

Chanticleer Festival 2000

Ana Cervantes

2. PLAYING WITH STRINGS

The next morning we start, plunging right into Brahms with curiosity, anticipation, and love: ears wide open, all channels set to Receive.

Violinists Caroline and Salvo are joined by violist Jennifer Smith and 'cellist Elizabeth Gottling Mendoza. They have both been with the Quartet for almost half of its existence. Jennifer, a few years ago, made a choice which is a bit like that made by some of the North American musicians I've been getting to know and appreciate here in México: to pick up and move to a place many big-city US musicians might view with a dubious eye at best. She moved to Great Falls, Montana, where she is principal violist of the Great Falls Symphony and violist of the Cascade Quartet. As I am to find when we start rehearsing, her playing is exquisite and her musicianship impeccable. It's been a very long time since I've had that chocolate viola sound close to me and I relish every moment. I also grow to value her consideration and gentleness, her independence as a woman and as a musician, and her rigorously high musical standards.

Elizabeth, whom everyone calls Liz except me (for some reason I start with Elizabeth and end up sticking to it) will have a baby Mendoza with her husband Rubén in December. This doesn't slow her down a bit. Like Jenny, she is an accommodating and generous ensemble player who also has great musical integrity. It becomes a pleasure just to take a cue from her in a couple of spots in the Galindo, not to mention the numerous places in the Brahms where we're doubling each other. It's been a long time since I've played with a 'cello as well, and I am loving how my lower register meshes with her instrument, how to seamlessly pick up her line so that I sound like a 'cello as we go into the final recap of the Brahms, how she picks up from me in a higher register in a flowing passage in the Galindo. She also has a sense of humor which is a unique mix of dry and goofy, and shares with Jenny a combination of uncompromisingly high musical standards with great gentleness of character.

Salvo turns out to be, like Jenny and Liz and Caroline, a fine well-rounded musician, as you would expect from someone who studied with Josef Gingold. He has the authority to play as a soloist and a first fiddle coupled with the humility to play a subordinate line with great delicacy and taste. He also has a wicked and spot-on sense of humor applicable as much to himself as to others, always useful in a first fiddle; like the others also, superb musical instincts and great ensemble skills, verbally and musically. By the end of the first couple of days the quartet plus piano is informally and hilariously named "Salvatore Greco and his All-Girl Band".

Being used to playing violin-piano duo rep with Caroline, it is fascinating to me to see and hear her in this larger-ensemble context, especially in this very special quartet context. What marvels we are, I think at one point, how we adjust our sound, our phrasing, our articulation, for each place in which we find ourselves: duos, trios, orchestras, and this extraordinary life form which is four string instruments melding themselves into one, the string quartet.

Somehow in the last few years the majority of the chamber music I've played has been with winds. Thus to be all of a sudden in this intensely string environment is almost a culture shock, but of a delightful kind. To listen to the quartet discuss and try out different bowings is powerfully thought-provoking in terms of articulation, I'm thinking of attack and decay in

different ways, of chord voicings, of the kind of energy that the bow gives the sound, and of how I can create that with the piano.

Emanuel Bach said, in one of his many wise counsels to keyboard players, "Above all, never lose the opportunity to listen to good singing". I'll add to that, "... and good string playing". For the millionth time I think of the great harpsichordist Ralph Kirkpatrick and of how he writes, in his beautiful small book on the interpretation of JS Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, of how it can be fatally easy, given the design of our instrument, to play the piano as though one were just pushing buttons, as though it were some kind of typewriter. We simply don't have the physical closeness to our instrument that a string player does, or a flutist, or (the ultimate) a singer.

What do we do? Hmm. We IMAGINE it, that's what, we IMAGINE that we are playing a string instrument, because of course we are. There are strings in there; it's just that the method of sound production, and the point of contact with the instrument, are different ...

NEXT... Part 3: [DOG MORNINGS... AND A MAGICAL MIDNIGHT](#)