

Musical Treasure Chest #12

Life for me, before COVID restrictions, was pretty much a whirlwind of musical activities: rehearsing, performing, teaching, and planning more of the same. One easily is absorbed into this rhythm of existence, with the tempo and the phrasing perhaps slightly altering, but the overall experience remains rather steady and predictable (in a comfortable sort of way). Making music (except solo work) is a social activity, requiring time and intimacy with others. Inhibit access to your fellow musicians, and the music stops. This fact has been hit home repeatedly over the last three months. Rehearsing last week with Norman Thibodeau, our flutist, made me realize just how much I miss the regular contact. I thought for this MTC I would share with you the story of how each of the Musicians of Ma'alwyck core players came to be a part of the ensemble and the repertory that I hold dear associated with each one of them.

Petia Kassarova, our cellist, has been a member since the very first year of the ensemble. I first met her in 1999 when she was finishing up grad school at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She had just won a position with the Albany Symphony and a colleague recommended her to me for an orchestral job I was hiring for. Her playing was really outstanding; I was impressed. I was also impressed with her demeanor, she was enthusiastic and fully engaged in the music. As I developed the concept for Musicians of Ma'alwyck, Petia seemed to be the perfect choice—musical, collaborative, and willing to make the group part of her life. What I love about Petia's playing is her fiery passion and intensity. This past January we performed the **Brahms first string sextet**, a piece which offers the first cellist almost constant prominence. How she soared on the lines. It was exhilarating to hear.

We have had many musical adventures together over the past twenty years, and numerous performances that have been extremely meaningful. I wanted to pick repertory to share with you that is particularly significant to me in association with each player. With Petia, it's hard to pin down because there are many pieces, but I think two particularly stand out, the aforementioned Brahms and

the **Rachmaninoff Vocalise**. She performed this on a concert with us many years ago at Wiawaka House up in Lake George. Even though I was on stage listening to it, the beauty and soulfulness of her playing moved me to tears. I had to collect myself before I went on with the next piece.

Petia and her husband are both from Bulgaria. They met playing in an orchestra in Brazil, and then decided to go to graduate school in America, where they established themselves professionally after completing their studies. I have great respect for them for their bravery launching a life in a new country where they had no family. About ten years ago they became American citizens. I was invited to the naturalization ceremony, which was quite moving, and I was tremendously honored to attend.

Here are links to both the Brahms and the Rachmaninoff:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ctm9F8VGgCs>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rrkae_ok8Y

Sten Isachsen, our guitarist, joined the group early on too. When I first conceived of MofM my concept was a string quartet, I had not yet done enough research to realize this wasn't the most accurate configuration for music in early America. But within the first year, I had read enough to see that musical ensembles were much more varied and that flute and guitar were more frequently used, as well as voice. Sten came to me via a recommendation from Karen Hosmer (a colleague at SCCC and principal oboe of the Albany Symphony), who said Sten embodied all you would want in a great guitar player. She was absolutely right. Sten is such an important part of the group, that I cannot imagine it without him. As a guitarist his skills cover a wide range, and his open-minded and hard-working attitude allows me to throw repertory in his direction that anyone else would be reluctant to take on.

In addition to his instrumental abilities, Sten is an award-winning audio engineer, running the audio program at SUNY-Schenectady. He was the engineer for our first CD and now during the COVID situation he has provided much of the technology for our specially streamed programs. I have watched in amazement as

he has figured out how to allow us to continue virtually.

Because Sten's musical skills cover such a vast variety of repertory, the piece I most associate with him (and delight in playing together) is Piazzolla's brilliant *L'Histoire du Tango*, a four movement work depicting the development of the tango. Here is a movement of it with the amazing Rusanda Panfili.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCkeaa-z1MU>

Our flutist **Norman Thibodeau** is not the original flutist in the group, who was Linda Greene. Linda, who is a fabulous flute player, joined in our first year, but won a position with the Syracuse Symphony in 2005. Luckily for us, Norman, who is from the Capital region, had just returned home after a several year stint with an orchestra in Mexico. I have known Norm since high school; we played together in a predecessor of ESYO, called Northeast New York Youth Orchestra. After college we both returned to the area and renewed our friendship playing together in various local orchestra "gigs." I was so happy to be able to offer Norm the invitation to play with MofM when he returned from Mexico.

Norm's ebullient personality, tremendous interest in all things musical, musical integrity, and his performance chops (he always lands on his feet no matter what) make him a joy to play with. He, too, has numerous skills, including great talent at musical arranging. We have performed over the years a number of outstanding transcriptions by Norm, as well as some fine original works.

I have many wonderful musical associations with Norm, but I think the one that stands out the most is the beautiful set of variations by Anton Reicha on the melody *Se Vuol Ballare* from "The Marriage of Figaro" by Mozart.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vqs3JqYLgyI>