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# Interview

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## A Conversation with Violist

*Kim Kashkashian*

By even the most rigorous of standards, violist Kim Kashkashian is a true master of the instrument. As a soloist, Kashkashian has appeared with numerous orchestras, including the New York, Berlin, London, and Munich philharmonics. Among her many awards are the second prize at the 1980 Lionel Tertis International Viola Competition, the 1980 ARD International Music Competition in Munich, the 1999 Edison Prize, and the Cannes Prize for Chamber Music in 2000.

Born on August 31, 1952, in Detroit, Michigan, Kashkashian originally wanted to play the clarinet; however, she was encouraged by her mother to play a violin that was already in the family. Kashkashian progressed so quickly at the violin, and to such a high proficiency, that by the age of 12 she was attending the prestigious Interlochen Arts Academy. While there, she was able to borrow a viola and the rest, as they say, is history.

Further studies took her to the Peabody Conservatory where she worked with Karen Tuttle and Walter Trampler. As Tuttle's assistant, Kashkashian began to teach at the Philadelphia Music Academy, where her love of teaching was ignited, a passion that has led to a career in teaching at the Mannes College of Music, the University of Indiana at Bloomington, and the Freiburg and Hans Eisler (Berlin) Hochschulen in Germany. Her German teaching period coincides with a time when Kashkashian's performance career

took off, resulting in so many playing opportunities in Europe she ended up splitting time between Europe and the United States. Eventually, she moved to Germany, where she lived for thirteen years. A few years ago, Kashkashian moved back to the United States and now teaches at this highly acclaimed New England Conservatory of Music.

A rare proponent, among string players, of new music, she has premiered or commissioned pieces by composers like Arvo Pärt, Tigran Mansurian, Peter Eötvös, Sofiya Gubaidulina, Linda Bouchard, Giya Kancheli, and György Kurtág.

**Q: Because you are a recording artist, performer who tours, and a teacher, I think of you in the same terms as I think of Yo-Yo Ma, in that, you cover not just the standard repertoire, such as the complete viola works of Hindemith, the two Brahms sonatas and Bach's Viola da Gamba pieces, but also new works by composers like Luciano Berio and Elliott Carter, as well as folk song material, film score work, and more open-ended work such as the Jan Garbarek material. What, as an artist, attracts you to the music literature you select? Are there any general considerations that encapsulate how you define what you'll perform?**

*There are two considerations. The first is affinity for the aesthetic involved. The other is the simple fact that we, all performers, should support contemporary composers. We try to choose according to our affinities, but it's also our job to play. Sometimes I will play pieces because I feel it's the right thing to do, even though it might not be a piece I have an affinity for. Balancing those two issues is important.*

**Q: You've recorded on ECM Records for a long time, over two decades, yet**

they don't sign artists to contracts in the way many record companies do. As a recording artist, how do you interact with ECM? Do you propose a project? Does producer and label owner Manfred Eicher propose a project? How does it work?

*It can work either way and, in fact, in my case, it has worked in both directions. Generally, he [Eicher] is extremely open to input from his performing artists. If we, the artists, are doing something that we believe in, the finished product will be the most effective.*

**Q:** In the article "Artistic License" by James Reel for the *Strings Magazine* web site ([www.stringsmagazine.com](http://www.stringsmagazine.com)), you said, "Vocal music is my inspiration and my basis, always." In the same article you also said, "What doesn't get discussed much is what happens during a note and what happens between notes – how you transform one sound into the next – and how much information is contained within any given pitch. One learns that best by listening to singers." As a teacher, how do you help your students develop the ability to learn from singers?

*There are many ways. First, my students usually have to sing for me. Second, we listen to great models of singers, and I make them listen to passages where I see what I call "bridge" work happening very clearly, until they understand the concept, as well as hear and recognize that same concept. This occurs when they do it themselves and feel what goes on in the diaphragm between the notes. If you are singing, your diaphragm is working, and you have to work to get from one pitch to another; it's your body at work getting there. Placing that work in context and understanding that process will carry over into how you mold with the bow and the left hand vibrato to create a parallel situation.*

As a trumpet player, I am familiar with working with my students on air and diaphragmatic breathing on a regular basis. Most people don't think of string musicians as having a correlation to air, but, of course, the concept of phrase is universal.

*Yes, although I wouldn't call it air in the simple usage, rather one must understand pacing, resistance, and the concept of what causes you to go from one note to another. There is a certain kind of rare placement of the energy that occurs in the diaphragm.*

**Q:** In preparation for your recording of the Luciano Berio's "Voci," you sang the work with Berio in the studio. Why and how did this come about?

