



Dominic Cheli performs Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 2 with the Colburn Orchestra, led by Valery Gergiev, at Walt Disney Concert Hall, October 23, 2018.

The Teachers Who Made All the Difference



Dario Acosta

Dominic Cheli

Ask a few emerging artists what has been their biggest influence, and they will cite that one inspirational teacher—or two or three—who not only gave lessons in technique and art, but provided a lifelong approach to music and sometimes a career boost, too.

by Steven Brown

After 22 years leading the Virginia Arts Festival's chamber-music series, André-Michel Schub said goodbye through a program of Mozart piano concertos with the Virginia Symphony Orchestra, which produces the festival every spring. As his fellow soloist in the Concerto for Two Pianos, Schub picked an up-and-coming artist named Dominic Cheli. "I chose someone I wanted to work with," Schub recalls. "I thought that would be the most wonderful choice I could make."

Cheli had won the 2017 Concert Artists Guild Competition, but Schub knew him for more than that: As an undergraduate at the Manhattan School of Music, Cheli had studied with Schub for four years. The Mozart program last May let Schub share a spotlight that had first fallen on him when *he* was a young contest winner—most famously, as the victor in the 1981 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition.

Even when mentors don't take so active a role in putting their pupils in front of audiences, the teacher-student relationship stands at the center of a young artist's development. Cellist Zlatomir Fung, the winner in several contests—including Young Concert Artists' 2017 auditions—salutes a series of teachers who have

molded him. "Every teacher has been right for that moment in my life," Fung says. "I'm really lucky and grateful."

If working toward a concert career takes talent and focus, so does guiding the journey. For all the aspiring artists' gifts, each student has "a unique balance of elements," says Catherine Cho, who teaches violin at the Juilliard School in New York City. "The challenge is: OK, this indi-

"I remember apologizing for some mistakes I had made in one recital," says Dominic Cheli, only to be surprised by teacher Zena Ilyashov's "insistence that I 'never apologize for trying to create something special.'"

vidual has walked into my room. Who are they? What do they want? What do they have to say?" Recognizing what cultivation each pupil needs, Cho says, "takes a lot of patience, and it takes a lot of thought. And at the same time, you have to use your gut instincts. Because it's guesswork. There's no handbook for how to teach all students."

Fei-Fei



Jiyang Chen

Teachers also have to prepare their pupils for the rigors of competitions and the challenges of establishing careers. (In the #MeToo era, teachers must also know how to protect their young charges from possible sexual misconduct.) Schub looks back to his own beginnings. "I thought building a career was very hard when I was starting out. Now, it's impossible," he says. The proliferation of contests may dilute a victory's impact. Shrinking arts coverage in the media makes it more dif-



Fei-Fei, center, in performance with the Pacific Symphony and chorus, led by Music Director Carl St.Clair.



Dominic Cheli, André-Michel Schub, and conductor Arthur Fagen following a May 2018 concert with the Virginia Symphony Orchestra. Schub invited his student Cheli to share the spotlight in Mozart's Concerto for Two Pianos in the concert.

difficult to attract attention. Nevertheless, some students' talents and commitment encourage Schub that, whatever their future may bring, "it will be music."

Increasingly, young artists with an entrepreneurial bent can create their own opportunities. To help them, conservatories and music schools teach entrepreneurship and related skills. At Juilliard, Cho leads a seminar in community engagement. "I'm always telling them, 'You can't just play concerts. In this day and age, we need to do so much more,'" Cho says. "How do you engage the community? How do you build awareness? How do you find a meaningful outlet through which you can use your passion for social change? Students these days are much more aware of their roles as artist-citizens."

DOMINIC CHELI

Dominic Cheli says he encountered his first serious piano teacher when he was in high school in St. Louis. Zena Ilyashov, like all teachers, occasionally had to counsel her pupil about matters beyond technique and musical style. "I would sometimes get nervous before performances due to being overly self-critical of my playing," he explains via email. "I remember apologizing for some mistakes I had made in one recital, only to be surprised by Ms. Ilyashov's insistence that I 'never apologize for trying to create something special.'"

