the classical music scene of Los Angeles, for the related concerts this weekend will be transformed, sandwiching different cello works and soloists between the overture and the symphony.

Saturday night Mischa Maisky will play Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto and a transcription of a Tchaikovsky aria; Sunday afternoon Alisa Weilerstein will play Tchaikovsky's "Variations on a Rococo Theme" and Respighi's "Adagio con Variazioni."

Los Angeles, it seems, is awash in cellists at the moment, and if Mr. Kirshbaum was crowded out of those concerts, he has only himself to blame. The occasion is the firstPiatigorsky International Cello Festival, which Mr. Kirshbaum organized to succeed a series of cello festivals he founded in Manchester, England, in 1988 and directed until 2007.

The Texas-born Mr. Kirshbaum, 66, who taught at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester for 35 years, took over the Gregor Piatigorsky chair in cello at the Thornton School of Music of the University of Southern California in 2008, a distant successor to that old cello wizard himself, who died in 1976.

Mr. Kirshbaum relocated to the United States in 2010 and has now inaugurated the festival as an outgrowth of both his English festivals and the longstanding Piatigorsky seminars that became part of his new charge.

Never one to hog the spotlight, and undoubtedly swamped with logistical difficulties, Mr. Kirshbaum is playing relatively little at the festival, which began on March 9 and ends on Sunday.

Though a persuasive champion of Bach's unaccompanied cello suites, he turned them over to six other players last Sunday. But he took on the choice Dvorak assignment as a sort of centerpiece and pulled it off with aplomb.

"Of the cellists of his age group," his elder colleague Janos Starker once said of Mr. Kirshbaum, "he speaks the language of music with the least theatrics."

Listeners used to having cellists try to overpower them with the Dvorak concerto's bravura proclamations, or dazzle them with its virtuosic flights, found something different: a cellist with a warm, well-centered tone trying to make the best musical sense of the whole. Bravura and virtuosity were all in place, to be sure, but were well integrated into a reading perhaps more compelling for its lyrical and thoughtful moments.

And to judge from the clamorous ovation Mr. Kirshbaum received, he had drawn the audience into complete sympathy with his more intimate approach.

Here, surely, was a place for a movement of Bach as an encore that none of today's young lions would have missed, but that is not the kind of artist Mr. Kirshbaum is. He had done justice to Dvorak, and that was enough of a night's work.

For a belated first-time visitor to Disney Concert Hall (which opened in 2003), the evening held other fascinations. From the splashy opening of "Carnival" to the hammering ending of the Shostakovich symphony, the hall showed an ability to yield bright, reverberant sonorities in wide-ranging dynamics and an equal ability to blend and contain them.

The most impressive sounds in some ways were the quietest. Midway through the Largo, Shostakovich breaks out of a clamor with quiet tremolos in the violins that sounded subdued and distant, yet so vital that they seemed to emanate from the walls.

This was sustained through beautifully played solos on oboe (by Ariana Ghez), clarinet (Michele Zukovsky) and flute (David Buck). The violins finally grew even quieter, as the merest thread of sound behind the celesta (Joanne Pearce Martin).

The stunning effect spoke well for the ability of the veteran maestro Mr. Jarvi and the players to trust one another, and for the ability of the hall to deliver the faintest of sounds. Here was a level of mystery and atmosphere that was never quite achieved in the Boston Symphony Orchestra's performance of the work at Carnegie Hall last week.

The Piatigorsky International Cello Festival runs through Sunday at various locations in Los Angeles; piatigorskyfestival.com.

Ralph Kirshbaum

The Herald

October 29, 2012

SCO, city halls, Glasgow

By Michael Tumelty

It's almost incredible that it's 16 years since an amazing Eroica Symphony with the SCO in Glasgow set the SCO management off in hot pursuit of Joseph Swensen for principal conductor, a post he held for nine years.

Now, as conductor emeritus, he still has the old dynamism, which he and the orchestra demonstrated on Friday night in an exhilarating account of Schumann's Third Symphony, The Rhenish, that was as full-bodied and red-blooded as it was suave and expressive.

It was one of those SCO accounts, with supreme playing from the expanded horn section, woodwind, brass and super-alert strings, that again raised the issue of Schumann the Outsider; Schumann the individualist, the man apart, and the Romantic composer without parallel. The symphony, with a slightly augmented SCO in full flight, was a provocative stimulus to thought: was Schumann, in fact unique, and not just another Romantic composer? Did anyone ever say anything quite as Schumann did?

Indeed you could argue a similar case for Samuel Barber, the American who eschewed European trends and pursued his American inclinations in his Cello Concerto, magnificently portrayed in a decisive, supremely confident performance on Friday night by cellist Ralph Kirshbaum, whose playing projected the mercurial character of the music, with the soul of the piece in its ravishing slow movement, set against the totally volatile nature of the finale, mind-blowingly played by the SCO. Kirshbaum is a master of the difficult concerto, and his intense, solo Bach encore was precisely the balm required.

A fine concert, prefaced by tellingly intimate playing of two extracts from Walton's glorious music for Henry V.

Ralph Kirshbaum

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

November 21, 2011

Symphony review: Cellist taps passion in concerto

By Larry Lapidus

Ralph Kirshbaum, distinguished cellist and educator, came to Spokane to perform with the Spokane Symphony Orchestra. It was a gift that few in the audience Saturday night, who had slipped and skidded their way over icy roads to the Martin Woldson Theatre at the Fox, will soon forget.

The evening was made more memorable by the surprising role Kirshbaum played as soloist in the beloved cello concerto of Antonin Dvorak.

After delivering a virtuosic performance of Zoltan Kodaly's delightful "Dances of Galanta," conductor Eckart Preu launched the opening of the Dvorak concerto. It proceeded beautifully, if a bit deliberately.

Note values were exactly observed, phrases were uniform and precise. Everything pointed to a performance of Olympian detachment and refinement. Until Kirshbaum spoke up.

The voice that rose from his Montagnana cello was not that of a sophisticated virtuoso, but rather the voice of humanity itself, in all its passion, longing and suffering. His opening flourish confronted the orchestra rather than joining it, and so it continued through the first movement; the orchestra would thunder with massive weight, or cajole with instrumental solos of serene beauty, while the cello spoke of passionate yearning.

Kirshbaum achieved this by varying color and intensity through his mastery of bowing. Familiar passages leapt to life, taking on new meaning and importance. Phrases were never distorted, but neither were they played metronomically.

Through accent and inflection, Kirshbaum spoke with individuality of the longing for love and for a distant homeland that animates the concerto.

As the piece developed through its second and third movements, Kirshbaum's passion and impetuosity seemed to spread through the orchestra. Dvorak's orchestration highlights the woodwinds, and the playing of Chip Phillips (clarinet), Bruce Bodden (flute) and Keith Thomas (oboe) spoke with growing poignancy.

In Dvorak's final movement, a folk-inspired rondo, the orchestra burned with the same fire as the soloist, alternately celebrating life and longing for the joys it withholds.