*Why is pretty clear and a no-brainer; if the composer is alive, you want to go and check with them, if it's possible to do so. It's a wonderfully enriching experience and a good reality check. Frequently enough, a composer's written text is not one hundred-percent to be interpreted the same way a similar text might be when written by another composer. Then working with him, sitting with the score, and me playing and having him, on occasion, say, "You sound too much like a string player, stop sounding like a violist," was enlightening. My response was, "Okay, what would you like it to sound like." Then he would sing something with the coloration he was looking for. I don't believe it's an uncommon proposition or way to work, whether a composer actually sings or sits at the piano and shows you the color they are looking for. In this case, Berio spent most of his life being vocally oriented. He's an incredibly gifted orchestrator, and the colors that come out in his orchestrations are amazing. But I would have to say that the deepest origin and impulse behind what he does is vocal, so for him to raise his voice in order to show me what he wanted was completely normal.*

**Q: How did your work with Berio inform your subsequent performance?**

*I've spent the last 15 years of my work basically attempting to sound, often enough, not like a viola. I've been trying to sound like some other form of information transfer. To keep it simple, if you try to sound like you're a double reed, or if you try to sound like you're a single reed, or you try to sound like a folk singer out of his native origin, that being Sicily, where Berio got so much of his inspiration, you find that you are trying to expand the emotional and expressive range of what the viola can do.*

**Q: You are a strong proponent for new music and have commissioned a number of modern composers to write for the viola, including Tigran Mansurian, Peter Eötvös, Linda Bouchard, Thomas Larcher, Betty Olivero, and Giya Kancheli. What is the inspiration for your desire to perform new music?**

*The original function of a musician was to tell the news. If you go back and think about the troubadours, their job was to, in a musical context, tell the news. We have the unbelievable good fortune of having wonderful museum pieces, which we get to relive and put in the present, to play a piece of Bach or Brahms or Schubert. It's a universal language, which is equally relevant today as the day it was written. There is no question about that. On the other hand, it is a museum piece, but just as you can go and look at a Renoir and have it touch your present day life, so too can listening to Schubert touch your present day life. Never-the-less, it's very important to also be involved in contemporary expression, and I think it's true for all musicians and performing interpretative artists—to be in touch with and actively involved with that which is being written today. That is, telling the news.*

**Q: You collaborated with Kurtág on reworking his piece for solo viola, "Jelek." How did this interaction come about and what was the result?**

*Just as with Berio, I was preparing to perform the work, and I knew the composer was alive, well, and living in Budapest, at the time, and I made an appointment to play for him. That's what you do if you're curious and you want that feedback, which I think is always enriching. I just went. I was in Vienna, I got on a train, and played for him. For five hours we worked on five bars, and I went home with my life changed, completely.*

**Q: How did that time with him transform you?**

*He was asking me to do things I had not imagined before, either aurally or in terms of what my capacities might be. I walked away knowing I had a huge growth step ahead of me. Were I to try to fulfill even some of what he was asking for, both conceptually and technically, a lot of time and energy would be needed. At one point he looked at me and said, "Hmmm... it seems that you don't learn how to hold the bow in America." Of course, with my background with Karen Tuttle, I was very proud of what I did with the bow. I thought what I did with the bow was clear and interesting and useful, and here was this man looking at me saying, "I guess you don't know how to hold the bow." It took me a good year to even understand what he had meant. What he was talking about, actually, was, "Why don't my bow fingers feel the string? Why don't my bow fingers actually feel where I am on the string?" When I understood and translated what he said, then I got a lot further very quickly, but it took a while.*

**Q: How much of Karen Tuttle's relaxed method of playing a string instrument has influenced your performance ability?**

*One hundred-percent. On a bio-mechanical level, how to play the instrument, how to negotiate your own body in order to get more colors and sounds out of the instrument, all of those things I learned from her. Of course, I've enlarged upon it, and I have my own way of describing and teaching it now, but I lay it all at her doorstep.*

**Q: You've worked with pianist Robert Levin in duo on numerous occasions and the two of you have created some memorable recordings. What is it about his work and abilities that draws you to so frequently call upon him?**

*Again I'm going to go back and use the word "affinities." Aesthetic affinities and, yet there are a completely different set of strengths and weaknesses from our two sides so we complement each other extremely well. We don't go into the studio unless we've played the music in a lot of concert situations, with almost no exceptions. Both of us deeply believe that the event of playing and involving other people, listeners, in the event, is part of what makes the music. We would not feel complete without the concert event.*

**Q: So the two of you will—for want of a better term—"air" the music out, and then, once you feel comfortable with it, go into the studio to perform it?**

*Yes, the music has its own process of ripening that way and of getting multi-dimensional, that I don't think you can do without performing for a public.*

