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Kim Kashkashian, Portrait



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KIM
KASHKASHIAN

THE VIOLA EXPLORER ON HER CONTINUOUS QUEST

'The challenge of being yourself
while being at the service of the
composer is a life-long one'

‘No violist in their right mind would only want to be a soloist!’

Viola player Kim Kashkashian has been at the forefront of the instrument's rise to prominence. Never one to rest on her laurels, she tells CARLOS MARÍA SOLARE about her current explorations and why she's increasingly turning to chamber music

THE IMPROBABLE PLACE FOR MY MEETING with Kim Kashkashian is a courtyard in the colourful Berlin district of Kreuzberg. That's where the studio of Robyn Schulkowsky – Kashkashian's long-standing percussion partner – is located. They have been busy working on Karlheinz Stockhausen's cycle *Tierkreis*. 'This series of twelve short pieces inspired by the signs of the zodiac calls for a lot of invention on the part of the performers,' Kashkashian explains. 'Stockhausen wrote some beautiful and simple melodies into it, with second voices that are sometimes composed of tightly constructed counterpoint and sometimes harmonic indications. We cycle each little piece at least three times, with different profilings of melody, harmony and voicing. We are working on colours and characters, choice of instrument, which octave to play in, when to go back and forth and how best to profile intervallic structures.'

The dozens of percussion instruments lying around in Schulkowsky's large studio testify to the intensity and breadth of these experiments, but *Tierkreis* isn't the only piece the duo is working on. A few days after our meeting the Berlin festival of new music, MaerzMusik, is due to profile the work of the Japanese-American composer Ken Ueno, and Kashkashian and Schulkowsky will perform *Two Hands*, a piece that the composer wrote for them. 'We premiered it at last year's International Viola Congress in Cincinnati,' Kashkashian says. 'But for this performance we will rehearse again with the composer.' In Cincinnati, the piece was performed as part of an evening called *Hands*, which Kashkashian describes as 'searching for commentary on what hands contain, do or produce; what kind of tools they can be physically, psychologically, morally or ethically'.

These concepts still preoccupy the violist, who at this point produces a novel by Portuguese Nobel Prize winner ▶

The violist with her 1995 Brothers Amati copy by Stefan-Peter Greiner



STEVE RISHKO

KASHKASHIAN'S INSTRUMENTS

KASHKASHIAN PLAYS A VIOLA made by Stefan-Peter Greiner in 1995, which is a copy of her own Brothers Amati instrument of 1617. She says: 'After having it for a few years, I started playing on it fairly seriously, and in the last five years I have played on it almost exclusively. After many years of going back and forth, I found I was very comfortable playing on the Greiner. The Amati has a beautiful, sensitive old soul, and that soul came through in everything I played. I am very grateful for that partnership and what the instrument showed me. But the bottom line is that the Greiner gives me the neutrality of an excellent tool: a beautiful, even sound, that speaks as I expect. It doesn't have the 1,000-year-old soul, but after many years with the Amati, I feel I can reproduce some of that, and I have more freedom to also produce other things that I might look for, that the Amati wouldn't want to do.'

See page 46 for an interview with Stefan-Peter Greiner about making violas

José Saramago and reads me a passage proposing the notion that each joint of our fingers has its own brain, one that is much more directly involved with what the hands produce than the brain in our head. 'This is such beautiful imagery,' she says. 'I run into things like this from time to time, and find it interesting to explore them as the subject for an evening of music; this theme is closely tied up with our psychology and our ethics, and what human beings are capable of.' Kashkashian still considers *Hands* a work in progress. 'The performance in Cincinnati was a first attempt,' she says. 'Although each piece successfully stood alone, I'm not sure the evening as a whole had the arc and potency we were looking for.'

WHILE SHE CONTINUES TO SHAPE her *Hands* project, Kashkashian is also considering the idea of circles or cycles as a unifying thread. She says that Stockhausen's series based on the signs of the zodiac belongs with this concept, as do, tentatively, Marin Marais's set of variations on *Les Folies d'Espagne*. 'Any piece based on an ostinato bass is, so to speak, circular,' Kashkashian says. 'The second movement of György Ligeti's Sonata for Solo Viola, "Loop", isn't the only loop in the piece: the "Presto con

'It's wonderful to have the time to stretch out and think, and to hear differently. Much as I love my students, once in a while I need some distance from them to regenerate'

sordino" is also one, as is the "Chaconne chromatique". I may also commission a piece that wanders through the 24 keys. These will all be different kinds of circles, or rather, different ways of closing a circle.'

