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Making Cho

STRINGS August/September 2000

Wherever you are, in any situation, you always have pluses and minuses. At some point, one may outweigh the other and then you have to make a choice," says violist Kim Kashkashian. She speaks from experience: making choices—personal, professional, and artistic—has been a recurrent theme in her life, and some of them have been so crucial and far-reaching that they affected the entire course of her career.

Of Armenian heritage, Kashkashian grew up in Detroit and began to play the violin when she was eight. "I really wanted to play the clarinet," she says, "but a cousin's violin was sitting in the closet, and my mother felt I should play an instrument that was already in the family. So I studied with Ara Zerounian, who brought up three generations of American string players. When I was 12 I went to the Interlochen Arts Academy; there I was able to borrow a viola, and simply moved back to the register I had wanted in the first place.

"But the truth is that I'm still a closet violinist, at least at home. I love to play the Bach sonatas and partitas, and all those wonderful Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert sonatas. I have a very patient friend who plays the piano with me."

Kashkashian studied viola at Peabody Conservatory and at the Philadelphia Musical Academy with Karen Tuttle, eventually becoming her assistant. This initial teaching experience laid the foundation of a lifelong dedication to teaching. She has held faculty positions at New York's Mannes School (now Mannes College) of Music and the University of Indiana at Bloomington, and the Freiburg Hochschule for Musik and the Hochschule für Musik Hans Eisler in Germany, and this Fall is taking up a position at the New England Conservatory in Boston.

WHAT SHE PLAYS

Kim Kashkashian's viola was made by Girolamo and Antonio Amati in 1617 and is about 16½ or 16¾ inches long. She got it from Charles Beare in London in 1985. She recently began to collect bows and has a Nicolas Maire, an Ouchard, and a Eugene Sartory, in addition to a Pfretzschner that she broke many years ago.

"I can plead callow youth," she says. "One day while I was practicing, I took a break and put my viola and bow on my bed, which I thought would be the safest place. When I came back into the room, I noticed that a picture on the wall was crooked, got onto the bed to fix it, and stepped right on the bow. It was completely in pieces, but a fantastic bow maker, Francisco Torres [of New York], fixed it, literally weaving it back together and also strengthening it, so it still sounded wonderful, though it had lost some of its resilience." For the Kurtág program at Weill Hall, she used two bows: the broken one for a piece in which she had to bang the stick on the music stand—because, she says, "you don't use a good bow to bang"—and the Maire for everything else.

Kashkashian uses only a little pad to keep the viola from slipping, not a shoulder rest, because her neck is short enough to do without one. Her strings are all Tonicas.

Her performing career, like most violists', began with chamber music. She spent many summers at Marlboro and now explains, "I was very much influenced by its tradition and the way the people there looked at music. And of course there was that great teacher and mentor, Felix Galimir." In New York, Kashkashian played with Philomusica and the Seal Cliff Chamber Players, but, she recalls, "At some time during those years I realized that I wanted to develop my solo abilities, I decided to put myself under fire, so in 1981

I entered two competitions, the Lionel Tertis in England and the ARD Competition in Munich, which both happened to take place within one week."

She won second prize at the Tertis and third prize in Munich, but she takes a generally dim view of competitions. "Their only real benefit lies in the preparation," she declares. "I wanted to learn all that solo repertoire, have it in my fingers at one time, and play it on stage, memorized, without being visibly nervous. I came out a much stronger player, and of course being judged so positively was a boost to my self-confidence. But the prizes did nothing for me directly in terms of a career."

There was, however, the benefit of exposure. "In Munich, they have a concert for the final prize-winners," she says, "and some people heard me and invited me to play in their festivals or concerts. So I did develop certain musical contacts in Europe, and one of them eventually changed the direction of my life: Manfred Eicher of ECM Records heard a radio broadcast of a concert I had played, liked it, and wrote me that he was interested in recording that performance. As a result

of that connection, and thanks to ECM, I've been able to record a lot of solo repertoire and unusual repertoire." And, one might add, contemporary repertoire. Kashkashian is one of those intrepid pioneers who have commissioned and premiered new works, inspiring composers to enlarge the notoriously limited viola literature and often collaborating with them directly.

