Walter Trampler
Memories of a teacher, colleague and friend

Johanna Martzy: a forgotten talent

Restoring a bow frog

What really happened to the ‘Gibson’ Strad?
The Strad

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Independent thinking

As a pupil of William Primrose and Lillian Fuchs, Israeli violist Yitzhak Schotten experienced two very different styles of teaching. He reflects on his life as both a performer and a teacher and shares a joke or two with Tully Potter.

Have you heard the one about the Israeli and the Scotsman? Once you have met Yitzhak Schotten, it gets harder and harder to dissociate him from a veritable stream of jokes – mostly Jewish, of which he seems to have an unending store. Not that Schotten is best known as a comedian; he is, in fact, one of America’s finest viola players. But the Israeli and the Scotsman really did interact, and the way the young Schotten came to know William Primrose is as extraordinary as any joke known to humanity.

The story began in 1943 when Schotten was born in Haifa, Israel, to two immigrants, Shmuel and Frieda, who were from Austria and Czechoslovakia respectively. ‘Neither of them was musical but my grandfather on my father’s side was a cantor.’ Schotten was not a prodigy but something about his behaviour convinced his parents that he might have musical talent. ‘When I was very young I was attracted to a gipsy fiddler in a café,’ he recalls. But although Schotten started violin lessons at nine, the turning-point came when he was about 14. ‘I heard Primrose on the radio and when I heard that viola sound, that was it.’ He duly switched his allegiance to the viola but by the time his hero visited Israel on a concert tour, Schotten was in the Israeli Air Force doing military service.

When a friend wanted to play for Primrose Schotten was urged to go along too, but he was reluctant as he wanted to be properly prepared for such an encounter. Schotten was eventually persuaded, went backstage in Tel Aviv with his friend and found Primrose in an approachable mood. It was arranged that they should both play for the master but in the event Primrose was ill and could not hear them. At this stage Schotten’s friend dropped out and by now Schotten was emboldened to ask for a second appointment – this time in Haifa. Schotten got up at 6am to be sure he was on time and waited at Primrose’s hotel. After two hours he left, walking away disconsolately, when something told him to return to the reception desk. There the woman on duty said: ‘Mr Primrose must ring down for breakfast.’ The great violist – whose hearing by that time was no longer what it had been – had overslept and therefore missed all the previous summons. The upshot was that Schotten at last played for him.

‘I was studying in Israel with Heinrich Jacobi, who had been a pupil of Hindemith, and Mr Primrose said: “You play just like Hindemith.” I was really pleased until he added: “And I can’t pay you a worse compliment.”’ Nevertheless, Schotten was offered a scholarship at the University of Southern California, where Primrose was then teaching. Even then fate intervened, when Primrose suffered a heart attack and Schotten’s big chance was further delayed. In 1964 Schotten finally came to the US where he was picked up from the airport by Primrose in his Bentley.

‘Studying with him was rough,’ recalls Schotten. ‘He was very nice to me but he was also very professional and I was a bit undisciplined. Mr Primrose used to throw me out of the lesson if he thought I was unprepared. He made me so nervous, I couldn’t vibrate! I once drove 90 miles to Santa Barbara and after a few minutes he said there was no point in having a lesson. Yet again the dread spectre of Hindemith raised its head, too. ’I was so influenced by Primrose’s playing that I listened to all his records. I brought the Hindemith Sonata op. 11 no. 4 to a lesson and played it with all my heart – and all my slides.'
Mr Primrose asked: "What are you doing that for?" I said: "I've been listening to your recording." And he replied: "People don't play like this any more." But there were compensations. Primrose found a Jewish couple who were willing to sponsor Schotten. They wanted to remain anonymous but I thought I must meet them and they became like my American family. There were also many things to be learnt from his irascible master. 'Primrose had maybe the best bow arm in the business and I remember him playing his incredible spiccato.'

In 1965 Schotten went with Primrose to Indiana University and spent a further year studying with him and playing in the local orchestra, followed by a summer's study at the Aspen Music School in Colorado.

From 1966 to 1969 Schotten attended the Manhattan School of Music in New York, where his teacher was Lillian Fuchs. They must have made quite a sight in the lessons - the tall, slim Schotten and the diminutive Fuchs - but he remembers her with affection. 'She was tiny but she had so much energy; and her arm was so extended that she managed to play so well.' Indeed Fuchs's recordings - mainly from the 1950s and often with her violinist brother Joseph - document one of the finest American players of the century. Schotten found her very different from Primrose. 'In a way Miss Fuchs picked up the pieces. She was more nurturing and very detailed, very much the kind of teacher who spoon-feeds you and gives you the fingering for every note. She would tell you where to slide and where not to slide and so on. I was very dependent on her. She would say: "Boy, move this arm!" She liked Tubbs bows, and sometimes she would hit you with her bow - she told me that she broke one of her good bows on one of her students.'

