

Rostropovich Comes to Berkeley

I enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley in 1959 as an 18-year old student. Upon arriving, I auditioned to play in the university orchestra which was directed by Sidney Griller of the Griller Quartet (members in addition to Griller: Jack O'Brien, Philip Burton and Colin Hampton). I was chosen to sit first stand in the first violin section next to Gail Denny who was concertmaster. Subsequently, I began to take lessons from Griller in exchange for math tutorials which I gave him. I visited the family on many occasions and got to know his wife Honor and daughter Catherine.

I was invited to many memorable events by Griller. On one occasion, he invited me to come to Hertz Hall, where most music events took place, and sit quietly while the quartet and violist William Primrose rehearsed a Mozart Quintet which they were about to record. Today this recording has been cited as "Without doubt this is one of the very greatest chamber music recordings ever made" by classicstoday.com.

And now we go to the main part of this story. The well-known cellist Mstislav Rostropovich came to Berkeley to give an evening recital. That morning the Berkeley orchestra, directed by Griller, was rehearsing for a future concert. Rostropovich came to the rehearsal, and after sitting and listening for a few moments, he stood up, came forward and said in halting English that he wanted to play with the orchestra. He indicated that he would play any concerto. The Dvorak Concerto was chosen when someone went over to the music library, found the orchestra parts and conductor's score. Meanwhile he was given a cello by someone and played a few notes to warm up. I remember everyone in the orchestra, including Griller, was quite apprehensive. After giving a stirring performance, he stood up, bowed a few times, and when the orchestra applauded, he clapped back.



Later that same day, Rostropovich wanted to play with the best cellists in the area. An impromptu performance of one of the Bachianas Brasileiras Suites by composer Villa Lobos was played in the Faculty Club by him and many excited cellists. I remember sitting on the floor totally surrounded by the magnificent sound of some eight or more cellos, including Rostropovich.

That evening, I picked up my date Catherine Griller in my old '49 Ford and drove to the recital. I was totally mesmerized by that time, and to the present day, cannot recall what was on the program. After the recital, I brought Catherine home and was invited in to a reception for Rostropovich. It was a beautiful night with a full moon. The Griller home in the Berkeley hills overlooked the Bay Area. When the main participant arrived, he was in a very expansive mood and the celebratory cocktails started. He ordered Bloody Marys for all the ladies. After drinks were finished, the empty glasses were tossed into the fireplace Russian style. I went up to Rostropovich and his accompanist who were standing together. He recognized me as having been near him in the orchestra that morning. Shortly thereafter, an argument started. Rostropovich pointed at himself and said "me Don Quixote" and then at his accompanist and said "you Sancho Panza". The accompanist then said "no I Don Quixote, you Sancho Panza".

The argument then escalated when both men grabbed each other by the chest. The rug they were standing on slipped away and they fell to the floor, continuing to struggle. Griller and the others nearby watched in disbelief, but no one dared to intervene. After a few moments, the 'fight', which I'm sure the two of them regarded as normal 'fun', stopped and everyone seemed to be greatly relieved.

That's what I remember of this event which happened some 60 years ago!