

Discovering Rostropovich

A remembrance by David Finckel

As a ten-year-old beginning cellist, I liked the instrument. I had some recordings by fine cellists – Leonard Rose, Janos Starker, Antonio Janigro, and I admired them. But when my cello-playing uncle called my father to have him write down the name Rostropovich, and when we finally got one of his early recordings in the house, and on the record player, I was transformed.

I can't say that my reaction was anything except visceral because I didn't know anything about pedagogy or history of cello playing or even string playing. It was simply as though, when I heard Rostropovich play, I was hearing my own voice. From one note to the next, his interpretation satisfied every desire my imagination could cook up about the music. I couldn't help it: I began to imitate him, and even fantasize that maybe I WAS him.

I certainly haven't had that fantasy, or delusion, for a long time. But the part about his playing satisfying, and surpassing, all my musical and cellistic expectations still is with me. And for that, I continue to be grateful not only to him but to fate – I was born at just the right time to catch Slava at his best, and during my most formative years.

To completely explain what I learned from Rostropovich would take hours of time and pages of documents. But I'll try:

First, there was unquestionable technical honesty in his recordings. They have a technical cleanliness that not only supports the music but adds a kind of shine to the interpretation that is simply not there even with the most technically accomplished cellists on record.

Second, the vocal quality of his sound – the intensity of vibrato, the *variation* of vibrato as appropriate to the music (many string players have only one speed and width of vibrato, what is comfortable for them), the extreme dynamic range – his ability to project the softest and most intimate music into every corner of a big hall, and seemingly drown out a whole orchestra when he needed to. These are some of the instrumental aspects of his playing that were so intoxicating.

But third is undeniably the most important, and that's about the way Slava served the music and public on stage. His mission was clear – to serve the composer and not himself. His magnetic dedication to his art, his do-or-die approach to every performance, all combined to generate love of the music (and for him) from millions of listeners around the world. No one disagreed: Slava was a force of musical nature, and there was no stopping him from his mission.