She is that rare phenomenon, a star solo violist. Her technique is masterful—and her tone is instantly arresting for its warmth, austere purity, and concentrated intensity. Glowing like dark amber and radiant like golden sunshine, it has infinite variety of color, nuance, and inflection. Her phrasing, rhythmically supple yet steady, flows and breathes as naturally as human speech; her expressiveness communicates deep personal involvement.

Her latest recording, made with the Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra under Peter Eötvös, features an all-Hungarian program: Bartók's Concerto, Kurtág's "Movement for Viola and Orchestra," and Eötvös' *Replica*, which was written for her. Her interest in 20th-century music, she says, developed naturally. "I feel that part of my job as a musician is to tell the news, to spread the word about what's going on in the musical world. After all, until maybe 100 years ago, performers played mostly music that was being written at the time. It's our obligation, as well as a challenge and a pleasure, to work with the composers of the day." She no longer has to seek out new works, though, since now composers send her their scores. "I have a terribly bad conscience about a pile that I haven't had a chance to look at," she confesses.

Kashkashian's European connections led to European concert engagements, and after dividing her time between the U.S. and the continent, she "began to realize that a violist has far more opportunities for solo playing in Europe than in America. That's always been true and it's still true. Here, the viola is just beginning to be reluctantly respected as a solo instrument, while in Europe it is fully accepted." So in 1987, when she had been teaching at Indiana University for two years, Kashkashian found that she was spending more time in Europe than America and made another significant choice: she moved to Germany.

As a result, her performing career flourished. "I played about 25 recitals and as many concerto dates a year in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy, which would never have been possible in America," she says. "I could have done a



Kashkashian admires her Amati.



Kashkashian has found that Europe offers more opportunities for violinists.

lot more, except that I am a mother and try to limit my time away from home." And because she wanted her daughter to have an at least partially American education, she moved to Berlin, which has the only American school in Germany, in 1996, after teaching in Freiburg for six years. "I made that choice for my daughter's sake, but then I was lucky," she explains. "The Hanns Eisler Academy happened to have an opening, and I auditioned and got the job. So it all worked out perfectly."

Kashkashian talks about her teaching career there with warm enthusiasm. "I've been lucky to have a large, gifted, interesting class," she says. "Unfortunately, my students are too shy to correct my German, though I often ask them to, especially the recurrent grammatical mistakes. In Europe, there is more reserve between teacher and student than here."

Throughout her European years, Kashkashian paid occasional visits to America to see family and friends and also to perform; the latest of these occasions was an all-Kurtág program at Weill Hall in New York (see *On Stage*, page 107). Describing the differences between European and American musical life, she says, "There's more flexibility in Europe. There are more small organizations that can survive. Every town has its own orchestra and chamber-music series; there are more broadcasts of classical music, both live and recorded. But since the falling of the Berlin Wall, the financial situation has been tighter. There's less state support, and a great deal of it is flowing into the East. It affects not only the arts, but social and medical areas as well."

Although Kashkashian's move to Germany was motivated by professional

considerations, her reasons for returning to America were more complicated. "Boston feels very much like home because my grandparents lived there and I often visited as a child," she says. "And I'm very happy to join the conservatory faculty; it's a wonderful school and I have colleagues there who have been my friends since we were in high school. In fact, the conservatory approached me five years ago, but though I considered returning to the States, I didn't feel quite ready for it. My daughter enjoyed attending the American school, and many things were quite wonderful, including my professional life. But there's something about the atmosphere, and certain aspects of private life, that I missed very much; I had lived in Germany for 13 years, and I just had the feeling it was time to come home. It's nice to have two homes, and to leave the second to return to the first."