Ilyashov's philosophy: "The only regret a musician may have is if they did not properly prepare," Cheli recalls. By focusing on work and progress, rather than on his emotions, Cheli says that Ilyashov's dictum "made me feel liberated from many of my fears."

"After I fully got rid of the old habits, it enabled me to create so many more colors on the keyboard," Fei-Fei says.

Cheli first played for the Manhattan School of Music's André-Michel Schub when he was 17. The teenager already "could devour the piano—play anything," Schub says. "And he was naturally musical, with a wonderful ear. It was just a matter of polishing the diamond." Since earning his bachelor's degree under Schub, Cheli has gone on to study at the Yale School of Music and, now, Los Angeles' Colburn School. But he still goes to Schub for coaching, and Cheli found their Mozart performances "a phenomenal experience."

Today, Schub says, Cheli's command of the keyboard is complemented by "a certain innocence and love of music that also come across." When they played Mozart together, the elder pianist adds, Cheli's contribution was "spontaneous yet perfect. It was the best of how a young person can play."

FEI-FEI

As a finalist in the 2013 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, Fei-Fei appeared in *Virtuosity*, the post-contest documentary that chronicled the music-making and behind-the-scenes activities of the high-pressure contest. She went on to win the 2014 Concert Artists Guild Competition. But during her childhood in Shenzhen, China, matchups with the wrong teachers nearly kept her talents from coming to light.

Her first teacher, starting when Fei-Fei was five years old, was "really sweet," she says, but he was so lax that she and her sister didn't progress. The next teacher they tried was "the opposite—she was incredibly harsh and mean. We'd get yelled at every week. She would say, 'You idiots!' My father thought, 'Are my daughters really that stupid?' He said, 'We'll try one more teacher. And if that doesn't work, we'll quit.'"

The third time was the proverbial charm. Ying-Hong Chiu recognized Fei-Fei's talent and encouraged her, and she studied with him for ten years. Then Juilliard beckoned, and Fei-Fei earned bachelor's and master's degrees as a pupil of Yoheved Kaplinsky. "I fell in love with Fei-Fei at her first lesson," Kaplinsky says. "Her engaging smile, her sunny and optimistic disposition, and her ability to touch the listener with engaging emotional expression was evident from the start. Her



Pianist Fei-Fei with teacher Yoheved Kaplinsky

playing is so deeply felt and so sincere that listeners are deeply affected by it.”

Yet as Fei-Fei’s growth continued, trouble cropped up: Her arms began to hurt after two or three hours of practicing. She at first thought that was “just part of the job,” she recalls. But Fei-Fei eventually told Kaplinsky. “We started working on changing my technique—freeing up my hands more,” Fei-Fei says. The revamp took a long time, and frustration sometimes bubbled up. But Kaplinsky counseled her through it. “After I fully got rid of the old habits, it enabled me to create so many more colors on the keyboard,” Fei-Fei says. “That’s really life-changing. And I don’t have pain anymore.”



Marianne Scolino

Francisco Fullana performed with the Buffalo Philharmonic, led by guest conductor Hans Graf, on November 10, 2018. In photo: Buffalo Philharmonic Assistant Conductor Todd Craven, Fullana, and Graf during a rehearsal break.



Felix Broedel

Francisco Fullana

lana says. “We would spend multiple hours a day, sometimes until very late at night, working together. The depth of the work is incredible in this way.”

He salutes Midori’s “work ethic and relentlessness.” And she returns Fullana’s compliment. “I admire his commitment and dedication to continuously working to refine his artistry,” Midori says in an email. “His positive personality has enabled him to keep focused on necessary tasks rather than being deterred by the negatives.” For Midori, teaching helps her expand her own understanding of music and the violin. “I am constantly learning,” she says. And she believes in going out into local communities alongside her pupils to “share

“I am able to share a vision of music education that I truly believe in,” Francisco Fullana says, “and touch the lives of kids that haven’t had enough opportunities.”

with the students as a fellow performer” in community-engagement events.