The First Symphony of Brahms followed, and if there was any fear of an anticlimax after the emotional high of the Dvorak, it was swept away by the power of Preu's conception and the magnificent playing of the orchestra.

The differences were dramatic between this interpretation and the one the symphony presented only three years ago. While that performance was open and airy, this one was passionately emotional.

The very sound of the orchestra was transformed.

The violins, in particular, played with much greater intensity and richness of tone, reflecting the growth in power, suppleness and confidence in that section over the past several years.

Preu maintains this symphony is Brahms' expression of his love for Clara Schumann, whose idealizing presence is represented by the haunting horn call in the last movement.

Here one must single out not only the fine playing of Jennifer Scriggins Brummett, principal horn, but the entire horn section, which displayed power and beauty of tone.

Whether Preu's romantic scenario accounts for the searing intensity of the performance we cannot know. The shouts of "Bravo" and thundering applause, however, proved its success.

Ralph Kirshbaum

THE DENVER POST

April 12, 2010

CSO's guest conductor makes himself at home with Dvorák

by Sabine Kortals

As principal guest conductor of the Colorado Symphony Orchestra, Douglas Boyd has long held the respect and favor of musicians and concertgoers. In Friday's concert at Boettcher Concert Hall, he proved himself a soundscape artist of utmost distinction.

Allowing sounds to unfold seemingly on their own, he led the CSO to its finest performance in recent memory in Antonin Dvorák's Symphony No. 9 in E minor ("From the New World"). The exhilarating, four-movement work bears Dvorák's Czech musical signature, yet freely references a range of American musical idioms that resonate emotionally.

With clarity and confidence, Boyd fashioned a unified musical experience that married rhythmic and technical prowess with heartfelt sentiment. CSO musicians responded to his interpretation with conviction, delivering especially strong performances from the horns, clarinets, bassoons and strings into the martial final movement that brought the audience to its feet.

The program opened with the CSO's debut performance of Jean Sibelius' incidental music for Maurice Maeterlinck's tragic play, "Pelleas et Melisande." Boyd successfully conveyed the poignant symbolism of a sad and sensual love story. The strings delivered a consistently rich, resounding sonority. And English horn player Jason Lichtenwalter displayed superb musicianship.

Centerpiece of the evening was Texas-born cellist Ralph Kirshbaum in a virtuosic reading of Dmitri Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major, Op. 107. With finesse and forcefulness, Kirshbaum owned the thorny work, not once shying away from its velocity and many modulations.

Especially notable was the extended cadenza movement. Kirshbaum adroitly recalled themes from the first two movements and brought to light the pensive, punctuated character of the work, as well as its escalating intensity.

Ralph Kirshbaum

theStrad

VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

February 2010

CONCERTS / REVIEWS

Ralph Kirshbaum (cello)
Peter Jablonski (piano)
WIGMORE HALL, LONDON 5 NOVEMBER 2009

In this substantial and challenging recital, Ralph Kirshbaum delivered a programme featuring composers who, in their own time, were considered pioneering. Of course those who are groundbreakers don't always fall on smooth ground, Webern being an obvious case in point. Even today's audiences sometimes remain puzzled by this composer's intensity of thought, although both Kirshbaum and Peter Jablonski were clear and expressive in the Three Little Pieces.


Lucid Lutoslawski from Ralph Kirshbaum

J. HENRY FAIR

Kirshbaum is invariably excellent in Beethoven, and the composer's 'Ein Mädchen' Variations were addressed with customary detail, every gesture forming an essential part of the dramatic text. Likewise, Kirshbaum demonstrated an innate feeling for the fervent lyrical writing in Chopin's Cello Sonata. The strong rustic element in its scherzo was vividly drawn, while the sumptuous tones of his 'Piatti' Montagnana cello breathed life into the searing melodies of the opening movement. For all the tremendous emotional depths he found in the Shostakovich Sonata, where even the burlesque in the scherzo was lent a furious twist, it was the Lutoslawski Grave that proved the triumph of the programme. In this relatively short written-out accelerando, constructed upon limited intervals, there is a surprisingly wide range of timbre and emotion, elements seized upon by these seasoned artists in their lucid and highly charged interpretation.

JOANNE TALBOT

The Cap Times
Your Progressive Voice

November 21, 2009

MSO plays with fiery Russian fate and high drama

By Lindsay Christians

Cellist Ralph Kirshbaum plays "Schelomo" by Bloch and "Silent Woods" by Antonín Dvořák with the Madison Symphony Orchestra Nov. 20-22. Courtesy of the Madison Symphony Orchestra

High drama marked the Madison Symphony Orchestra's program Friday night, which featured all the drops and giddy heights found in a great roller coaster.

John DeMain opened the program with Ottorino Respighi's lighthearted, pastoral Fountains of Rome, an ode to the sculptures in what MSO music historian J. Michael Allsen calls "the eternal city."

The delicate opening seemed to approach from far away, tentative as the players eased into the piece. Textures in the strings were lush and lovely; one could almost hear the running water.

A blast of brass and a flurry of winds sounded like children splashing in the ancient fountains. Huge low notes in the organ vibrated over and around the players; later the sunset movement captured a contemplative tone with mellow bells.

Guest cellist Ralph Kirshbaum, a renowned performer and teacher, opened Ernest Bloch's theatrical "Schelomo" with a wrenching, mournful tune. With swooning dynamics, Kirshbaum pulled phrases out of his instrument like strands of yarn.

(I immediately noticed the beauty of his cello -- according to some brief research, it's called the "Piatti" cello and it was built in 1729.)

Kirshbaum's a masterful artist, notable for his expressiveness. In the "Schelomo," soloing over a menacing background from strings and brass, he breathed into each line as though the instrument was an extension of his body.

Kirshbaum responded to audience enthusiasm with two encores, one listed in the program: "Silent Woods," by Antonín Dvorák; the other a Sarabande from Bach's

third cello suite. The first was like a slow ballet, with a luxurious and lyrical feel.

The latter, long and smooth with hints of a folk melody, allowed Kirshbaum to showcase his considerable skills as a musical colorist. It sounded like the musical equivalent of burnished bronze.

DeMain closed the program with Tchaikovsky's fifth symphony, which the MSO last played in 2003. Allsen explained in the program that the symphony treats the composer's "resigned, even relaxed ... relationship with Fate."

The opening bassoon and clarinet solos were low and silky, setting a dark tone that exploded into more passionate, fiery passages later in the Allegro con anima. The fate theme became clear as the music marched on.

Tchaikovsky swelled the drama in the Andante cantabile, con alcuna licenza. The MSO's playing was cinematic, and Jason Haaheim's timpani hits made me jump. The Valse: Allegro moderato took on the balletic character so familiar from the composer's holiday classic, with rapid swirling strings and a triumphant tone.

In the later movements of the Tchaikovsky, some players sounded out of step. The sound got muddy. But those are minor quibbles in what was otherwise an exuberant performance, as delightful as a thrill ride but immeasurably more moving.