As to how the move will affect her performing, she says, "The situation for a solo violinist is still far better in Europe. My years there have left me with the enjoyable but naïve impression that the viola is a solo instrument like any other—but, though I hate to say this, American violinists are still acting like missionaries, and it's time for me to join the fight. However, I'll continue to perform in Europe, going over probably three or four times a year, and pack as much playing as possible into ten days or two weeks. I am very lucky: for about ten years I've had a fantastic management, the Sonia Simenauer Impresariat in Hamburg. My schedule is fairly solidly booked for the next two years, so going back and forth will be a bit frantic, but we knew we'd have to accept a period of adjustment." Although a highly successful soloist, Kashkashian also performs in numerous chamber-music groups with such players as pianist Robert Levin, percussionist Robyn Schulkowsky, violinist Leonidas Kavakos, cellist Miklós Perényi, and violinist Garth Knox, formerly of the Arditti String Quartet.

Among stringed instruments, the viola has always occupied a special position, both positive and negative. It has sometimes even been described as a "sad" instrument, because its dark sound has inspired many composers to write very somber, mournful music for it; one of Kashkashian's own recordings is a program called *Elegies*. "Sad?" she retorts. "An instrument can't be sad. An instrument can become anything, depending on the hands and the imagination of the person who's using it. We no longer even agree that there's such a thing as a particular viola sound. The viola is still in a state of flux, of experimentation; every few years somebody

comes out with a new, differently shaped viola. But one thing they all have in common is that the string length and the pitch aren't exactly right for each other. The viola is tuned a fifth lower than the violin but is only a few inches longer. Ideally, the viola should have a longer string, acoustically speaking, but then you couldn't play it. This discrepancy gives it that particular kind of tone quality that we might characterize as human, perhaps because it's less reliable. I would like to present the theory that the viola is an absolutely flexible tool that can respond to the player's imagination perhaps more than any other."

She proves this contention in her own playing through her incomparable tone and her artistic choices. The viola literature, also perhaps more than any other, confronts the player with specific problems in its inevitable reliance on transcriptions. In the Bach Gamba Sonatas, for example, which Kashkashian plays with a harpsichord, she chooses to stay in the low cello range as much as possible. "My original intention," she explains, "was to play them on a five-stringed viola, with an added low F string, to retain the original pitch rather than jump around the registers, sometimes for just one note, like the low B in the D-Major Sonata. But at that time we didn't have the right kind of string that would articulate properly. So I ended up playing it on my Amati, tuned down and using gut strings, of course, and that gives it a completely different kind of carrying power. There's more core to the sound, and there are no balance problems when playing with a harpsichord.

"I still have that five-stringed viola, a wonderful instrument made by Francesco Bissolotti of Cremona. I now have it strung up with a high E instead of a low F, and that's great; one can use it for any number of Vivaldi concertos, also the Sixth Bach Suite, and I'm even experimenting with the Schubert's 'Arpeggione' Sonata. Actually, I used to wish I were using it when I played the Kurtág Concerto, because half of that piece is up in the stratosphere. The extra string is accommodated by an instrument specially built to be broader, with an extra-fat fingerboard."

The Brahms Sonatas, on the other hand, she plays in the high clarinet range. "That was also a matter of going back to what he originally wrote and wondering, why did he change this or that passage? Perhaps he took it down an octave because the violists of his day didn't sound good up high, but now we are so much better that we can risk it. And if the clarinet had a low C, perhaps he would have gone down there, so we'll use our C string." In short, Kashkashian

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uses the full range of both the clarinet and the viola, and her recording is wonderful.

The Bartók Concerto, which she plays on her latest recording, poses a different kind of choice. Left unfinished at the composer's death, it was completed by his friend Tibor Serly. But recently Bartók's son Peter, together with a composer named de la Maggiore, went back to the original manuscript and redid some of Serly's work, reducing the orchestration, at around the same time Hungarian violinist Csaba Erdlyi made his own, even more bare-boned version. Kashkashian decided to use Serly's version because "Peter Eötvös felt quite strongly that the orchestration is more characteristic of Bartók. I have, of course, experimented with both versions and think both have advantages and disadvantages; I tried to make an educated choice."

