

Double Acts

Inside views on relationships in the string world

The New York-based violinist and pianist recall an emotional post-9/11 concert, a page turner who went AWOL, and how being married affects their work

MARK KAPLAN

I FELL IN LOVE WITH YAEL when we played Bartók's First Sonata, the first time we met, at the 1999 Seattle Chamber Music Festival. The Bartók was the first piece we played together, and it's not the most romantic music. It can be a difficult piece to put together – I had just played it through with another, fine pianist, and we had stopped every few bars to work out the tempo changes. With Yael, it was amazing: we played it through without interruption the first time.

THERE'S A LOT TO JUGGLE. We both have solo commitments, duo performances, around 20 trio recitals a year and teaching. But it all works out, partly because we know each other so well. When Yael and I rehearse, we don't have to say, 'Maybe we should start from letter B.' As soon as one of us stops the other knows why, and where to start again. Of course we have disagreements, but most importantly we have a unifying bond grounded in mutual respect.

ONE OF OUR MORE UNUSUAL CONCERTS was the opening performance at the Winter Garden, near Ground Zero. This is a huge glass atrium that was destroyed in the 9/11 attacks but reopened in 2002. From a musical point of view the concert was outrageous – we were miked up and the acoustics were terrible – but we walked away feeling wonderful. There was a real sense of rebirth, and the audience was thrilled to hear music in this newly rebuilt space that had seen such horrors.

OFTEN IT'S THE EXTRA THINGS WE DO beyond our regular performances that prove the most memorable, such as the time we performed in Royce Hall in Los Angeles for about 1,500 schoolchildren. They were bussed in as part of an outreach programme, and their reaction when we walked on stage was amazing – these kids were cheering so loudly we felt like rock stars! You don't often find that with classical audiences: no matter how enthusiastic, they're normally more conservative.

YAEL AND I OFTEN PLAY FOR EACH OTHER. It's useful to perform for a musician who's not influenced by the physical aspects of playing the violin. I've learnt lots from Yael about rhythm and pacing. At the end of the second movement of Ravel's G major Sonata, the primary theme is shared between instruments, and sometimes in concerts I'll turn away from the audience and move towards Yael, so it becomes a private moment where the audience is eavesdropping. I wouldn't do that with anyone else.

YAEL WEISS

I GREW UP IN BAT YAM, a sunny coastal city just south of Tel Aviv. I would practise the piano every day for a few hours and then watch the sea. So for me, movement in music is always related to the movement of the ocean. Mark comes from a very different background, being born in Massachusetts and growing up in upstate New York, where it can be bitterly cold. Even now, in concerts, we tend to disagree on whether the stage feels too warm or too cold.

WE OFTEN LOOK BACK ON THE FUNNY THINGS that have happened in concerts. I remember one performance of the Schubert Trio in B flat major, in which the page turner decided to walk off stage after turning the last page – while we were still playing. That was alarming. And then there was the performance of Beethoven's Triple Concerto in a small Czech town. The stage was so small we had to sit in a line – the cellist sat behind me, and Mark behind the cellist, so I couldn't see either of them. We were playing with no conductor and I had to lead using large, expressive gestures – mostly with the back of my head!

THE VERY FIRST TIME I MET MARK I found it endearing that he asked me how to pronounce my name correctly, and then took real care to get it right. When we performed together after this, there was hardly any talking because everything just felt effortless. Now we also like to sit and discuss the music away from the stage, analysing the possible ways in which we might approach it. I very much enjoy our frequent conversations about the works we play.

WE HAVE DIFFERENT APPROACHES to new technology. I'm very excited about the many ways to use the internet for sharing all aspects of music – not just performances and concerts, but also information, ideas and teaching. Mark, on the other hand, is less inclined to turn on the computer when thinking about music – perhaps he just doesn't like gadgets as much.

ONE THING WE BOTH LOVE is sharing music with our little boy, Aviv. He's almost four now, and he finds a wonderfully uninhibited joy in music, which he expresses not only in singing but especially in movement and dancing. Our friends tend to ask if he is studying an instrument yet, but so far he's just taking dancing classes.

INTERVIEWS BY NICK SHAVE



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