Ralph Kirshbaum
The Sydney Morning Herald

April 14, 2008

Brahms's 'Fifth' taken on energetic outing

by Peter McCallum

Sydney Symphony Paul Daniel, Opera House, April 11

The Sydney Symphony successfully promoted this concert as Brahms's "Fifth Symphony" (Brahms wrote only four) though, in fact, the work in question - a dark and rewarding orchestration by Arnold Schoenberg of Brahms's Piano Quartet in G minor, Opus 25 - would be better labelled Brahms's Noughth Symphony since the quartet (1861) preceded Brahms's first symphony by 15 years.

By a happy coincidence, the Australia Ensemble performed the original version only a few weeks ago and those who had that spirited, gutsy performance still ringing in their ears could not have helped admiring the way Schoenberg had rebalanced the original's virtuosic piano part (absent from Schoenberg's orchestration) among the instruments. Most striking is the moment in the Gypsy Rondo finale where a piano cadenza spirals down from sinister clarinet to cellos and double basses in a gesture that would not be markedly mis-dressed in the gnarled expressionism of Schoenberg's own *Pierrot Lunaire*. The detail of Schoenberg's orchestration is unfailingly interesting. No passage is repeated with the same colours; the textures in the first three movements are carefully weighted with woodwind and burbling brass to give them substance and serious outline; while the finale gives way more to the modern technicolour noise of percussion and trombone slides. The conductor Paul Daniel, the chief conductor-elect of the West Australian Symphony Orchestra, energised and disciplined the orchestra, like a tall and amiable leader on a hike where no bush, tree or distant slope escapes being pointed out.

Before this, we had had the opportunity to hear the deep richness of Ralph Kirshbaum playing his Montagnana cello, which would have been pleasurable enough in *Bah, Bah, Black Sheep*, but which found an apt foil in the ruminative meandering lines of Bloch's Hebraic Rhapsody, *Schelomo*. Each part of the range seems to have its own beauty: intensity tinged with colour and tartness in the upper register and velvety richness of unimaginable depth in mid and lower notes. There is much more to Kirshbaum's playing than sound, however: he follows lines and builds their shape with imagination and musical intelligence. Dvorak's fairytale tone poem, *The Noon Witch*, opened the program with brighter, less subtle colours.

Ralph Kirshbaum

The New York Sun

October 17, 2007

A Blanket Of Rich Sound

Classical Music

by Fred Kirshnit

With Alice Tully Hall undergoing renovations, several local classical groups have shifted their performances to the Society for Ethical Culture, a sacerdotal building just down the block from the renovation site. One of these ensembles is the granddaddy of them all, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, which presented a very fine program of Romantic Russian music on Sunday afternoon.

Modest Mussorgsky collaborated with his roommate and distant relative Count Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov on two dark cycles of songs — Sunless, and Songs and Dances of Death, the second of which was offered on Sunday. Accounts vary as to whether the composer wanted to expand the latter grouping, but there is little doubt that he had plans to orchestrate it (there are indeed several orchestrations, but these were all fashioned after Mussorgsky's untimely death). In their basso and piano version — they are also sung by contralto — these thanatological masterpieces were ably presented by Morris Robinson and pianist Ken Noda.

The hall is designed in an odd configuration for sound, in that it is approximately as wide as it is deep. As it is coupled with a cupola-type ceiling that dominates over only two stories, finding the right spot for ideal listening can be tricky. But there was little concern when Mr. Robinson intoned his phrases, as his rich, resonant depth surrounded those of us in the balcony like a warm blanket during a frigid night on the steppes.

Mr. Robinson had the measure of these songs and hit all of his notes in their exact center, exhibiting no strain whatsoever. The tessitura here is quite subterranean, and most versions, especially live ones, can appear labored and unnatural. Mr. Robinson's gift is his ability to phrase smoothly even in the roughest of passages. Although I am spoiled for these particular aural vignettes because of the tremendous artistry of Polish contralto Ewa Podles, I was quite impressed with this current rendition, an impressive pairing of a confident and rousing singer with a descriptive, dexterous, and suitably self-effacing pianist. Now that Mr. Robinson has conquered these depths, he can work on moving to the next level: imbuing his realizations with more character-laden narrative. No stranger to the opera house, he has consistently shown the talent to portray a given

personality. There is much rich material here that he has yet to explore.

Along with the popular Piano Trio of Pyotr Tchaikovsky, the Lincoln Center players presented a true rarity. Anton Arensky studied with Rimsky-Korsakov (who didn't?) and was one of a motley crew of students who composed pieces on the death of Tchaikovsky. Arensky's work is a string quartet, but with a difference. The foursome — Ian Swensen, violin, Paul Neubauer, viola, and Julie Albers and Ralph Kirshbaum, cellos — achieved an extremely pleasing string blend from the outset. Having two cellos instead of a pair of violins made for some gorgeous vibration, and much of the work itself shows promise.

The middle set of variations on a theme of Tchaikovsky was a tad soporific, but the outer movements were exhilarating and bracing. The first movement relies heavily on folk themes, while the last begins very similarly to one of the movements of the 13th quartet of Beethoven and quickly quotes from that famous Russian theme "Slava," which, in a muddle of geographical styles, most of us associate with the second of the Rasumovsky quartets of the Bonn master.

The work as a whole was recommended to the society by Mstislav Rostropovich, coincidently nicknamed Slava, and so codirector Wu Han dedicated this performance to his memory. The four participants honored that memory profoundly with exceptional musicianship.

Ralph Kirshbaum

December 5, 2007

Vanbrugh Quartet/ Kirshbaum

MAGNIFICENT programme planning and superb playing made the latest recital by RTE Vanbrugh String Quartet one that will long remain in the memory. The first half of the programme comprised three short quartets by Irish composers born in 1933, 1958, and 1967, each with a distinct musical voice.

Seoirse Bodley's String Quartet No.4 represented what I have always hoped this exceptional musician would produce – superbly organized, imaginative, accessible music which synthesises his natural lyricism and experimentalism. The music is colourful, harmonically and contrapuntally interesting, and it completely captivated.

Ronan Guilfoyle's Music for String Quartet commanded attention from the outset. Well written for the medium, it contains several distince ideas that, on a first hearing, did not seem to be convincingly worked out. It is a piece I would like to hear again and again, though.

Deirdre Gribbin's Merrow Song is among the most intriguing, imaginative pieces I have heard. Superbly realized colours bring the listener into a world beneath the waves in music that grabs the attention.

One may hear a clinically exact performance of Schubert's Cello Quintet in C major on CD. It is unlikely, though, that it could match the intense emotion the Vanbrugh created with Ralph Kirshbaum. This brilliant US cellist brought a new dimension to the second cello part – but the whole performance was quite unforgettable.