Eötvös is a Hungarian composer who is active in both Hungary and Germany and is based in Holland, where he conducts the radio orchestra. He wrote his *Replica* for Kashkashian after hearing her recordings, especially those of Kurtág's works. She says of their collaboration, "When I first looked at the score, I got very scared, because it's in multiple meter. For example, the orchestra is playing in two and I'm playing in three, or I'm in five and the orchestra is in four, and I wondered how this was going to work. But he was fantastic to work with and kept encouraging me simply to play the main bar, to play the breath of the phrase, to play what I felt. He said, 'Kim, I wrote this music as if on your skin; don't worry about a thing, just play.' And in the end, when I had enough confidence to do what he suggested and not worry about every micro-16th being together or not together, it did work out really well, and I felt I could express what he wanted. We premiered it in Milan and then recorded it."

Instantly recognizable through her uniquely distinctive sound and interpretive choices, Kashkashian's technical approach to her instrument is equally individualistic, and watching her play is fascinating. Her hand position is unusual, even unorthodox: she supports the viola with the base of her thumb, her wrist bent in, her hand almost parallel to the neck. Yet she has unlimited facility and speed and a wonderful vibrato. How does she do it?

"I have some very strong opinions about this," she smiles, and picks up a pencil, closing her fist on it. "If you use your hand in the normal way, that's the way you'd grab any object, with the fingers closed—and that's how you should hold the fingerboard. It's the closure of the hand that counts. I always have my students

make that natural closing of the fist. And the wrist position is also part of my theory. Usually it's bent out slightly, but you actually get the best leverage, with the least muscle contraction, if it's bent in a little. If you do *this*," she says, drumming her fingers on the table and keeping the knuckles straight, "you can see that the finger action is from the knuckle line, and you want to reproduce that on the fingerboard because it's the simplest and most articulate way. But you must set your hand at an angle where possible, and that means the wrist must bend in, not out. I do, however, change my position slightly according to whether I need more bounce in the fingers for articulation or a more sliding, snakelike feeling."

She also moves her hand slightly along with each finger change, keeping the thumb opposite the second finger, where it would be while making a fist. The base of her first finger barely touches the neck, and only in passagework. "If you don't squeeze and keep an open thumb, you're absolutely free to vibrate. And the main point is that your hand, including the thumb, makes a full circle, not a triangle, as it would if the thumb were bending outward.

"What's more, you can get a parallel feeling of a circle in the right hand by

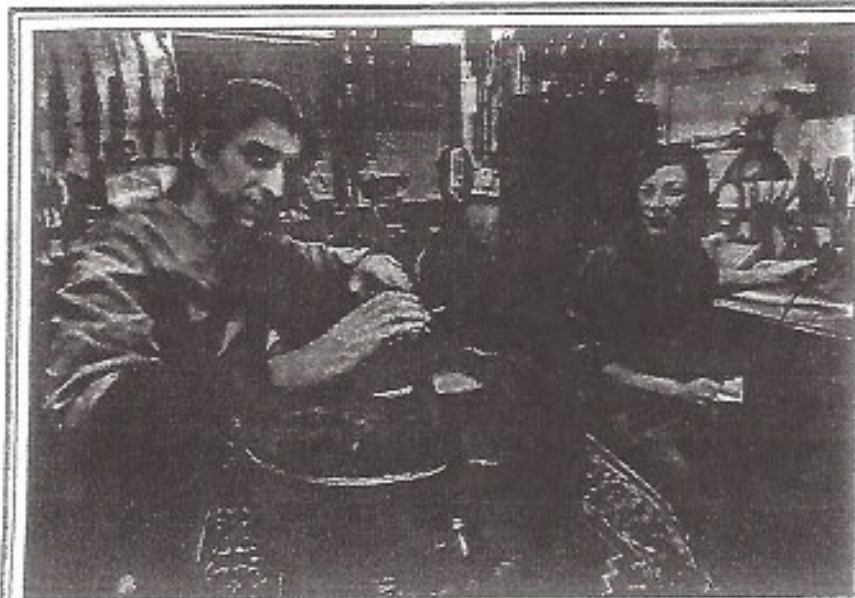


Silvia Lotti

Kashkashian's technical approach is highly individual.

placing the thumb opposite the second finger on the bow," she continues. "I try to balance the weight from the middle of the palm, not over the first finger. At the tip,

you have to turn in more for first-finger weight, but you can still have the feeling of being centered over the middle of the palm, and then you readjust as soon as



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possible. For me it's pretty much an iron-clad rule that you get a warmer sound with more overtones if you do that than if you balance toward the first finger. On the other hand, you get more core to the sound with more first-finger pressure. You have a choice." Indeed, her bow seems to cling to the string with unusual closeness; perhaps this is part of the secret of her unique tone quality.

