

ARMENIAN RHAPSODY

ONE OF THE WORLD'S TOP VIOLISTS, DETROIT-BORN KIM KASHKASHIAN BRINGS PASSION, INTENSITY AND FIERCE ETHNIC PRIDE TO HER LIFE AND HER MUSIC

By MARK STRYKER
 FREE PRESS MUSIC WRITER

CLEVELAND — Kim Kashkashian, one of the world's great violists, is a little bleary-eyed as she climbs into the minivan this Sunday morning. She performed Bela Bartok's exhausting Viola Concerto the night before with the Cleveland Orchestra, and she barely slept once her head hit the pillow.

"All the other worries I put aside seemed to come out," she tells a friend. "On the other hand, I now have my daughter's graduation all planned."

The Detroit-born Kashkashian, 55, who performs at the upcoming Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, is one of just a few violists with a thriving solo career. But even within a small circle, she stands out for her maverick sensibility, storyteller expression and the breadth of her activities as a performer, recording artist, teacher and champion of contemporary music.

"Kim is absolutely at the pinnacle," says Detroit Symphony Orchestra violist Caroline Coade. "She's a role model. We all want to build awareness for this incredible instrument. She's out there commissioning new works, making unrivaled recordings, soloing with orchestras, playing chamber music and teaching."

Kashkashian is 5-foot-6, but her long neck and lean, lithesome frame create the illusion that she's taller. She has a soft face, high cheek bones, plaintive eyes, short brown hair, an ultra-bright smile

See KASHKASHIAN, 2F

and a generous laugh. She could easily pass for 40.

From the outside, Kashkashian's journey to the top of her profession seems paved with inevitability. Her pedigree includes the Peabody Conservatory, rubbing shoulders with giants like Rudolf Serkin and Felix Galimir at Vermont's prestigious Marlboro Festival and competition prizes. She launched her solo career working with the perspicacious Latvian violin virtuoso Gidon Kremer in the early '80s.

During her landmark 20-year tenure with the artsy boutique European label ECM, she has recorded everything from Bach and Brahms to lots of new music by modernists like Luciano Berio and György Kurtág. Since 2000 she has taught at Boston's New England Conservatory, relocating after 13 years in Germany, where she built her career on the viola-friendly European scene. Her peak was about 60 concerts a year.

But a program-book biography obscures a complex road map of bushwhacking, grinding sweat and struggle. A perfectionist and prone to self-doubt, Kashkashian has battled not only the recalcitrant viola but darker angels. She has willed herself into greatness.

"I'm not by nature a sunny person," she says while waiting for a flight at the airport. "Some of us fight through a dark cloud every morning, but I've learned that if I can't fight through it, at least there's something on the other side of it. I've trained myself to be happy."

Extraordinary touch and nuance

The viola is the Rodney Dangerfield of the orchestra, its players the butt of endless jokes such as: How can you tell that a violist is playing out of tune? The bow is moving. Kashkashian's favorite is the most macabre: How do you make a violist sit up straight? Stab him in the back.

Larger and more unwieldy



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than the violin, the viola is the alto voice of the string section. Solo repertoire is limited but growing thanks to players like Kashkashian and her Russian contemporary Yuri Bashmet, heirs to William Primrose, the most important violist of the 20th Century.

Kashkashian's magic starts with the dark-complexioned purity of her tone and absolute technical mastery. But the loftiest realm of technique isn't speed; it's nuance. Kashkashian draws an extraordinary range of color from the viola, shading each note with its own considered hue, animating each phrase with dramatic intent, balancing gutsy rhythm and intensity with untethered flow. Nothing sounds fussy. Her playing blooms with shrewd intuition and delirious song.

"When you hear Kim, you wish to experience in your daily emotional diary the feelings that emanate from every one of her performances," says her longtime pianist, Robert Levin.

The first music Kashkashian heard was her Armenian-born father singing opera and Armenian folk songs around the house. Though he died when she was 9, his resonant baritone was seared into her DNA. She speaks of his voice longingly — "it's as familiar to me as the color of the sky" — and every time she picks up the viola, she's playing a duet with his spirit.

"I'm a melody person," she says. "Other people might be harmony people, rhythm people or structure people. Of course, the elements are intertwined and can't live without each other. But melody for me is the guiding engine."

Her taste for contemporary music was formed as a teen intoxicated by the visceral sonorities and pleasures of new music on record. By now, she has had dozens of works written for her and forged illuminating

partnerships with many important composers.

Once when preparing a piece by Kurtág, a Hungarian who writes intensely distilled and eloquent miniatures, Kashkashian traveled to Budapest to play for him. She thought she was prepared. Five hours later they were still only two lines into the piece.

"I had a complete midlife crisis," she says. "The things he asked for, things I wasn't able to do until later, generated a whole new level of playing for me. I didn't know there were so many layers to the onion."

The composers are grateful for her advocacy. Kashkashian gave the premiere of a new concerto by Tigran Mansurian two weeks ago in Boston. Speaking through a translator, the Armenian composer compared her to Petrarch's muse and noted that she always remains at the service of the composer instead of the other way around.

Teacher and student reunited

Kashkashian's final business in Cleveland on this morning is teaching a master class at a workshop named for her own legendary teacher, Karen Tuttle, who despite declining health at age 88 has made it here for the weekend. Her students treat her with the affection and reverence reserved for matriarchs. Kashkashian likes to call her 'Tut, smuggle up to her and kiss her cheek.