KIRSHBAUM
ASSOCIATES INC.
711 WEST END AVENUE SUITE 5KN NEW YORK NY 10025 (212) 222-4843 TEL (212) 222-7321 FAX WWW.KIRSHBAUMASSOCIATES.COM

Ralph Kirshbaum

The Gazette

November 15, 2007

An Evening of Subtle Sounds

by Arthur Kaptainis

The replacement of Hindemith's Symphonic Metamorphoses by Schubert's Unfinished Symphony turned this week's MSO program into a stylistically uniform tribute to Austro-German classics of the 19th century. Happily, the orchestra is not itself monochromatic, so the results, last night in Place des Arts, managed to overcome my grumpiness over the unexplained switcheroo.

Our conductor was Marek Janowski, an old-school European who values transparency, order, balance and other values that do not necessarily make headlines. Brahms's Haydn Variations came across as the colourful masterpiece it is. Not to mention a good vehicle for what continues to strike me as one of the best woodwind units in the business.

Next came Schumann's Cello Concerto, a dark and interior work that can seem rambling in the wrong hands. Ralph Kirshbaum, a Manchester-based American making his MSO debut, applied a sweet tone to the melodies and articulated the technical passages with an exuberance that made them speak. The finale included a solo cadenza possibly by Emanuel Feuermann, modified somewhat by Kirshbaum himself. Or so I am told!

Schubert started the second half. The famous second subject in the cellos, so easy to overplay, sounded like a whispered confession. Yannick Nézet-Ségin, who led the other orchestra through this score in September, gave us more in the way of craggy expression, but this thoughtful version was admirable in its way.

Conducting from memory, Janowski demanded moderation from the brass. They were given more scope in Weber's Der Freisch tz Overture, placed at the end of the program, almost as a surrogate finale to the Schubert. It was lively and fun, and a great showpiece for the MSO horns.

Speaking of other orchestras, I heard the Concertgebouw on Friday. The repertoire was mostly Messiaen, and the setting was the famous Concertgebouw hall, so direct comparisons are problematic. Certainly the Concertgebouw strings have a special luster in that special place, but my overall impression is that concert life is no worse for MSO subscribers.

Ralph Kirshbaum

The Oregonian

November 19, 2007

Symphony review

Guest conductor keeps it Classical

By JAMES McQUILLEN

In remarks before the Oregon Symphony's Saturday night concert at Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, guest conductor Hannu Lintu said the unifying characteristic of the three pieces on the program was that they are Classical. Not in the sense of "classical music," but capital-C Classical, exemplifying the clear and concise sound of the era before the Romantics took over.

They were also similar in being uncharacteristic. Two were unusually terse late symphonies by Beethoven and Jean Sibelius, and the third was a virtuosic concerto by Joseph Haydn, which features dazzling virtuoso writing by one of the least flamboyant figures in the classical canon.

Lintu, who conducted Sibelius' heroic Fifth Symphony in his previous appearance with the orchestra two years ago — a Finnish conductor for a Finnish composer — seemed well-suited to the introverted, often brooding Sixth. He was both intense and slightly off-kilter, with a bone-dry wit and a gangly presence; he seemed simultaneously unpredictable and careful, emotive and austere. Under his direction, the mystery and muted passions of the Sibelius unfolded with elastic tempos in an appropriately limited dynamic range. The sense of disquiet was heightened by having the piece at the opening of the concert, in the place usually occupied by overtures and other appetizers, and it was never quite dispelled.

The superb cellist Ralph Kirshbaum joined the orchestra for a similarly muted but arresting performance of Haydn's Cello Concerto No. 2. His tone was rich, with generous vibrato, but his approach was refined and his technique quietly brilliant; above the orchestral accompaniment, which Lintu kept generally soft, buoyant and lovely, he deftly tore through a solo part loaded with double-stops, fleet finger work and broken counterpoint with no apparent effort.

Beethoven's Eighth Symphony was the finale, and again Lintu seemed in his element. It's a classically proportioned symphony, more compact than the Seventh and certainly more than the Ninth, but it's full of opportunities to underscore the mercurial, imbalanced Beethoven, with abrupt outbursts and manic energy. In the Allegro vivace, the close of a focused, polished performance, the orchestra sounded about to spontaneously combust.

Ralph Kirshbaum

The San Diego
Union-Tribune.

August 18, 2007

CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEW

'Schubertiad' rings true at Sherwood

by Valerie Scher

In Franz Schubert's day, a “Schubertiad” was a gathering in which his music was performed, sometimes followed by food, drink and even dancing, with the composer at the piano.

Yesterday, La Jolla Music Society SummerFest provided its own all-Schubert program – titled “A Schubertiad” – at La Jolla's Sherwood Auditorium in the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. There was no food (other than what was available at the outdoor concession stand) and certainly no dancing.

Instead, the nearly sold-out event supplied prime examples of Schubert's chamber music and songs, splendidly performed by such accomplished musicians as soprano Heidi Grant Murphy, violist Cynthia Phelps and cellist Ralph Kirshbaum.

It was an affectionate and artistically rich tribute to the Austrian composer who died in 1828 at age 31.

In 1824, for instance, Schubert wrote a sonata for a six-stringed instrument he referred to as an “arpeggione.” Though the arpeggione long ago disappeared from concert life, the sonata nicknamed “Arpeggione” was transcribed for cello and became a beloved classic.

Cellist Kirshbaum pinpointed its appeal: melodies that were irresistible, whether solemn or soaring. Deftly supported by pianist Orion Weiss, Kirshbaum gave them a velvety smoothness that was enhanced by expert phrasing. Though fast, intricate sections were sometimes a bit of a struggle, his command of the cello's upper register was evident in the opening movement's hauntingly beautiful high notes.

While Schubert wrote only one “Arpeggione” sonata, he composed approximately 600 songs. Soprano Murphy and her husband, pianist Kevin Murphy, performed a pleasingly varied selection that illustrated Schubert's genius for combining words and music. In “Auf dem Strom” (“On the river”), they and French horn player Richard Todd vividly conveyed the tale of a heartsick lover caught in a storm.

No less affecting were the songs for voice and piano alone. In “Litany for the Feast of All Souls” (as the German text was translated), Murphy sang about granting peace to those who have suffered. With hands clasped and a beatific expression, the soprano made the performance an almost prayerlike experience as her voice radiated a supple
purity and power.

Yesterday's concert also offered a double treat. It included Schubert's popular song “Die Forelle” (“The Trout”), which soprano Murphy sang with winning spirit and clarity, as well as a
wonderfully cohesive performance of the “Trout” Quintet by violinist David Chan and bass player Chris Hanulik as well as violist Phelps, pianist Weiss and cellist Kirshbaum.

The musicians were precise but never pedantic, vigorous without being vulgar. And they brought out the charm of the variations that are based on the song's theme. The strings were unfailingly sonorous as they joined together for the melody. The variations allowed ample opportunities for individual virtuosity, as in pianist Weiss' showy trills.

All of which helped make this “Schubertiad” shine.

