

A black and white photograph of a cello and sheet music. The cello is on the right, and the sheet music is on a stand on the left. The background is a blurred outdoor scene with a building and a fence.

# BECOMING THE MUSIC: ROSTROPOVICH, THE HERO OF THE CELLO

TONEBASE CELLO

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# INTRODUCTION

“When I perform Bach, I must feel like Bach. I play a very healthy Bach. When I play Schubert, it’s not as healthy-feeling. I make a feeling of much more suffering. I am ‘Rostropovich A’ when I play Bach, ‘Rostropovich B’ when I play Schubert, ‘Rostropovich C’ when I play or conduct Shostakovich. I must come very close to the composer this way.”



In the pantheon of the great cellists of the past, there are many names that must be mentioned when making a “who’s who” list. Casals, Feuermann, Piatigorsky, Starker, du Pré, Fournier, Rose, Shafran, Tortelier—the list goes on and on, and luckily so for us! But there is one name that rises above all, whose impact on the cello world and the world of music is so great he is in his own category: Rostropovich.

**Mstislav Rostropovich** (1927–2007) was such a colossal figure that he didn’t just set standards for cello playing—he changed history. Over the course of his life, hundreds of new works were written for him by almost every major composer of the century, such as Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Britten, Walton, Kabalevsky, Miaskovsky, Schnittke, Pärt, Penderecki, and many others. All told, Rostropovich gave the premieres of 224 new works, large and small. And according to Yo-Yo Ma, “That means we cellists owe him maybe 40 percent of our current repertoire.”

Rostropovich’s intense, searing, white-hot sound was instantly recognizable, his masterclasses and private lessons inspiring, and his playing at the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 was just one of many politically-connected acts for which he became famous. But how did this great artist get into the mind of the composers he played? How did he bring them to life?

The tonebase cello team has prepared various excerpts from interviews with Rostropovich, which highlight how he was able to get into the music—to get behind the notes—and make the music he played seem fresh and exhilarating each time. We also learn about his practice habits—some of which might surprise you! We hope that you find these excerpts from this great artist inspiring. Read on to take a journey into the mind of one of the century’s greatest artists. Of course, don’t hesitate to reach out to the tonebase cello team if you have any questions or comments.

# On doing exactly what the composer writes in the score:

I'll tell you. Of course, I have enormous deep experience and connection with a collection of composers. For example, my résumé now counts 135 world premieres as cellist and 87 as conductor. When my contact with a composer starts, I sometimes cannot sleep nights. This is because when I play his composition, he tells me, "Slava, you know, I think that this episode would be better a little bit faster, and another episode would be better if you play a little bit slower." I don't sleep because I think to myself, "Why had I not, through the music, understood this before?" When a composer gives me music — symphonic music or cello music — I'll never play it on the cello immediately. I only see this music and read this music into my memory. Yes, I read the score because before I play it, I would like to be sure to know about this composition and understand what he says in this composition.

Only after that, when I understand it in my mind, do I take my cello. Then I already know which finger to use, what is the sound, and which voice I must use for that. First, I must know the idea of composer, and secondly, I come to interpretations because I want my interpretation to be coming exactly from what the composer would like. That music from a great composer is like a letter for me. These are also letters from Brahms or from Bach. Like a letter, he says to me, "Slava, that's very slow and very soft here. That's a very concentrated piano, and that's *mysterioso*, and that's *animato*," etc. For me, that's what the composer means there, and that's the most important goal, the most important idea.



*Pictured: Mstislav Rostropovich and his wife, Galina Vishnevskaya, 1965.*

# On creating a cello sound:

My mind, even at a young age, was geared towards Romantic symphonic music, not cello music. My interest has always been in the large-scale repertoire and that's the sound I've always had in my head, not the cello sound. My "big sound" concept on the cello, therefore, came from my desire for a more orchestral scale projection. I don't hear a cello sound when I play; I hear an orchestra. I never tried to copy another cellist's sound.

My concept of sound also comes from my experience of playing works with many composers, including Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Britten, Penderecki, and Lutoslawski, to name a few. I also studied orchestration for three years with Shostakovich and I wrote two piano concerti. I am, therefore, very sensitive to the different orchestrations and timbres of different composers, and I learned to vary my sound depending on whose music I was playing. I don't think of myself as having a single sound.

I think some cellists have sounds that are best in certain types of music. My friend Janos Starker's sound is absolutely fantastic for solo pieces like the Kodály Sonata or other more intimate works, but I prefer a different sound when I hear a piece like the Prokofiev Sinfonia Concertante. I believe the Prokofiev needs to have a very strong and full sound.

Of course, I was familiar with the playing of many cellists. Feuermann was a phenomenal cellist, but his sound in pieces like the Dvorak Concerto didn't have enough meat for me. Please understand that I greatly respect my colleagues, whether I'm talking about Starker, Feuermann, or others. It's just that I have a different concept of how certain types of music should be played.



*Pictured: Rostropovich on Swedish television in 1966*

# On practicing:

I generally practiced at most two hours per day. My record was over a four day period after Shostakovich gave me the score to his first cello concerto. I knew that he was working on it, but I first learned that he had completed it from the local newspaper. I remember wondering anxiously if I would get to see it since, at the time, I had no idea if I would be the one to give its premiere. I rushed over immediately when he called, and he said that if I liked it, he would dedicate it to me. I was in heaven! I went straight home and practiced ten hours that day, ten hours the next day, eight hours the day after that, and then six hours on the fourth day. I only practiced that hard because I was so excited about the piece, and that was the most I practiced in all of my 79 years. I played it for Shostakovich from memory after the fourth day, which was one of the proudest moments in my life. I was very lucky because I didn't need to practice when I was young. While some performers had to practice every day in order to stay in top form, I didn't. It was as if my fingers had a memory of their own. They never forgot what they were supposed to do.



# Additional Quotes

“In New York City before 1960, I believe, we organized a cello society in which Piatigorsky and others were original members. Someone asked why there is such a feeling of camaraderie among cellists, which perhaps does not similarly exist among other instrumentalists. Neither violinists nor pianists have such a feeling of harmony. Piatigorsky, very seriously, said he thinks it is because we have a very hard life and we lug around an instrument that is not so easy to transport.” – Rostropovich

“There can scarcely be a cellist here, or anywhere, who wasn’t affected by him. He was supreme. He was loved. He was a wake-up call for every one of us. You can’t get away from that. The impossibility of what he was doing on the instrument was beyond physical ability. There was a kind of willpower that was so grand, and it is overwhelming. You know, this – it’s kind of a reality distortion. You enter into that – his sound world, or you see him in person, and something happens, and you fall under the spell. – Yo-Yo Ma

“He was a great cellist but perhaps an even greater teacher. This was his ultimate gift.” – Mischa Maisky

“Such power, such intensity. He could look at a person and see so clearly what was hidden within. It was the genius to awaken genius in others.” – Natalia Gutman



# Sources

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