"I had a lesson with her two days ago," she says as the van heads to class. "It's amazing how much you forget."

The class is at the Cleveland Institute of Music in a recital hall flooded by natural light. Anna Hoopes, 17, plays the first movement of William Walton's 1929 Viola Concerto. Kashkashian, wearing a loose red shirt and black skirt, dives into the marrow of interpretation.

"Are you nervous?" Kashkashian asks.

"Yes."

Both burst into laughter. "The problem is the evidence is showing in your vibrato," Kashkashian says. "It's a really fast, electric vibrato. Can you consciously slow it down? You were just trying to control yourself — I know. Believe me, I know. But you *can* learn to control it."

Long hours in the practice room

Critics and musicians often call Kashkashian a natural musician, but she argues it's a mirage. In her own mind she has always played catch-up. She took up the violin at 9, late in the game compared to her peers. She studied with Ara Zérounian, a Detroit teacher with a Midas touch, who also trained the world-class violinists Ida and Ani Kavafian from Detroit.

Kashkashian switched to viola at the Interlochen Arts Academy at age 12, attracted by the alto range. The viola's size fit, too, since she was already her full height. But the Kavafians were the whiz kids on the scene, leaving Kashkashian in their wake. She felt similarly behind the talent at Marlboro in her 20s and Kremer's circle in her early 30s.

"Even today, I would say that I can produce a reasonable facsimile of a natural player, but I'm not one," she says. "The only thing that's natural and the thing that drove me all along was the need to produce certain sonorities. That's why I say I'm a melody player."

Her friends say no one put in longer hours in the woodshed. This is a woman who is known to practice in airport restrooms. "It looks to me now that she does things with such ease, but I remember the incredible struggle she used to have to get to this point," says cellist Marcy Rosen, who has known Kashkashian since Marlboro.

"I'm grateful now that it's been hard work for me," says



Kashkashian. "There's an element to music making, which I'm going to call resistance, and without that resistance factor, I don't think the whole picture of the music or experience of the performance can reach the audience. The performer has to fight for something."

'An Armenian baby?'

Piercely proud of her heritage, Kashkashian made her first trip to Armenia in 1990 to perform in the capital Yerevan. One day a friend in the orchestra office asked, "How come you don't have children?" Kashkashian playfully looked heavenward as if to say, "He's not helping." Two days later, the friend arranged what Kashkashian assumed was a routine excursion to a children's hospital.

It was a set-up. The head doctor was secretly giving her the once-over, and something in her soul spoke to him. He walked her to the other side of the hospital, explaining that conditions in Armenia, suffering from a devastating 1988 earthquake, were so bad, he sold his car and bought a horse because there was no gasoline.

They entered a room with two babies in bed. "Can you imagine one of these being yours?" he asked. Her jaw dropped: "An Armenian baby? Of course!" Six months of paperwork later, Kashkashian had a child.

She picked the 5-month-old girl, whose smile reminded her of her aunt. She named her Areni. Beyond all the obvious ways a child changes a parent's life, Areni, now 18, had one truly unexpected consequence.

"She taught me to be happy," says Kashkashian, a single mother. "She's an extraordinary and unique example of a happy Armenian. I've never known any Armenian who has the natural sunny nature that my daughter has, and, boy,

have I learned a lot."

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Kashkashian on CD

Kim Kashkashian's discography is so expansive and so diverse that knowing where to start can be tricky. Try one of these highlights from each of the following categories:

■ **What's new:** "Asturiana" (ECM), a soulful CD of Spanish and Argentine songs with pianist Robert Levin.

■ **Contemporary (all on ECM):** Tigran Mansurian's "Monodia," Luciano Berio's "Voci," Kurtág's "Homage à R. Sch.," Glya Kancheli, "Vom Winde" and Schnittke, Viola Concerto.

■ **20th-Century modern:** Bartok, Viola Concerto (ECM), Hindemith, Viola Sonatas (ECM), Britten/Penderecki/Hindemith, various (ECM), Shostakovich, String Quartet No. 15 with Gidon Kremer, Daniel Phillips, Yo-Yo Ma (Sony)

■ **Older repertoire:** Mozart, Divertimento in E-flat, K. 563, with Kremer and Ma (Sony); Mozart, Duos for Violin and Viola, with Kremer (download at Deutsche Grammophon Web site); Brahms, Sonatas for Viola and Piano (ECM).

■ **Wild card:** "Elegies," Viola and piano music by Britten, Vaughan Williams, Glazunov, Elliott Carter and more (ECM).

Hear sound clips of Kim Kashkashian at www.freep.com.





Kim Kashkashian works with Anna Hopper, 17, during a master class in Cleveland.





Photos by RON KUNTZ/Special to the Free Press

Kim Kashkashian enjoys a reunion with her revered former teacher, Karen Tuttle.

19th Annual Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

The 19th Annual Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, presented by the University of Michigan School of Music, is a celebration of chamber music. The festival features a variety of chamber music ensembles, including string quartets, piano trios, and vocal ensembles. The festival is held at the University of Michigan School of Music and is a highlight of the summer season. The festival is a collaboration between the University of Michigan School of Music and the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival. The festival is a celebration of chamber music and is a highlight of the summer season.





DON KUREZ

Violist **Kim Kashkashian** recently formed a trio with composer-pianist Tigran Mansurian (who also sings) and percussionist Robyn Schulzowsky to perform Armenian music.

Printing imperfections present during scanning