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Ralph Kirshbaum

The Mercury News

July 25, 2007

Music triumphs in battle @ Menlo

TCHAIKOVSKY PIANO TRIO MAKES IT AN OPENING NIGHT TO REMEMBER

By Richard Scheinin

For those who say classical music is boring, stuffy, predictable, dated, whatever, I say this: You didn't see Monday's sold-out, opening-night performance at Music@Menlo, in which pianist Wu Han, violinist Joseph Swensen and cellist Ralph Kirshbaum lifted their battle axes and went slashing and thrashing through Tchaikovsky's Piano Trio in A minor, drawing the guts out of every beautiful note.

It was boiling Romanticism, memorable, the type of performance that's always threatening to break out at the chamber music festival on the Peninsula. Until it does, the audience sits and waits; and then comes the deluge, one of the reasons this festival, now in its fifth season, has become such a hot ticket. The players aren't serving any California cuisine; they're grinding the meat and letting the juices flow, making music.

Although, I need to confess: Driving to Monday's concert at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto, I wasn't even remotely in the mood for the Tchaikovsky. All that schmaltz, on and on, for nearly an hour. Who can stand it?

But who would have predicted this performance?

Swensen, after the first movement, was wiping the sweat off his violin and, as the next movement commenced, practically gasped for air while drawing down his bow, with huge strokes, like a tree-cutter, releasing those big melodies and their variations. Anyone who witnessed it would realize that classical music, when played with this level of commitment, is

the real subversive music of our time, boiling away in the cultural underground.

Well, if the word spreads too widely, no one will *ever* get a ticket. Meanwhile, Menlo runs through Aug. 10 in Palo Alto, Menlo Park and Atherton.

There are lots more concerts (including free ones by the gifted students in the festival's chamber music institute); master classes (free to the public); multimedia symposia; and informal "Cafe` Conversations" at the Menlo School in Atherton with the likes of pianist Gary Graffman (Thursday at noon) and luthier Samuel Zygmuntowicz, subject of the recent book "The Violin Maker," by John Marchese (Saturday at noon).

As for Monday's program, titled "Homage," it took a while to build.

Part of Menlo's appeal lies in its presenting a family of musicians, who rotate in and out of performances, lend ing an air of familiarity to the festivities. As the players are shuffled and recombined from piece to piece, there is an equal degree of surprise and unpredictability.

This concert, however, moved along like a talent show, a little woodenly, with one group following the next, with a whole new set of faces, and then - Next! - yet another.

And why this repertory?

Yes, one piece (by Schnittke) was an homage to Mozart; another (by Ravel), to Couperin, sort of; another (by Mendelssohn), to Beethoven, and so on. But the "homage" bit was really just a random organizer; there was no true connecting thread between the works. The festival's co-artistic directors and founders - Wu Han and her husband, cellist David Finckel - might as well have titled the program "Good Stuff by Europeans."

Schnittke's "Moz-Art" for Two Violins led off. It's a work of intellectual high jinx: Schnittke, the Russian, who died in 1998, was fascinated by the remaining fragment, for violin, of a piece Mozart had composed for a pantomime. He sliced and diced it, added new ingredients, and put it all together in dizzy combinations, creating a collage that feels like a raucous prank.

Brother violinists Ian and Joseph Swensen played it with raw power, along with tiny taps, pops, wind-ups and wind-downs, whimpers, whistles (literally), perfect out-of-sync-nesses and intentional de-tunings of strings. They had a great time with it, and the piece came off as a circus fanfare, a good enough way to start the festival.

Next!

An all-star woodwind quintet stepped up for Ravel's "Le tombeau de Couperin," the wistful tribute to the French baroque in which the composer memorialized friends who had died fighting in World War I. Arranged by Mason Jones, "tombeau" received a crystal performance with three standout voices: flutist Carol Wincenc; oboist William Bennett, principal of the San Francisco Symphony; and clarinetist Carey Bell, the San Francisco Symphony's incoming principal, a terrific player.

The program's first half ended with Mendelssohn's String Quartet No. 2 in A minor, performed by the Escher String Quartet, a young ensemble, which has been gathering lots of accolades and deserves them. Its sound is golden-ripe, and its performance was technically almost infallible, cool-edged, yet pulsing like the engine of a luxury car. I liked them; they seemed ultra-clean, yet hot, and I figured them to be the night's biggest pleasure.

Until, after intermission, the trio of veterans stepped onstage for Tchaikovsky and played the role of Muddy Waters to the Eschers' Robert Cray. Nothing scripted here, and nothing squeaky clean. This was spontaneous *music-making* by Wu Han, Swensen, and Kirshbaum, imperfect at times, but exploding with passion, intelligence and melody. It was a wrenching performance, a tribute to Tchaikovsky - an authentic "homage."

Ralph Kirshbaum

THE TIMES

May 9, 2007

In Review

Concert
BBC Phil/Noseda
Bridgewater Hall, Manchester
★★★★☆

HILARY FINCH

Four for the price of one: no wonder the concert sold out. Any attempt at balanced programme planning went out of the window when the high point of the Manchester International Cello Festival was reached in a performance of four English cello concertos in one evening.

This year's festival theme has been the cello music of the British Isles. And there they were: Bridge and Britten, Elgar and Walton – and a real stamina challenge for both the audience and the BBC Philharmonic under the apparently indefatigable Gianandrea Noseda.

The evening was artfully structured, and cunningly cast. It fell to Colin Carr to make the opening *Oration*: Frank Bridge's so-called *Concerto elegiaco*, written in the aftermath of the First World War, is both lament and protest. Carr's was a restrained virtuosity and a muted yet impassioned melancholy.

There were strange spectral pre-echoes of a later war requiem and, indeed, of the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* that Britten wrote for Rostropovich. The late Russian cellist was the invisible yet ubiquitous guest at the festival, and Natalia Gutman's playing – a great Russian bear of a performance – reminded us of that interfertilisation of languages that grew from Britten's friendship with both Rostropovich and Shostakovich. The power and precision of Gutman's cadenza was unforgettable – and the way it retreated into the shadows before swinging into the mighty concluding Passacaglia.

Noseda seemed heady with excitement, as though he were discovering an entirely new imaginative world. His vision seemed sharper than ever when he turned to Elgar's Cello Concerto after the interval. With Ralph Kirshbaum refusing to exaggerate a moment of rhetoric over and above what was written in the score, this was a performance of infinitely supple and elusive emotional life.

If anything could be said to unify the experience of the evening, it was the sheer inability of any of its music to be pinned down to a definable national language. Yo Yo Ma's beaming concluding performance of Walton's Cello Concerto revealed yet another mask – a harlequin this time – in the musical motley of the great British cello concerto.

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Ralph Kirshbaum

guardian

May 8, 2007

In Review

By Tim Ashley

Classical

BBC Philharmonic/Noseda
Bridgewater Hall, Manchester
★★★★

Festivals are usually celebratory occasions, but a bitter-sweet atmosphere hung over this concert, part of the Manchester International Cello festival, founded in 1988 by Ralph Kirshbaum. The concert was dedicated to Mstislav Rostropovich. However, the previous evening, Kirshbaum announced his intention to stand down as the festival's artistic director, a decision greeted with considerable sadness.