That made a powerful impression on Fullana. Following Midori’s example, he co-founded the Classical Music Institute in San Antonio, Texas. The group’s projects include a summer program in which Fullana and other artists mentor about

FRANCISCO FULLANA

Francisco Fullana, recipient of a 2018 Avery Fisher Career Grant, zeroes right in on his key mentor: the violinist and humanitarian Midori. She taught him as he earned an artist diploma from the University of Southern California. “Teachers are role models, no matter at what stage of life,” Fullana, a native of Spain’s Balearic Islands, says via email. He thinks Midori exemplifies that. “After 30 years on stage, she still practices hours and hours,” on top of teaching, overseeing her outreach foundations, and serving as a UN Messenger of Peace.

For a student, “working with Midori is like practicing by yourself while having an extra set of ears that just happen to be incredibly sensitive and perceptive,” Ful-

“Working with Midori is like practicing by yourself while having an extra set of ears that just happen to be incredibly sensitive and perceptive,” says Francisco Fullana.



Timothy Greenfield-Sanders



Zlatomir Fung with teacher Richard Aaron at the Juilliard School, December 2018. Fung says that Aaron “turned me into a cellist.”



Zlatomir Fung

100 children, mostly Hispanic, from San Antonio’s underserved areas. “I am able to share a vision of music education that I truly believe in,” he says, “and touch the

lives of kids that haven’t had enough opportunities to explore their creative and artistic sides. There’s nothing more rewarding than seeing the excited face of a

kid having his or her own eureka moment when figuring out how to make a good sound or when they have learnt a new piece.”



Randall Gosby takes a bow after performing at the 2018 Sphinx Competition Finals Concert with the Sphinx Symphony Orchestra and conductor Carlos Miguel Prieto.

ZLATOMIR FUNG

Celloist Zlatomir Fung, a Juilliard School undergraduate who already holds a fistful of prizes, says his good fortune with teachers began when he was 3 years old. “Somehow or other, it happened that the town where I was living—Corvallis, Ore.—happened to have this brilliant Suzuki cello teacher. And I just fell into her lap,” Fung says.

Ann Grabe, a cellist in the Eugene Symphony, devoted Fung’s first year almost entirely to such basics as the correct finger position and bow hold, and the thorough grounding paid off from there on, Fung says. And when Grabe presented her class recitals, her students had to be on their toes. “Say you had been working on Suzuki book two,” Fung says. “She would get onstage, and she’d have a hat. It would have the names of all the pieces in the book. You had to draw a name. So you would never know which piece you’d play. You’d have to be ready with all of them.”

When Fung moved east to study in the New England Conservatory Prepara-

tory Division, faculty member Emmanuel Feldman honed his technique and introduced him to major cello works. Fung says that Juilliard’s Richard Aaron, who began teaching him when Fung was in high school, “turned me into a cellist. He encouraged me to start thinking artistically

Cellist Zlatomir Fung salutes a series of teachers who have molded him. “Every teacher has been right for that moment in my life,” Fung says. “I’m really lucky and grateful.”

about the instrument.” Aaron showed his pupil how to break down technical challenges into manageable pieces. And he encouraged Fung to discover as many possibilities as he could for shaping a given phrase or note.

“He’s a lucky kid who had very good training,” Aaron says. “All I did was nurture what was there already.” When Fung



Ann Grabe, a cellist in Oregon’s Eugene Symphony, devoted her first year teaching Zlatomir Fung to getting the basics correct. The thorough grounding paid off, Fung says.

entered Juilliard, Aaron suggested sharing the teaching duties with Timothy Eddy. “It’s better for students to have as many inputs as possible,” Aaron says. He predicts a stellar future for Fung, “if he has the right breaks” in the music business. “He’s one of the most brilliant cellists I’ve ever heard in my life,” Aaron says. “People don’t know that yet.”

RANDALL GOOSBY

When violinist Randall Goosby was a teenager in Memphis, he travelled to Shelter Island, NY one summer to attend the Perlman Music Program. For the first time, he recalls, he encountered other budding musicians who were as talented as he—or more so. “That was a spark for me,” recalls Goosby, a winner of the 2018



Bella Hristova
Photo: Lisa-Marie Mazzucco

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Randall Goosby

Young Concert Artists International Auditions. At the end of the Perlman program, the head of its faculty—violinist Itzhak Perlman—helped Goosby land a scholarship to Juilliard’s Pre-College division. The youngster and his mother shuttled between home in Memphis and

“The most important thing I got from studying with Itzhak Perlman was love of music,” says Randall Goosby. “He just exudes that in whatever he does.”