Can all this be taught? "Well," she says, "I do try to teach the individual students; I don't put them into a mold. But I know that I have a rather specific, personal way of teaching, so I make sure to be available for auditions wherever I teach, because I wouldn't want to take on any students without getting a feeling for them as persons and players and without letting them get a feeling for me. The relationship between student and teacher is very personal, so it's important for a good partnership that we choose each other.

"I must admit, though, that only about 50 percent of my students can make use of my technical ideas. It depends on the shape of their hands. My teacher, Karen Tuttle, had a completely different hand position. I took her principles, her ideas of what was available to me in terms of flexibility and comfort, and then used what worked for my hand. That's the only thing you can pass on."

Indeed, Kashkashian's way of playing is so unorthodox that if one has not heard and seen her perform, one might think it an impossible dream—all little kids want to let the wrist collapse. "Perhaps we should listen to them," she observes. "They know how to find the most natural position. Also, have you noticed how babies grab your finger? Their grip is so strong that they can really tug you, though there's no muscle, no tension. It's an absolutely perfect bow grip.

"The basic question is always the same: what is most natural and comfortable? You should hold your instrument in the way your body wants to function, not some odd, twisted position. So if you start by asking yourself, 'What would my body be doing without the instrument?' you come to the best, most natural technique.

"I'll give you an example," she continues. "I was performing the Mozart Divertimento with my string trio [Leonidas Kavakos, violin, and Miklós Perény, cello], and before the concert they went off somewhere and I was alone on stage, practicing that tricky passage with the trills and shifts. They both came back simultaneously, one on each side of me, and at absolutely the same moment one said, 'You should pick up your fingers when you shift!' and the

other said, 'Keep your fingers closer to the fingerboard!' I laughed and said, 'Both of you show me what you mean.' They did, and then they looked at each other and said, 'Hey, it works!'

"So ultimately, everyone has to find their own solutions." ✦

DISCOGRAPHY

All of Kim Kashkashian's recordings are on ECM.

Bach: Three Sonatas for Viola da Gamba and Cembalo, with Keith Jarrett, cembalo (1501).

Bartók: Concerto; Eötvös: *Replica*; Kurtág: "Movement," with the Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra, Peter Eötvös, cond. (1711).

Bourchard: *Pourtinade*; Chihara: *Redwood*; Shostakovich: Sonata, with Robert Levin, piano, and Robyn Schulkowsky, percussion (1425).

Brahms: Sonatas, with Robert Levin, piano (78118-21630-2).

Romances and Elegies: Britten, Vaughan Williams, Carter, Glazunov, Liszt, Kodály, Vieuxtemps, with Robert Levin, piano (1316).

Britten: *Lachrymae*; Hindemith: *Trauermusik*; Penderecki: Concerto, with Stuttgarter Kammerorchester, Dennis Russell Davies, cond. (1506).

Hindemith: Sonatas for Viola Alone, Sonatas for Viola and Piano, with Robert Levin, piano (1330-32).

Kancheli: *Vom Winde beweint*; Schnittke: Concerto. With Orchester der Beethovenhalle, Bonn; Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Saarbrücken, Dennis Russell Davies, cond. (1471).

Kurtág: *Nine Pieces for Viola Solo*; Jelek; *Hommage à R.Sch.* Schumann: *Märchenbilder*, Op. 113 and 132, *Fantasiestücke*, Op. 73, with Robert Levin, piano, Eduard Brunner, clarinet (1508).

Karaindrou: *Ulysses' Gaze* (film) (1570).