The concert, with Gianandrea Noseda conducting the BBC Philharmonic, consisted of four concertos by 20th-century English composers. The cello's ability to encapsulate heightened, tragic emotion made it a preferred instrument in a century of war, revolution and totalitarianism, and three of the four concertos effectively constitute musical responses to political convulsion.

The centrepiece was Elgar's Concerto, his tremendous elegy for a vanishing world, which Kirshbaum played in a performance of great nobility, grace and nostalgic sweetness. Britten's Symphony for Cello and Orchestra is darker and more uncompromising. Written for Rostropovich in 1963, it is a lean, spectral piece, at odds with Rostropovich's energetic personality. Natalia Gutman was the soloist, probing its shadowy world with grave brilliance, and Noseda examined its pungent textures, though neither could overcome its impenetrability.

The programme's comparative rarity was Frank Bridge's Oration, a harrowing, angry tribute to the first world war generation. It pitted the soloist – the outstanding Colin Carr – against grieving woodwind and mechanistic marches.

To remind us that the cello need not always be associated with tragic solemnity the evening closed with Yo-Yo Ma playing the Walton Concerto – the work of a master entertainer, performed by a virtuoso of infinite charm.

Ralph Kirshbaum

The Boston Globe

February 10, 2006

Levine, BSO, soloists strike the right tone

By Richard Dyer

Beethoven is not a hard sell for the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Symphony Hall was packed last night for James Levine's all-Beethoven program, which is part of his ongoing Beethoven/Schoenberg project.

Levine programmed two Beethoven symphonies, the Second and the Seventh, and the Triple Concerto for violin, cello, and piano, all carefully chosen to display parallels to the music of Arnold Schoenberg. The finale of the Second, for example, may have been the wildest symphonic movement anyone had composed up to that time (1802). The Triple Concerto is the only piece for that combination of soloists in the standard repertoire; Schoenberg adapted a concerto grosso of Handel into a concerto for the equally remarkable combination of string quartet and orchestra. The Seventh is all dance energy -- something that could be said of Schoenberg's Suite for solo piano.

Most BSO performances of the Triple Concerto in the last 25 years have featured established piano trios. Levine's choice was three solo virtuosi with major chamber-music credentials -- pianist Jonathan Biss, violinist Miriam Fried, and cellist Ralph Kirshbaum. Fried and Biss are mother and son, and Kirshbaum played like one of the family, which is saying something -- Biss's grandmother and Fried's mother-in-law was the legendary Russian cellist Raya Garbousova.

This is a spacious piece, designed to give all three soloists equal opportunity to develop the melodic material and to display the characteristics of all three instruments and the personalities of the players; it also springs surprises -- a polonaise erupts in the middle of the finale. Fried offered fire, elegance, and gleaming sound, although in the first movement she sometimes played with more attack than tone. Kirshbaum, in a notoriously difficult part, displayed a singing soulfulness. Biss's piano stuttered briefly in the first movement, but he played everything else with authority, imagination, and brio.

The two Beethoven Symphonies offered a demonstration of the improvement Levine has wrought in the orchestra. The musicians played with style, balance, energy, and finesse over a newly-expanded dynamic range. The Seventh represented some kind of pinnacle of execution, and it was full of wonderful details -- a three-note passage in the flute illuminated a phrase like a ray of sunshine. Levine maintained the same tempo in the trio of the Scherzo that he had begun with, while completely changing the musical characterization. The furious, disciplined speed and charging rhythm of the finale excited even the conductor, who rose from his chair three times. And when it was over, the entire audience was out of its seats, on its feet, and howling.

Ralph Kirshbaum

theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

January 2007

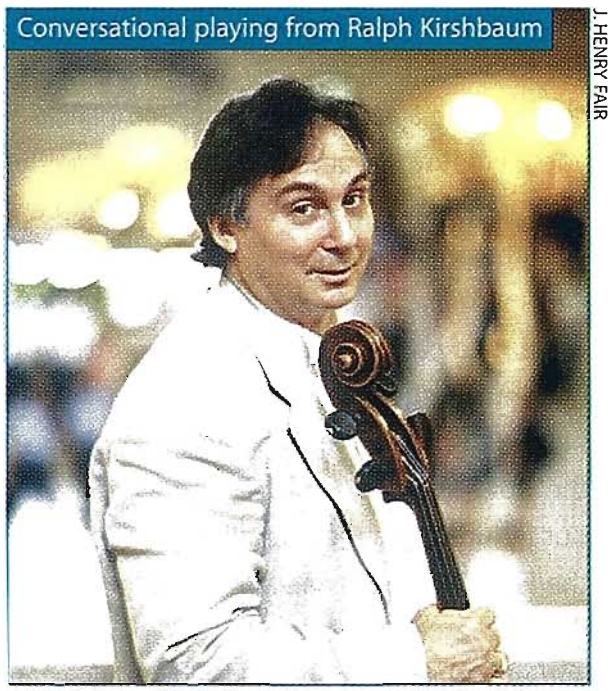
Concert reviews

RALPH KIRSHBAUM (CELLO)
VIVIANE HAGNER (VIOLIN)
THOMAS RIEBL (VIOLA)
IAN BROWN (PIANO)
MICHAEL COLLINS (CLARINET)
Wigmore Hall, London 15 October 2006

Ralph Kirshbaum clearly loves to have company on the concert platform in order to savour the joys of musical dialogue and communication between colleagues. However true, conversations are rarely as rounded as in the Brahms Clarinet Trio in this concert marking his 60th birthday, where he shared the phrases exquisitely with clarinettist Michael Collins. Here the inspired melodic invention was couched within judiciously chosen tempos that seemed tailor-made for the material. A similar sense of empathy informed Schumann's E flat major Piano Quartet, where again much attention was lavished on matching phrases: the ebb and flow were most persuasive, and Viviane Hagner, Thomas Riebl and Kirshbaum were remarkably homogeneous in their timbre.

Phrase characterisation is of course strongly bound in with bow articulation, where the amount of bow, coupled with arm weight and gesture, can generate a vast array of vivid colours. These qualities are required for almost every note in Beethoven's 'Magic Flute' Variations, aspects Kirshbaum perfectly encapsulated in a delightful performance with Ian Brown, as ever an accomplished partner. Similarly Beethoven's Duo for cello and viola was given a sharply characterised rendition, with the tones of Kirshbaum's Montagnana cello richly resonant. The performance was particularly impressive since this is not Beethoven's finest creation and there are moments where the musical impetus would have flagged in lesser hands.

JOANNE TALBOT


Conversational playing from Ralph Kirshbaum

J. HENRY FAIR

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Ralph Kirshbaum

The New York Times

November 21, 2006

Carrying On a Conversation With Those Chatty Russians

Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Ralph Kirshbaum on cello and Peter Jablonski on piano Sunday.