**Q: You are quoted in the book *Horizons Touched, The Music of ECM*, by Steve Lake and Paul Griffiths, regarding a recording session at which you played as the soloist with an orchestra and the composer, Berio, and producer, Eicher, were in attendance. You noted,**

**regarding Eicher's presence, "...the unspoken sung into the room." Can you elaborate, as much as words will allow, what you meant?**

*Let me rephrase this situation, to which the quote is related. Manfred Eicher has an unbelievable mysterious and miraculous capacity of walking into the midst of his artists, kind of looking around, somehow energetically balancing things out, calming them down, or enlivening the atmosphere, and by the time he walks out of the room, everybody feels different. I don't know how he does it. It's an unusual gift, and in this case, where it involved an orchestra, if you just shift things around a little bit, and that you touch a few shoulders on the way, you get a really different sense of comradeship and therefore a different sense of how the sound melds together. Again, it's a mysterious and miraculous ability, because it doesn't look like he's doing anything at all.*

**I don't believe non-musicians will ever understand how just a single look from one musician to another can totally change the character of music at the moment the look occurs.**

*Yes, it changes. This is true because chamber music is so deeply intimate. Making music is, itself, so deeply intimate that even just a little rebalancing of anything can change the nature of music's character.*

**Q: In an interview with British journalist and BBC Radio producer Michael Church, published on the NPR web site ([www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)), you're quoted as saying your Armenian origins are "hugely" marked in your music. Writers and interviewers often reference your Armenian heritage, and I wonder if the reason is because it's important, or is it that they are looking for a way to latch on to an easy point of reference? How much does your Armenian heritage inform what you do as a musician?**

*I'm not sure I can answer that. I'm not sure I'm the one who can see it clearly. I am an Armenian-American, as opposed to a Polish-American or Chinese-American. Of course, in every case, the culture and history is part of what you grow up with and is part of your unspoken background, what your assumptions are. This exists. That being said, I can say I have a great deal of sympathy and even empathy, as well as an unusual degree of ability as an American to understand what the Armenian predicament might be. There is a nature to the Armenian character, which is pretty universal. My daughter is the only Armenian I know who wakes up happy. She's the only one I know of. Most of us fight through a black cloud. If you are an Armenian-Armenian and not a Diaspora-Armenian, that makes perfect sense because life is just damn hard and it has been for centuries. They keep getting hit over the head with one thing after another. The connection is inexplicable, but you can just say that this is an attachment that actually exists. You can't put your finger on it, but it's there.*

**The composer Walter Hartley once told me an artist is not a good judge of his or her own particular influences because said artist is too close to the subject. I've always believed this, but I wanted to ask the question with regard to you and your music because of all the writing there is about your heritage.**

*Yes. I don't know what I would have been like had I not grown up hearing my father sing Armenian folksongs. To a degree, that is in my blood.*

**Q: You are a former student of violinist Felix Galimir. What did you learn in that experience that you carry with you today?**

*I was lucky enough to be his student, to play with him, and I consider him my mentor. He was absolutely my musical mentor at the*

*Marlboro Music Festival. I would say that next to the influence of Karen Tuttle, he had the biggest influence on me. From him I learned complete dedication, complete concentration, and extreme gesture. Under him I learned how extreme your gesture had to be. He was also the late Viennese School expert. Many of my generation would call him their mentor, in that, we all learned our Webern, Schoenberg, and Berg from him at Marlboro because he did the premiere performances of those pieces with the composers. He was an incredible resource. He had the most direct, honest and deep connection between who he was and what came out of his instrument, out of all of the people I've ever heard. I learned from that. I learned to try to emulate that. There was no dividing line between him and the instrument.*

**Q: You took on the task of recording the complete works for viola solo, viola, and piano by Paul Hindemith. As you were going through the work, were there new things you found in the music that you hadn't seen, found, or felt during the previous experiences you had playing and teaching those pieces?**

*You always find something new, always, especially under such concentrated circumstances. You're always going to find a new way, a new turn of the kaleidoscope, for sure. As we headed into that series of recordings, what became very clear, to both Robert and me, was the wonderful span these sonatas covered from the beginnings of Hindemith's compositional style up to the later style. Inside of this very small medium, viola and viola-piano, you can see a huge spread of who this man was as a composer. That was great, just to be able to look at the music in that way.*

**Q: In your recording of the Brahms "F minor Sonata," you did some sections an octave higher than I was used to hearing them. My initial thinking was that I was probably just more familiar**

**with a different edition. When you're going to take on a piece of music that has been edited by a number of different musicians, or even different editions of a piece by the composer, how do you choose which suggestions to follow or not to follow?**

