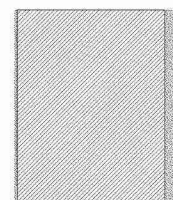
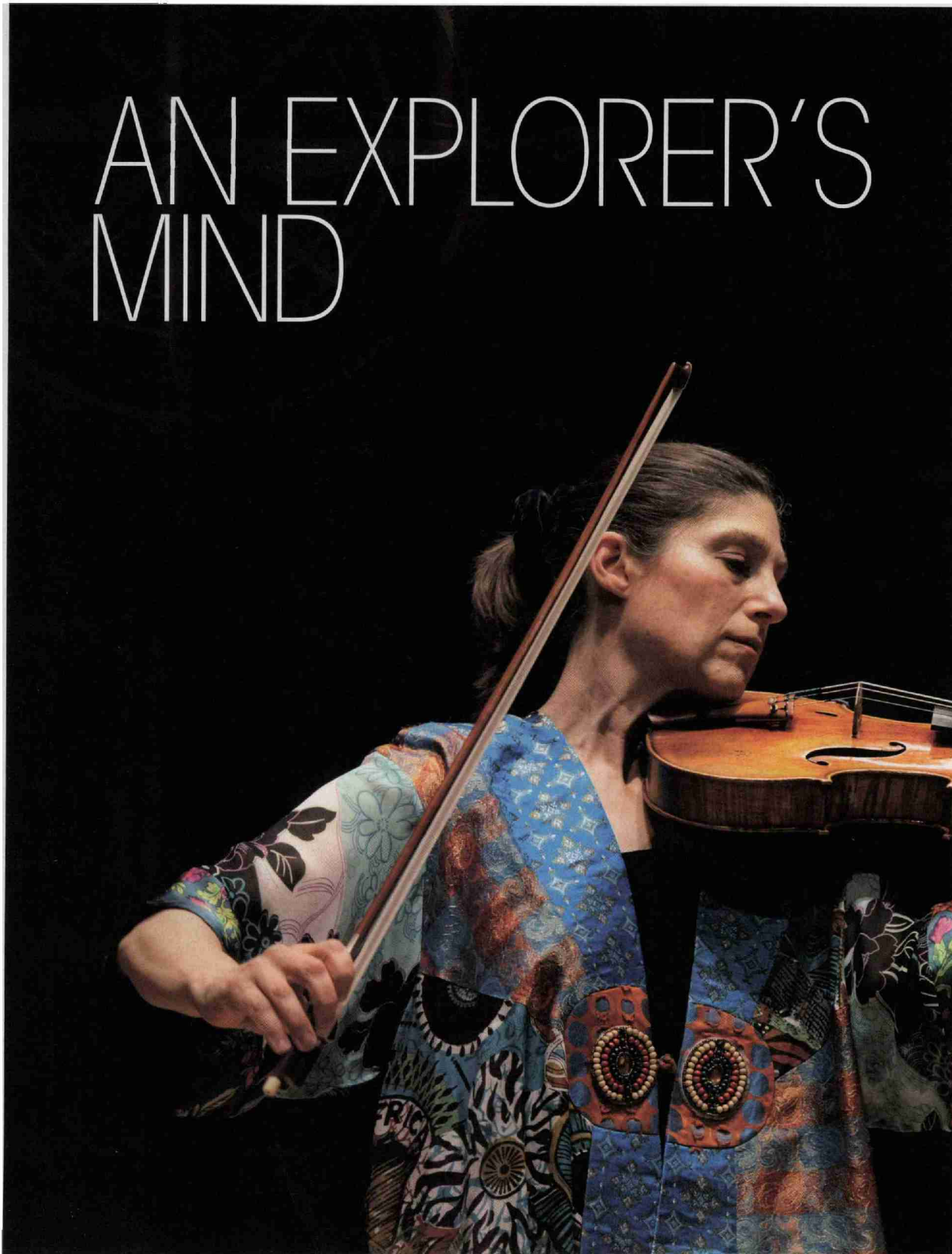


AN EXPLORER'S MIND





J. ADAM FEASTER/UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER



How Hungarian composer György Kurtág helped shape Kim Kashkashian into the most prominent viola soloist in America

By Corinne Ramey

In the early '90s, when violist Kim Kashkashian lived in Freiburg, Germany, she worked on a solo-violin piece called *Jelek* by Hungarian composer György Kurtág. "And I thought, as one always does, given the opportunity to play for the composer, you take it," she says.

So she got in touch with Kurtág, hopped on a train to Budapest, and the two started to work. Kurtág picked apart every phrase, every gesture, and every sound. "He'd stop you every two seconds," Kashkashian says. "He'd say millions of things: 'It's not convincing, I don't understand, it's not convincing, it's not convincing.'"

She counts off Kurtág's criticisms on her fingers.