BERNARD HOLLAND

MUSIC REVIEW

Three-fourths of Sunday's duo concert at the Frick Collection on Sunday offered 20th-century Russian updates of a 19th-century Romantic sensibility. Ralph Kirshbaum, cellist, and Peter Jablonski, pianist, played a Sonata in C by Prokofiev and another in D minor by Shostakovich, adding Rachmaninoff's Vocalise, happily adapted here for the cello.

The other piece was a little different: Debussy's Sonata for Cello and Piano. It began this late afternoon program, and as the recital wore on, the listener's imagination kept referring back to it. One of the Russian sonatas found Shostakovich, at 28, singing a winning melody in enormous long breaths and setting it against country-style dance music. It was 1934 and a little before the composer's famous run-in with Stalin. The grimness of the Largo movement matches the composer's moods in later years.

The Prokofiev begins with a similar lyrical generosity, but at the end seemed almost austere next to one of Shostakovich's more popular pieces. The phrases of the famous Vocalise are even longer and at least as irresistible. Keeping musical sentences of these lengths moving properly is

Ralph Kirshbaum and Peter Jablonski

Frick Collection

not easy, and both these players did it well.

The Debussy, examined literally, is a very strange beast: strings of fragments that proceed briefly and then abruptly change the subject. The joke becomes the sigh becomes the smile and so on. The hidden magic in this great music lies between the fragments: a kind of mysterious unseen glue that assembles the different parts and prods them along a coherent path. As is usually the case in Debussy, the process defies analysis.

The Frick's small circular space is about as close to a salon as public concerts get in New York. If the decibel levels decided on by these two fine players sounded strong at the start, there was also the possibility that ears used to bigger halls and more distant stages had some necessary adjusting to do.

Ralph Kirshbaum

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

October 21, 2006

PSO displays Quixote with style

concert review

By Andrew Druckenbrod

In 2002, a survey of 100 international writers named Miguel de Cervantes' "Don Quixote" as the best novel ever written. But perhaps it might be better to say he is the best character ever created.

A fascinating new book recently published called "The 101 Most Influential People Who Never Lived" ranks Quixote as one of most significant literary figures. His idealism, his ability to see what he wants to see and his steadfast faith in himself despite his critics have hit a chord in people since the 1600s.

That's the key to why the many musical representations of Quixote work so well, such as the two works performed last night at Heinz Hall by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra: Richard Strauss' "Don Quixote" and Manuel de Falla's "Master Peter's Puppet Show." Conducted by Rafael Fruhbeck de Burgos, these two works take action from various chapters in the novel, but gain their strength from a depiction of the Knight-Errant's spirit and persona.

Not that a little help from some friends doesn't hurt. In the Strauss, it was renowned cellist Ralph Kirshbaum. In the Falla, it was unexpected allies, puppets.

Taken from a chapter in the novel in which Quixote watches a puppet show and, of course, confusedly thinks it is real. Falla's work actually uses a puppet troupe to tell the story, in this case the Bob Brown Puppets.

This was wonderful stuff, engaging for adults and the children who were there. The puppets were magnificent, and their show well-conceived, with Quixote and Sancho Panza as larger-than-life puppets watching a "real-life" puppet show. The puppets were lifelike and funny, with the only gaffe being that one of the puppet masters forgot to animate Quixote when he first speaks. In a way, though, this was fitting.

While one's eyes were on the puppets, one's ears were with the performers, who rendered the colorful score expertly. A slimmed-down PSO sat stage right of the puppeteers, with three singers providing the voices of Quixote (David Wilson-Johnson), Master Peter (Peter Bronder) and the boy narrator (Awet Andemicael). The latter sang the folk-inspired — and rapid — recitative of the narrator with a buoyant tone, with the translation projected above the stage.

The orchestra handled the quick turns and unusual requests of the piece, and captured its ancient Spanish soundscape. The dark and sorrowful melody accompanying the puppet Melisendra was particularly gorgeous, with able contribution by English horn player Harold Smoliar. Fruhbeck was fluid in his approach here and with the Strauss, inspiring potent, but not stilted or forced playing.

Strauss visited several episodes of "Don Quixote" as variations "on a Theme of Knightly Character." Cello, violin and viola solos carry several themes that connect it all. Concertmaster Andres Cardenes and principal violist Randolph Kelly matched elegantly with Kirshbaum, whose noble tone on the cello was the full sincerity for which Quixote yearned. The cellist conquered the virtuositic parts without a hint of pomposity, searching instead to marvelously illuminate the warmth of the madman with long lines.

The supertitle projector remained for the Strauss, identifying the variations — such a common-sense, audience-friendly idea. I don't know why it isn't done more often.

Ralph Kirshbaum
The New York Times
November 7, 2005

Exploring Repertory Where Three's Right Crowd

by Jeremy Eichler

Chamber music sight reading often thrives at summer festivals, mostly for the sheer enjoyment of playing through great, indestructible repertory like, say, the Brahms String Sextets. These events are typically as ephemeral as they are spirited, but at the Aspen Music Festival two years ago, a trio of players got together and the combination

McDuffie Dutton Kirshbaum Trio

92nd Street Y

seemed to stick. They were the violinist Robert McDuffie, the violist Lawrence Dutton and the cellist Ralph Kirshbaum. This year, they strung their last names together and took their music beyond the Rockies with a small tour that ended Saturday night in a performance at the 92nd Street Y.

There's not nearly enough string trio repertory to sustain an ensemble year-round, but these established players are clearly not looking for new full-time gigs. Mr. Dutton, for one, is a member of the Emerson String Quartet, whose busy touring schedule would surely limit the number of trio engagements in the future. Even so, these occasional collaborations can sometimes yield a freshness and vigor that are harder to find when musicians are entrenched in their everyday routines. Those virtues were audible on Saturday night, when the ensemble offered trios by Beethoven (Op. 9, No. 3), Dohnanyi (Serenade in C Major) and Mozart (Divertimento in E flat Major, K. 563).

The group took a little time to find a cogent, blended sound, but the musicians locked in soon enough and turned in high-octane readings with relative polish. Of the three works, the Dohnanyi made the strongest impression, with its whirling, folklike rhythmic energy. Mr. McDuffie is a spry, charismatic player who laid into the smoky violin lines with gusto. Mr. Dutton shone in the winged solo of the second movement, with pools of rich, dark C-string colors and a warm amber tone on top. Mr. Kirshbaum was a steady grounded presence in the bass.

Still, there is room to grow here. Parts of the Mozart could have had a lighter touch, and the group sound seemed somewhat attenuated in its range, with dynamics below mezzo-forte in short supply. But these players have clearly found a solid connection and the makings of something durable, even if they perform only a few times a year as a satisfying busman's holiday.

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Ralph Kirshbaum

THE PLAIN DEALER

FEBRUARY 5, 2004

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Cello-piano pairing super in small space

REVIEW

Ralph Kirshbaum and Peter Frankl

WILMA SALISBURY
Plain Dealer Music Critic

The recital by cellist Ralph Kirshbaum and pianist Peter Frankl Tuesday night at Plymouth Church of Shaker Heights was a dizzying experience. The performance was held in the church's chapel, an intimate space so reverberant that it functioned like a sounding box for Kirshbaum's Montagnana cello, a magnificent instrument that once belonged to 19th-century Italian virtuoso Alfredo Piatti.