Ligeti's unaccompanied sonata will be included on Kashkashian's next recording for ECM, sessions for which take place this month. The CD will be balanced by György Kurtág's *Signs, Games and Messages*, an ongoing series of movements for solo viola. In a less esoteric vein, Kashkashian is planning a Schumann programme together with her piano partner of several decades, Robert Levin. 'It'll be a complete act of theft: we won't be playing the one piece Schumann wrote for the viola; instead we'll play works for horn (the Adagio and Allegro), cello (*Stücke im Volkston*), clarinet (*Phantasiestücke*) and violin (the D minor Sonata). The latter was a suggestion of pianist Péter Nagy, and it works beautifully on the viola. My musical relationships with Robyn and Robert go back to the 1980s. It has been an education to watch our development: sometimes we are on parallel paths, sometimes not, but it always seems to come together again. We inspire each other that way.'

Kashkashian's latest chamber music projects explore complex issues through philosophical themes

During another interview a few years ago, when Kashkashian was based in Berlin and taught at the Hochschule für Musik 'Hanns Eisler', she told me about dividing her professional life into three approximately equal parts: solo playing, chamber music and teaching. I ask her if this still holds true. 'Of course, these proportions change on a yearly basis, but on top of that, I've now practically given up performing with orchestra. There are very few concertos I would like to continue playing, such as those by Peter Eötvös and Luciano Berio, maybe adding Brett Dean's at some point, but other than that I'm very happy not to be the hero in front of the orchestra. At this point in my life I am much more geared towards the intimacy of playing with a few people or alone. Accordingly, I am playing much more chamber music. When my daughter was younger I needed to be at home as much as possible: I'd practise there, travel to concerts, then return home straight away. Now that she is 21 and in college, I am free to spend longer periods elsewhere. There are several festivals I visit on a regular basis – Great Lakes, Sarasota, Ravinia, Helsinki and Verbier, Nobuko Imai's Viola Space in Tokyo and the Bartók Festival in Szombathely, Hungary.'

One festival has made a greater impression on Kashkashian than all of the others, as she explains. 'I am most engaged with the Marlboro Festival, towards which I feel a great debt of gratitude. I first attended Marlboro as a very young 19-year-old. I grew up there musically, under the influence of that wonderful bunch of immigrants: Felix Galimir, the brothers Mischa and Alexander

Schneider, and of course Rudolf Serkin. Like many of my generation, I am very grateful to them for giving me not only a stylistic training, but also a perspective on the ethics and morals of how to work, what music can mean in your life, and what you owe to others because you have the gift of making music. These ideals suffer in today's speedy world. The older Marlboro circle of artists were displaced persons: they had to flee, or chose to leave, their European homes, and perhaps for that reason the music and what it meant was so central to their spiritual well-being. It was a great learning experience in so many ways for all of us who were lucky enough to have shared those years. Now we try to pass it on. Not that we come close, but we try.'

WHICH BRINGS US TO THE THIRD PART of Kashkashian's musical life – teaching. At the time of this interview, she is halfway through a sabbatical from her position at Boston's New England Conservatory, where she has taught since 2000. She says: 'It's wonderful to have the time to relax and think, and to hear differently. Much as I love my students, once in a while I need some distance from them to regenerate. As Garth Knox is teaching my class this semester, I need feel no guilt whatsoever: my students are open-mouthed and open-eyed and learning great things with him.'

Conversation turns to Karen Tuttle, who passed away in December 2010. 'She was my teacher and mentor,' Kashkashian says. 'I studied with her until the day she died, and indeed >

KASHKASHIAN ON...

THE VIOLA AS A SOLO INSTRUMENT

‘It is an unfortunate and inexplicable fact that the viola as a solo vehicle is better understood and accepted in Europe than in the US’

KAREN TUTTLE

‘Her playing was an ideal, organic whole in which the written page came through her body and out of the instrument’

COMPETITIONS

‘Nobody should go to a competition with the goal of winning, or believe to be a better or worse player for having won or lost. This cannot be a reflection of value’

THE BEAUTY OF VERSATILITY

‘No violist in their right mind would only want to be a soloist!’