"In my case, almost always, 'If you stand still, you'll have a better chance. Stop waving around, you're trying the wrong way.'"

She demonstrates, playing air-violin, waving her left arm from side to side.

We're in Kashkashian's home outside of Boston, in what she calls her "music room." She's sitting cross-legged in a wooden chair, wearing a three-quarter sleeve blue shirt and loose black pants, her brown hair pulled back in a tight bun. She's barefoot, and wears no makeup. Kashkashian frequently sits in unconventional ways, with her legs curled up, and often an elbow on her knee, but she always looks extremely balanced, as if a string attached to the ceiling is holding up her spine.

Kashkashian walks over to one of the many neat stacks of sheet music on the floor, and picks up a tattered copy of *Jelek*. She points out where Kurtág had penciled "stand still," and then "don't stop the bow" and "release the sound."

She still prefers to play off this copy, she says.

That day in Budapest, Kashkashian and Kurtág pored over the first three lines of *Jelek's* first movement, which itself is less than a minute, for the next four hours. "At the end of which, I realized that I'd met my midlife-crisis teacher," Kashkashian says. "He was asking me to hear, understand, and materialize things that I'd never dreamt of."

Last September, two decades after the two first met, the Grammy-nominated Kashkashian released her new album *Kurtág/Ligeti: Music for Viola* (ECM), with Kurtág's *Signs, Games, and Messages* and György Ligeti's *Sonata for Viola Solo*. It's the latest for a violist who has forged a unique solo career, performing and recording the standards of the viola literature—and elevating the status of the viola as a solo instrument—while actively working with composers, commissioning and promoting new repertoire.

Kashkashian, who recently turned 60, is arguably the most prominent viola soloist in America today. Her relationship with Kurtág, which has spanned several decades and continues to this day, has shaped who she is as a musician and made an indelible impact on her career.

Since 2000, Kashkashian has taught at the New England Conservatory, and lives nearby with her 22-year-old daughter, Areni, in a modest home in an affluent Boston suburb. Born in Detroit, Michigan, Kashkashian began playing the violin at age nine, and at 12 enrolled at the Interlochen Arts Academy, where she switched to viola. She attended the Peabody Institute, initially to study with Walter Trampler. After her first year, Trampler left, no longer willing to make the commute from New York. Karen Tuttle was her new teacher, which Kashkashian calls the “most serendipitous stroke of good fortune.”

Teaching posts at Indiana University, and in Freiburg and Berlin, Germany, soon followed.

During those years in Germany, Kashkashian took lessons with Kurtág every year or two. She played standard viola repertoire—the Bartók concerto, Schubert's Arpeggione sonata, and the Brahms sonatas—and Kurtág's own music, which he constantly revises: his one-movement concerto, and *Jelek*, or *Signs*, which later became *Signs, Games, and Messages*.

The latter is a collection of short solo pieces, ranging in length from 30 seconds to just under five minutes, with names like “Chromatically Saucy,” “Letter to Vera Ligeti,” and “Hommage à John Cage.”

The two would play together, with Kurtág at the piano. “He is a great pianist, a really great pianist,” Kashkashian says, her voice simultaneously soft-spoken and assertive.

“He probably would not want to play Brahms in public, but to actually play those sonatas with him at the keyboard was a revelation.”

His ideas about touch, voicing, compositional integrity, and structure provided a new perspective, she says.

Kashkashian gestures to her viola, which sits in its open case near a baby grand on the other side of the room. White bookcases line the walls, filled with everything from Dickens and *Gray's Anatomy* to modern fiction by such authors as Ha Jin and Ann Patchett. Kashkashian is an avid reader, and next to the chair in her kitchen there is a thoroughly

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—*Kim Kashkashian*

Post-it-noted copy of music critic Alex Ross' 2010 collection of essays *Listen to This*.

For one particular lesson with Kurtág, Kashkashian brought along violist Carol Rodland, a former student who now teaches at Eastman School of Music. It was around Thanksgiving, Rodland recalls, and Kashkashian was working on the Bartók concerto. “It was the most wonderful thing to watch my teacher having a lesson,” she says. “I loved seeing how he’d sit down at the piano and even in one note he’d show how many layers of gesture are possible.”

Kashkashian would rarely get beyond one measure at a time.

“He cares so much,” Rodland says of Kurtág.

Violist Garth Knox, who has worked extensively with modern composers, including both Ligeti and Kurtág, says he admires Kashkashian for her patience. “It’s pretty hard going,” he says. “Kurtág’s a genius, really, and he can’t believe you can do something until he’s spent hours doing it with you. Kim had great patience and humility, and kept going back for more.

“She loved being taken back to the very basics.”