As the instrument's warm timbre filled the high-ceilinged room and resonated off hardwood surfaces, the listeners were enveloped in glorious sonorities. The feeling of hearing the music from inside a gigantic cello was almost overwhelming. At intermission, I moved from the second row to the balcony to get a little distance from the source. But there, too, the sound was all-consuming.

Frankl also produced a full tone on a small concert grand that he played with the lid fully raised. Although the partners were mostly equal, the piano sometimes verged on overpowering the cello.

The duo's interpretations were as large-scale as their sound. They played Beethoven's Sonata No. 4 in C major, Op. 102, No. 1, with rapturous romanticism and unanimity of style. Kirshbaum spun out legato lines like a singer with an inexhaustible supply of breath. Frankl went along with the flow.

Chopin's Sonata in G minor, Op. 65, was also a lavish outpouring. Playing in the grand manner, the artists let the music surge. Although some details were slightly blurred in the allegro movements, the work as a whole was beautifully shaped and shaded.

In Prokofiev's Sonata in C major, Op. 119, the musicians pushed beyond the majesty they brought to the 19th-century works. Holding nothing back, Kirshbaum luxuriated in sumptuous tone, and Frankl attacked the keyboard with steely fingers. At times, the music was too loud, and there was no place left for it to go. But generally, the players kept the dynamics expressive.

After these three big sonatas, a musical trifle would have been welcome. The artists stuck to substantial repertoire, however, concluding their program with a grandiose interpretation of Schumann's Adagio and Allegro in A-flat Major, Op. 70.

Presented by the Cleveland Cello Society, the recital drew an enthusiastic audience that brought the performers back for two encores. Lightening up at last, they played one of Mendelssohn's "Songs Without Words" and one of Schumann's "Five Pieces in Folk Style." Like luscious after-dinner mints, the little delicacies were the perfect ending to a rich musical feast.

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Ralph Kirshbaum
Discography

HYPERION

CDA67846 — **Schubert**: String Quintet in C major, D956; String Quartet in C minor 'Quartettsatz' D703 (Ralph Kirshbaum, cello; Takács Quartet)

ALTARA CLASSICS

ALT1019 (2006) — **Shostakovich & Prokofiev Cello Sonatas:** Sergei Prokofiev: Cello Sonata in C major, Op.119; Dmitri Shostakovich: Cello Sonata in D minor, Op. 40; Sergei Rachmaninov: Vocalise, Op.34 No.14 (Ralph Kirshbaum, cello; Peter Jablonski, piano)

EMI

CZS 5 73341 2 (1999) — **Brahms**: Piano Trios, Opp. 8, 87 & 101; Piano Quintet, Op. 34 (Peter Frankl, Andre Previn, pianos; Gyorgy Pauk, violin; Ralph Kirshbaum, cello; Yale String Quartet). Reissue.

BBC MUSIC MAGAZINE

BBC MM141 (1995) — **BBC Music Magazine: Volume IV, Number 5** Beethoven: Piano Trio in B-flat, Op. 97 "Archduke"; Dvorak: Piano Trio in e, Op. 90 "Dumky"; live recording (Ralph Kirshbaum, cello; Peter Frankl, piano; Gyorgy Pauk, violin).

BMG CLASSICS/RCA RED SEAL

09026-68964-2 (1998) — **Brahms "Double" Concerto & Beethoven "Triple" Concerto** (Pinchas Zukerman, violin; Ralph Kirshbaum, cello; John Browning, piano; London Symphony Orchestra; Christoph Eschenbach, conductor).

62696-2 (1994)** — **Pinchas Zukerman plays & conducts Haydn** Symphony No. 105 "Concertante," for Violin, Cello, Oboe, Bassoon, and Orchestra, Hob.I:105 in B-flat; Symphony No. 6 "Le Matin," Hob. I:6 in D (Pinchas Zukerman, violin solo; Kate Hill, flute solo; Robin O'Neill, bassoon solo; Quintin Ballardie, viola solo; Olga Hegedus, cello solo; Stephen Williams, double bass solo); Concerto for Cello and Orchestra, Hob. VIIb:2 in D – cadenzas by Maurice Gendron (Ralph Kirshbaum, cello; English Chamber Orchestra; Jose-Luis Garcia, leader; Pinchas Zukerman, conductor).

VIRGIN CLASSICS

5623742 (2004) **Bach: Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin** Cello Suites Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin, BWV 1001-1006; Cello Suites BWV 1007-1012 (Christian Tetzlaff, violin; Ralph Kirshbaum, cello)

45086-2 (1994)** **Bach: 6 Suites for solo cello** Suite No. 1, BWV 1007; Suite No. 3, BWV 1009; Suite No. 5, BWV 1011; Suite No. 2, BWV 1008; Suite No. 4, BWV 1010; Suite No. 6, BWV 1012 (Ralph Kirshbaum, cello).

59565-2 (1989) **Barber**: Cello Concerto, Op. 22; Cello Sonata, Op. 6: Adagio for Strings, Op. 11 (Ralph Kirshbaum, cello; Roger Vignoles, piano: Scottish Chamber Orchestra; Jukka-Pekka Saraste, conductor).

PHILIPS CLASSICS

420 781-2 (1988) ** **Tippett**: Concerto for Orchestra; Concerto for Violin, Viola, Cello, and Orchestra (Ralph Kirshbaum, violoncello; Gyorgy Pauk, violin; Nobuko Imai, viola; London Symphony Orchestra; Sir Colin Davis, conductor).

CHANDOS RECORDS

CHAN 6547 (1989) **Walton**: Belshazzar's Feast for Baritone, Orchestra & Chorus; Concerto for Cello & Orchestra; Coronation Te Deum (Ralph Kirshbaum, cello; Sherrill Milnes, baritone; Royal Scottish Orchestra and Chorus; Sir Alexander Gibson, conductor).

CHAN 6607 (1979) **Elgar**: Cello Concerto in e, Op. 85; Falstaff – Symphonic Study in c, Op. 68 (Ralph Kirshbaum, cello; Royal Scottish National Orchestra; Sir Alexander Gibson, conductor).

CHAN 8384 (1985) **Elgar**: Cello Concerto; Walton: Violin Concerto (Ralph Kirshbaum. cello; Royal Scottish national Orchestra; Sir Alexander Gibson, conductor).

MUSIC@MENLO *LIVE*

Maps and Legends - Disc III: Haydn: Keyboard Concertino in C Major, Hob. XIV: 11; Beethoven: String Quartet in f minor, op. 95, Serioso; Brahms: Sextet no. 2 in G Major, op. 36. (Erin Keefe, Jorja Fleezanis: violins; Lily Francis, John Largess: violas; Ralph Kirshbaum, David Finckel: cellos.)

**Denotes currently out-of-print