

Recording with Rostropovich

An account of the Emerson Quartet's recording with Rostropovich in Germany

by David Finckel

Few experiences in the Emerson Quartet's exciting career have left as deep a mark on us, both personally and musically, as the four days we spent in wintery Ludwigshafen (near Mannheim) and nearby Speyer, with my teacher and mentor, Rostropovich.

Rostropovich, who sadly passed away in 2007 at the age of 80, was the biggest influence on me as a cellist, by miles. He also set for me an example for living, an attitude about performing, and other priorities larger than music. One of the last century's notable humanitarians, his courageous stand for artistic freedom in the Soviet Union is viewed by many as one of the significant nails in the communist regime coffin. His contribution to the cello literature – over 200 works composed for him, many by the greatest composers of his age – is unparalleled by any performer in history, of any instrument. I could go on and on, but suffice to finish this small tribute by saying that he was a great human being who gave to the world beyond measure.

The story of that concert, and the recording, is one of personal determination on the quartet's part, and of generosity and faith on the part of our concert sponsor, the BASF Corporation of Ludwigshafen. The company recently celebrated the 90th anniversary of its extensive cultural activities, which have been performed on a level of commitment, depth and consistency beyond any corporate arts support I have ever known.

At the time of the Rostropovich project, we had a close relationship with the company's director of culture, Detlef Böckmann, and we were able to convince him that BASF was the proper place to base the project, which would of course involve learning the work with Rostropovich, performing a concert, and making the recording for Deutsche Grammophon. We made a special journey to the area to audition recording sites, and selected the beautiful Dreifaltigkeitskirche (Holy Trinity Church) in the nearby town of Speyer. The church was built during the Baroque era and the interior is entirely of wood, with gorgeous acoustics.

Church outside

Church inside

Arriving in snowy December, we first encountered Rostropovich in the church. He showed up without a part to the Schubert (I had brought one just in case) and with his cello strings each at least a half step out of tune. When I expressed amazement at this he explained that he had had the cello specially prepared (I'm not sure what this meant) in order to get the most resonant pizzicati from it for the famous slow movement. (This cello was the "Duport" Stradivari, which he had acquired shortly after he left the Soviet Union in 1974. It was commissioned in 1711 by a wealthy doctor from Lyon who paid Stradivari twice his normal fee for a cello of unusual quality. It went into the hands of the famous Duport brother who played the premiere of

Beethoven's Sonatas Op. 5 Nos. 1 and 2 in Berlin at the court of King Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia, with Beethoven at the piano. I have since heard that the cello was sold to a collector in Japan, and to my knowledge, no one has seen it since. I did get to play on it quite a bit, though, and soon after I revisited it in Washington with Sam Zygmuntowicz, who copied it when making the cello that I have played since 1993).

The rehearsal was amazing. Slava, for the first run through, seemed to be half-lost and confused about everything, from the bowings to the counting to the page turns. After we finished the movement, he berated me for not having given him my bowings. We were all speechless. What do you say when the greatest cellist the world has ever known demands your bowings?

As the rehearsal progressed, things changed. The next run through was on another level, and soon, we were left in the musical dust as Slava took command of everything, summoning up metaphors, noticing details in the composition, stopping for detailed work, exhorting us to do more of just about everything we thought we were already doing. It was like being dragged by a freight train. It was exciting, exhausting, and unnerving to be playing with someone who could hear so acutely, whose understanding of the music was so deep, and whose charisma was so overpowering. We knew exactly how the rest of the week was going to play out.

Listening 2

The recording sessions went extremely well, up to a point. Slava had seemingly limitless energy and needed almost no sleep. We were lavishly entertained, stayed up late tasting wines, eating way too much food, laughing our heads off at his amazing stories. This was fine for the most part except that, having retired usually around 2 a.m., our hotel phone would ring at 5:30 or 6:00 a.m., Slava demanding that we join him for breakfast. This happened every day.

The straw that broke the Emerson's back was the lunch for us thrown by the mayor of Speyer. After a 3 hour meal of heavy German food, speeches and gallons of beer, we went back across the street to the church to record the slow movement. It did not feel good. As we listened to only the first minutes of the playback, Slava suddenly called a halt and commanded that we all go back to the hotel for naps. He simply said the sound was not right. We did as he instructed, of course, and agreed to return in the evening, after dark. There was no arguing with Slava. When we arrived back at the church, the snow was falling heavily. The little town was dead quiet. The scene was every bit as magical as the music itself, and the recording of the slow movement was accomplished that evening in an atmosphere so rarefied as to truly be called incomparable.