Taking constant criticism wasn’t always easy for Kashkashian. “Once, he looked at me quizzically, and he said, ‘It seems that Americans don’t learn how to hold the bow,’” Kashkashian says. “That one upset me. My immediate reaction was, ‘How could he say that!’” She raises her voice, and waves both arms in the air.

She’d spent years studying the bow hold with Tuttle, and it took several more for her to process what Kurtág actually meant. “I finally figured out that what he meant was that my bow hand wasn’t feeling the string,” she says.

Speaking on the phone from his home in France, Kurtág recalls his years working with Kashkashian on his music. “It was marvelous because she could experiment very freely, and sometimes experiment in the contrary direction, because she was very flexible and receptive,” Kurtág says.

She would throw her whole self into whatever he asked for and was willing to go to extremes, he adds.

His works are living, breathing creatures, he acknowledges, and he’s constantly revising them, based on what works for a particular player. “Generally, I change all that is not the best for the interpreter,” he says. “My pieces have no really definitive form. If I see that it’s not so compatible to her, then I change it.”

I ask Kurtág, who is 86, if he plans to finish *Signs, Games, and Messages*. He’s currently focused on writing an opera based on Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. “Then, if I’m still living, perhaps I will,” he says.

Other composers echo Kurtág's appreciation for Kashkashian's flexibility. Lera Auerbach, a composer and pianist who has written for and played with Kashkashian, often finds it challenging to get string players to play what is written in the music, especially if she's asking for something ugly or distorted. “With Kim, this is never the case,” Auerbach says. “The moment she feels she understands the color I ask for, she will experiment endlessly to reach this color.”

Kashkashian isn't afraid to search for extremes, like ugly, teeth-grinding ponticello, she says.

Kashkashian regularly works with composers and commissions new music for her instrument. In 2005, composer Ken Ueno

was surprised to receive a voicemail from Kashkashian, since the two had never met. "She had gone to my concert, liked the music, and reached out and called me," Ueno says. The two have since collaborated multiple times, which Ueno calls a transformative event in his career.

Composer Brett Dean, who was previously a violist in the Berlin Philharmonic, says that Kashkashian has an "exploring mind."

"What I've always admired is that while in one sense she has the kind of career and position of a traditional mainstream soloist," he says, "she's never shied away from exploring the nooks and crannies of what music can offer."

In late May, I saw Kashkashian play selections from *Signs, Games, and Messages* at the International Viola Congress in Rochester, New York. When Kashkashian plays the viola, she looks comfortable, as if she's become one with her instrument, and is wholly committed to the musical and emotional task at hand. Her teacher, Karen Tuttle, famously told students to cuddle the viola, something Kashkashian appears to have achieved. "Kim radiates more than she plays," violist Knox says.

Her musical collaborators say that her particular strength, as a violist and a musician, is her ability to create melodic narrative and manipulate musical time. Kashkashian has a strong affinity with the vocal elements of viola playing, says pianist Robert Levin, her frequent collaborator. "She has an absolutely uncanny sense of musical flow," he says.

At the 2012 Viola Congress, the program, with lots of short movements, looked unending. "It's not as scary as it looks," she told the audience, laughing. She played the short pieces in largely chronological order, pausing between movements to talk about how Kurtág's musical language became sparser as time progressed. "At the end you're faced with a set of slow scales, which contain so much emotional material that you just can't believe that it's in something housed that simply," she says.

But on her new album, Kashkashian plays the movements in an order of her own choosing. "Kurtág's a firm believer in dramatic intent," says Kashkashian. "I therefore wanted to create a big arc that has smaller arcs within it, much as a sonata has movements."

At the recording studio, Kashkashian laid out all the movements in a big circle on the floor, surrounding the recording consul, visually constructing the order.

Kurtág says he'd prefer to not have so many slow movements in a row, but that the order of the pieces is up to that particular interpreter. "It's very interesting, not the best for me, but if she decides that it's so, then it should remain," he says.

Pairing the Kurtág and Ligeti on the album was an easy choice. Kurtág and Ligeti were classmates, and remained close friends until Ligeti's death in 2006. The pieces may seem different on the outside, but they are strikingly similar, Kashkashian says. "You look at that big cathedral of a work of the Ligeti sonata, and you put it next to all these tiny little fragments," she says. "But if you look at the fragments as a movable cathedral, it is one."

I ask if she played the Ligeti sonata for the composer. "Unfortunately I never had the opportunity," she says.

Kashkashian pauses, and corrects herself. "Never *made* the opportunity, I should say."

Kashkashian was by no means a child prodigy or young star, and her career is not something that just fell into her lap. She's worked extremely hard and actively sought out opportunities, and still practices about 20 hours a week when learning new music, she says.

Playing scales is her meditation.

"I work hard because I love what happens to me when I'm working," she says. She assiduously prepares for new projects, says Hungarian composer László Tihanyi, and when premiering his viola concerto sent him many emails with thoughtful questions about each unclear pitch and musical phrase.