While he was a pupil of Fuchs, Schotten played in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and, from 1967, the Boston Symphony Orchestra. For the 1970–71 season he was associate principal of the Japanese Philharmonic Orchestra in Tokyo and did some radio broadcasts. 'I was climbing Mount Fuji and heard this performance of the Debussy [Trio] Sonata coming from someone's radio. It sounded familiar and I realised it was mine.' After a spell back in the Boston Symphony Orchestra, he went to the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra as principal in 1973, switching to the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra in 1976 and staying there until 1979. During his years with the Cincinnati CO he was a member of the Trio d'Accordo, with the violinist Jorja Fleezanis (the first female leader of the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra) and the cellist Karen André; in 1978 they won the Concert Artists' Guild International Chamber Music Competition in New York. His last orchestral job was as principal in the Houston Symphony Orchestra from 1983 to 1985. Since then he has been known as a soloist and a teacher, although he would probably look upon himself as a teacher first and a soloist second, because he takes his pedagogical duties very seriously.

Schotten began teaching in 1967 with a summer job at the Eastern Music Festival at Greensboro, North Carolina. From 1977 he began having fairly regular summer commitments and from 1979 to 1983 he taught full-time at the University of Washington in Seattle. From there he moved to Rice University in Houston, Texas and in 1985 he took the post he still holds at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. In addition he has spent a year as visiting professor at the Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, and he recently did a week as guest professor at Indiana University, working in Josef Gingold's old room.

Does he teach the methods of his own great teachers? 'I do, but obviously I have been developing my own ideas over the years. I think that with Primrose it was especially the sound that impressed me, but a lot of my right-hand technique came from him and I teach it.' Schotten is interested to find, however, that other Primrose pupils differ slightly from him in applying their bow technique and in passing it on to their pupils. 'As for Miss Fuchs, I think I got the sound from her, too. She played more in the lower part of the bow. Many people play at the tip a lot; it works in the upper strings but it is not so good in the lower register. In the lower strings the viola is closer to the cello and I tell my students to use the lower part of the bow because the sound is clearer and more focused that way.' When Schotten was an orchestral player he found that this idea sometimes brought him into conflict with his colleagues, but now he is free to do his own thing. 'I teach a lot of technique,' he says, 'because I feel a lot of the students who come to study with me at college level are not taught well. I have a repertoire class and a technical
Mr Primrose said: “You play just like Hindemith.” I was really pleased until he added: “And I can’t pay you a worse compliment.”

class and I make all my students play scales.’ At the same time, Schotten does not allow them to become overdependent on him, as he was on Fuchs. ‘I never give my students fingerings at the beginning. The teacher should teach the student to be as independent as possible.’ He is mindful that a fingering which works for one may not work for another and that it is possible to waste hours working on unsuitable fingerings. He finds that he is still discovering new fingerings for himself, too.

Schotten feels that a university is the best place to study music. ‘A conservatory is not the real world — it’s another world. If people know how to practise you can get so much done and get your education at the same time. You have to be taught how to practise, of course. If you do three hours’ good practice you can achieve a lot. If you just play through music for eight hours, that’s no good.’ His students have had to obtain high grades just to get into university and some are double majors, which means music has to take its place in the general scheme of their education. Schotten is proud to be working in the string faculty alongside such musicians as Paul Kantor, Stephen Shipps, Andrew Jennings (who teaches chamber music) and Erling Blöndal Bengtsson, and there are plans for the American String Quartet to visit on a special programme.

Schotten is well known in the profession in the US — in 1987 he was the host chairman of the 14th International Viola Congress — but in Britain he is known mainly through his recordings, which he has been making since 1951. Schotten was the first to record Hindemith’s op.25 no.4 Sonata (released on LP for Crystal) and his CDs include an interesting programme of sonatas by Hindemith (op.11 no.4) and Clarke and Bloch’s Viola Suite, all three masterpieces written in 1919 (Crystal CD637).

Here his partner, as in the concert hall, is his wife Katherine Collier, a superb pianist who is also on the faculty at Ann Arbor.

Schotten and Collier married in 1978, having met at the Red Lodge Festival in Montana and decided within three days that they were made for each other. Ironically they had not been scheduled to play together in that festival but did so for fun and found that they got on musically as well. The first work they played was Schubert’s Arpeggione Sonata, which they have since recorded (Crystal CD635). In preparation is a CD (to be released by Crystal later this year) of Brahms’s E minor Viola Sonata and his Clarinet Trio in its viola version, as well as the newly published Concerto by J.S. Bach, of which Schotten has made his own version. He and Collier played it recently at the Tertis Competition on the Isle of Man and he has also performed it with a string quartet, although the recording will be with chamber orchestra. Another recording awaiting release is the Prokofiev–Borisovsky Suite from Romeo and Juliet, to which Schotten has made a few amendments of his own.

The Schotten tone is warm and singing but flexible, produced from a most intriguing 17” [43.2cm] viola by Ventura Linarolo of Venice. Dating from c.1550, it was thought to be Drescian until Charles Beare identified it as having been made as a lira da braccio, when it would have had a flat pegbox and seven strings. It was subsequently used in both the Joachim and the Kreisler quartets. Schotten plays with an old French bow in the Tourte style. Although he has a modern bow as a back-up, he finds that his combination of viola and Tourte-style bow works so well for him that he does not need to chop and change. Having heard him often on record and more recently in recital, I can vouch for that.