*You have to find out how far back the editing goes. If the editing is a first edition then you can pretty well assume the composer might have had something to do with it. In this case, the Brahms case, it's a complex situation because his original version for clarinet is very clear. The original version for viola is also very clear. We took the liberty of mixing the two versions because it seemed to us, in some cases, what happened in the viola version Brahms took down an octave because he had the low C. In those cases, we kept the low octave. Sometimes we looked at [the two versions] and said, "You know, it seems like he's just breaking the line here, and I bet if he thought violists could go that high, ah-ha, he might have kept it in the original range." We were trying to make educated guesses. Basically, we mixed the two original clarinet and viola versions saying that if Brahms were alive to today and was able to hear how most violists can sound on the upper A string, he might have kept it. We took a risk. We couldn't call him up. In the meantime some of what we did on that recording, like starting the piece in the upper octave, like the clarinet does, I don't do anymore. I've decided I just like hearing it in the lower range the viola affords.*

**Q: As a women musician in the male-dominated genre of classical music, have you ever faced discrimination, and how have you dealt with it?**

*First, if you look at Chamber Music America—the big thick magazine that comes out once in a while—I'm not so sure it's male-dominated anymore. Also, if you look at the makeup of a symphony orchestra it's certainly not male-dominated anymore. What might still be male-dominated is the role of soloist or conductor. There the*

*proportion is probably still more male, but I'm not so sure it's a horrible domination anymore. In my experience, young men, or men who are entering into their career, might experience as much trouble as young women today. I, perhaps, was very lucky, both with my teachers and colleagues, and those who were in a position of more artistic power than I had. I was never pushed and never asked to do things I might not have wanted to do in order to gain, but I think I was lucky. But I want to say this pressure happens to the boys too. Both young men and young women can put up a very clear signal which would prevent people from trying to take advantage. It is possible to set up very clear unspoken signals. I advise my young women who are going into an audition or are going to be at a festival to not wear tight clothes or high heels. Don't ask for it. Don't put it on display. If you're clearly all business, the chances are others will treat you that way.*

**Q: You moved to Germany in order to better take advantage of all the playing opportunities available in Europe. Upon your return to the United States, did you notice more playing opportunities had opened up during the time you were gone? In other words, is the American scene getting any better with regard to classical performance?**

*Perhaps for classical altogether, possibly. For viola as a solo instrument, for some inexplicable reason, it doesn't get better here. The huge advantage of being in Europe for some years, as a violist, is that the viola is considered to be a solo vehicle. It's not only the principal violist who plays a solo with any given orchestra in any given year; it's assumed there will be other viola soloists as well, and that is still not the case here. With the help of some young and wonderful artists, maybe the next generation will see advances, but it hasn't happened yet.*

**Q: Most people know Keith Jarrett as a first-rate jazz musician. He is,**

however, also a very accomplished classical performer. You recorded three Bach sonatas with him in duo. What did he bring to the studio in terms of musicianship and how did the working relationship play out to produce such a warm performance?

*It was great to work with him, really wonderful. He was super prepared and had done a whole lot of research. He knew exactly what he wanted, and yet was completely flexible in terms of gesture and shape and tempi. It was amazing to work with him, a truly great chamber music player.*

**Q:** Edith Eisler wrote in the article "Making Choices," from the August/September 2000 issue of *Strings Magazine*, that you have "a generally dim view of competitions." You're quoted as saying, "Their only real benefit lies in the preparation." Do you still believe this to be true?

*I think that is absolutely true. I advise anyone who needs motivation or needs to be pushed that a competition is a good vehicle for that, because you push yourself past your own known capacities under those circumstances to do your best. One learns. However, it is not a highly musical experience. You're not playing actual whole pieces to an audience, and you're putting yourself deliberately in the situation of being judged. If you're doing a big competition, the final rounds are going to be open to the public, and there is usually a prize of the public, which doesn't necessarily coincide with the prize the judges give. What we're doing by saying we can judge musicians is, "We're going to put chocolate, oranges, spinach, and grass, all in the same bucket and decide which one is better." How do we decide? It's not like running a millisecond faster than another person. That is measureable. We cannot measure those things, and we cannot measure the depth of the human soul and how it reaches out. We cannot measure stylistic preferences, or even intonation because it's variable and we do make expressive choices; what is for one*

*an expressive choice is for another out of tune. So how are the decisions made? It's the lowest common denominator. It doesn't necessarily tell us which of these people might be able to reach and express and change an audience with the music better than another person. That's not what's being supported by a competition. Therefore, I think, it's not a healthy situation. We end up supporting the wrong thing.*

**Q:** What advice do you have for young women musicians?

*Work hard; stay clear. Stay clear inside.*