NEW MUSIC

‘Part of a musician’s job is to tell the news. Therefore we should develop a responsibility and a love for contemporary music’

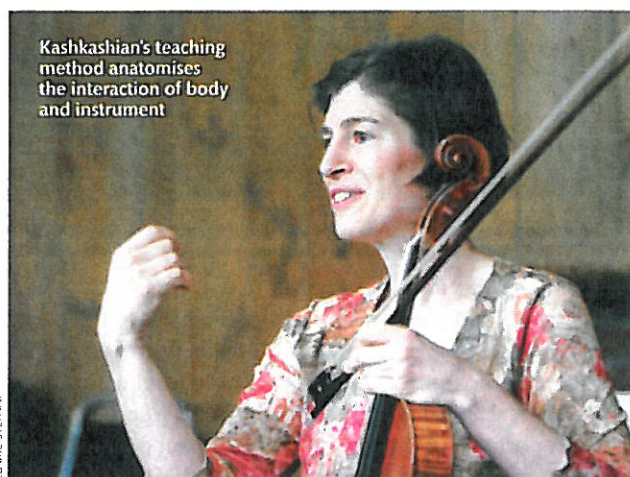
BACH

‘I start and end every day with Bach. It is a potent way to communicate: both to order my impressions about the world like a meditation, and then to share that order with the world around me’



PIETRO GÖLDYANNI/ECM RECORDS

Kashkashian: ‘The body reflects the instrument, and ideally the two should become one’



CLAIRE STEFANI

Kashkashian’s teaching method anatomises the interaction of body and instrument

continue to learn from her. Of course, as a performing artist I had to develop my own way of understanding her advice and the philosophies that she stood for. Each of us must do this, and I certainly hope that my students will take anything I offer them and come up with creative solutions that have a life of their own.’ Tuttle’s philosophies have had a profound effect on Kashkashian’s own teaching methods, as she acknowledges. ‘What I teach is based on certain premises that Karen Tuttle demonstrated so convincingly: that the body reflects the instrument and resonates with it, and that ideally the two should become one. Your body is part of the instrument that you work with. How people handle this concept can vary; I try to show students how to play their instrument with no muscular blockages and no unnecessary struggles going on within their bodies, so that the joints are not compromised in their mobility.’

A WORD ON COMPETITIONS

TWO STUDENTS WHO ARE currently in my class each sent the same CD to both the Ravinia Steans Institute and to the Primrose Competition. Student A was accepted at one and not at the other, while with Student B it was the other way round. Needless to say, I had to comfort them both. However, I actually found it very good that neither found success in both places; for me, it meant that both their CDs were quite personal, not middle-of-the-road. I said bravo to both of them: for having enough personality to be accepted, and enough personality to be rejected. Both are equally important.

'Competitions are a very good tool for sharpening your skills and climbing two steps of the ladder in the amount of time it would normally take to climb one. They provide a concentrated means of preparing and improving, and of teaching yourself to be strong under any circumstances. That said, a competition does not function as a deeply musical tool: you cannot judge art the way you judge a race. There are certain elements that can be defined and judged, but music making at the highest level – and that is what you expect at an international competition – just cannot be judged.'

STEVE RISKIND

The emphasis of Kashkashian's teaching method is to find a way of interacting with the instrument that is in tune with the body's natural mechanical balance, as she explains. 'Any time you have an excess of energy, you have a situation where the structure that links your body to the viola is not ideal,' she says. 'If you find the ideal structures, body mechanics work one hundred per cent for you. Karen Tuttle would express this differently as "release, re-pull". By "re-pull" she meant something that happens in the middle of the bow, which actually releases the lower spine and "re-rotates" the arm against the natural pronation and towards a more centred approach to the stick. For me, it's a question of making sure that none of the joints is in a compromised position: that the joints are not over-committed to one point, that any joint in the body can be moved any way, that none is at an extreme. If you are over-committed to one point, the sound

itself becomes over-committed. You get what might be a very penetrating sound, but it doesn't have many layers.'

Kashkashian is clear about the benefits of this approach: 'The whole issue of body mechanics and of developing a structure that works with the instrument benefits sonority and resonance, and produces a singing quality that reaches the back of the hall. These are primary considerations, because music and sound production are then one inseparable entity. On the highest level, pulse, rhythm and sonority are one, and are, together with both vertical and melodic harmony, reflected in sound. Every sound contains its own pulsation and the duration of each note has an organic shape. Having internalised this, a student is ready to conceive of and perform a musical text without false effort or subjectivity. This is, of course, the challenge we all face. Why and how are we translating this text into sound? The challenge of being yourself while being at the service of the composer is a life-long one.' ■