Almost everyone I spoke with talked of Kashkashian's dedication and perseverance. Dimitri Murrath, a former viola student, says that because Kashkashian had to struggle to figure out things by herself, she is particularly good at explaining them to others. "I think that's what makes her able to teach in the way she does," he says.

When asked to describe Kashkashian, her friends and colleagues say she's kind, funny, warm, quirky, and focused. Tihanyi, the composer, says that while she has a strong personality onstage, offstage she is warmhearted, and occasionally timid. She can be

exceptionally generous, sharing her home with those who need a place to stay, and even loaning out her 19th-century Steinway. She's an extremely dedicated parent, and her daughter often travels with her.

Some students find her scary because she can be unpredictable, but others gush about her ability to address both physical and musical problems, and to individualize her teaching style. "Some teachers are great, and some are sort of like gurus," says violinist Robin Scott, a former student who has since collaborated with Kashkashian at Marlboro. "She's one of the gurus at NEC."

Kashkashian is a free spirit, says her neighbor, Maria Barbarino. She follows her own rules when she gardens, when she cooks without recipes, and when she does Reiki on her basil plants (they grew) and on the tail of Wally, Barbarino's cat (it healed).

"I know she comes from a world where she knows a lot of important people, but there's not an ounce of making anyone feel that she's in any way superior to any of us," says Barbarino. "She's completely down to earth."

One of Kashkashian's nonmusical passions is martial arts, and she practices kung fu and tai chi several times a week. "A

A SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Over the years, Armenian-American Kim Kashkashian has developed close working relationships with such other contemporary European composers as Sofia Gubaidulina, Krzysztof Penderecki, Giya Kancheli, Arvo Pärt, Luciano Berio, and Lorand Eotvos. Her extensive discography ranges from Bartók and Mozart to Schnittke and Vaughan Williams. But especially notable are her critically acclaimed ECM recordings of the music of Armenian composer and singer Tigran Mansurian, which seem to serve as a touch stone for Kashkashian as she returns to his music over and over again. Those albums—including 2003's *Hayren*, 2004's *Monodia*, and 2009's *Neharót*—feature Mansurian's own songs as well as arrangements of the hauntingly beautiful works of the Armenian priest, poet, and composer Komitas Vardapet, who reportedly went mad after witnessing the 1915 Turkish genocide of the Armenian people.

lot of what he says I take right into my viola studio," Kashkashian says of her martial arts teacher. "We're working with a sword, and he says to me, 'Would you cut a tomato by slashing straight down on it?' I said, no. He said, 'Well, don't use your sword that way, use it on an angle.'"

WHAT KASHKASHIAN PLAYS

Kashkashian plays a viola made by Bonn-based maker Stefan-Peter Greiner, made in approximately 1995. It's a copy of her former 1617 Antonio and Girolamo Amati, which she sold about five years ago. The viola is 16 inches, with very wide bouts and high ribs. Greiner is in the process of making her another copy of the viola. "I don't have a back-up instrument," she says. "I worry, if anything were to happen, what would I play on?" Boston-based maker Benoît Rolland made her bow specifically for her instrument.

She raises her right arm, and it's unclear if she's wielding an imaginary viola bow or a sword. "And I thought, 'Holy moly, what if instead of all that complex language about pulling in on the diagonal towards the bridge, blah, blah, I just said, 'Cut it like a tomato!'"

Kashkashian laughs.

She has a loud, raucous laugh, where you can really hear the "h" sound in "ha." It often stops as quickly as it starts. "Stuff like that happens all the time, where there's a congruence that's just magical."

In addition to works by Kurtág, Kashkashian has performed and recorded other Hungarian music and her 2009 album, *Neharót*, features works by Armenian and Israeli composers. I ask if she has a particular interest in music from this area of the world.

She pauses. Kashkashian never speaks before she's ready. "I have an affinity for that part of the world and its language," she says, finally. But the reality is more complicated than that.

"I have a general interest in root music," she says. This applies as much to better-known composers, like Schubert and Brahms, as it does to Romanian, Hungarian, and Armenian ones. "The further away we live in time from the widespread pervasive use of these folksongs, the more important it might be to be aware of that root."

"My other big love is to work on song literature. Not necessarily German lieder, but song." She mentions her 2007 recording, *Asturiana*, of songs from Argentina and Spain.

If Kurtág taught Kashkashian to break musical ideas into tiny fragments, and examine the integrity of each bit of musical grammar, she has since put all those back together again. Ueno, the composer, says there's a part of his viola and percussion duo *Two Hands* that looks simple and sparse on the page. "That's where you see Kim shine," he says.

"When there's nothing else but tone and line, she's far ahead of everyone else. This is the barest, most core of a person." ■