New York, where Perlman and Juilliard’s Catherine Cho jointly taught him. Goosby continued with the duo as he earned his bachelor’s degree.

“I think the most important thing I got from Mr. Perlman was love of music,” says Goosby. “He just exudes that in whatever he does.” And when Goosby worried that he might not be able to match violinists he heard on videos “absolutely killing some of the toughest repertoire ever known,” he says that Catherine Cho had the answer: “Ms. Cho was the first to make it clear that you don’t have to do anything these other people are doing, as long as what you’re doing is true to yourself.”

During the years Goosby commuted



The Violin Channel

Randall Goosby with teachers past and present following his 2016 recital at Juilliard: from left, Philippe Quint, Itzhak Perlman, Goosby, and Catherine Cho.

between Memphis and New York, Cho recalls, “there was not a week when he complained about the schlep, when he did not have a good attitude. He came in with positive energy. He came in with a big and generous heart, ready to work.

He did that for all those years in precollege, and he continued that momentum in undergraduate.” To expose himself to new ideas, Goosby is now pursuing his master’s at Juilliard under Donald Weilerstein and Laurie Smukler.

“With hard work come great rewards in life,” Cho adds. Goosby will get a taste of that next November, when he plays J.S. Bach’s Double Concerto with the Grand Rapids Symphony. Alongside him at center stage: Itzhak Perlman.

HANNAH TARLEY

After completing her bachelor’s degree at London’s Royal College of Music,

violinist Hannah Tarley returned to her native United States to earn a master’s from Juilliard. She opted for an unusual gambit: studying simultaneously with three teachers, namely Itzhak Perlman, Donald Weilerstein, and Catherine Cho.



Hannah Tarley



Hannah Tarley at a rehearsal of Notes by the Bay, the summer music festival in California that she founded for young people.



Hannah Tarley and Itzhak Perlman share the stage at a San Francisco Symphony performance, with Michael Tilson Thomas conducting, September 2018.

“They encouraged my playing so much and showed me different ways you can approach music,” she says. Perlman’s vast experience in the concert hall pays dividends with every work a pupil takes to him, Tarley says, but she otherwise refrains from comparing the three. “You meet a lot of musicians along the way, and a lot of teachers,” she says. “It’s really great when you’re able to take something from everybody, and observe what works for them and what they bring to the table. The amazing thing is when you can combine all of those things and turn it into whatever it is you need.”

Having three teachers at once wouldn’t suit most students, Cho says. But it worked for Tarley. “She’s a very deep musician, a deep thinker,” Cho says. “And what’s fascinating about Hannah is, she has this youthful enthusiasm for learning, which young kids also have. I think that’s a very healthful balance if you’re an

Hannah Tarley opted for an unusual gambit: studying simultaneously with three teachers, namely Itzhak Perlman, Donald Weilerstein, and Catherine Cho.

artist—to have the perspectives of youth and wisdom at the same time.”

Tarley, a winner of Astral Artists’ 2018 National Auditions, puts that youthful, entrepreneurial mindset to use in a summer program she founded in California: Notes by the Bay Music Festival. For two weeks, students aged 7 through 17 work toward a performance that not only displays their musical talents, but lets them express themselves through other outlets, such as poetry or literature. “It gets figured out as we go along for the two weeks” of the festival, Tarley says. “I never know how it’s going to go until I see who the kids are. I build it around them. That’s very special.” **S**



Juilliard School

“Students these days are much more aware of their roles as artist-citizens,” says Catherine Cho of the Juilliard School, where she teaches violin and leads a seminar in community engagement.

STEVEN BROWN, a Houston-based writer specializing in classical music, is the former classical-music critic of the *Orlando Sentinel*, *Charlotte Observer*, and *Houston Chronicle*.

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