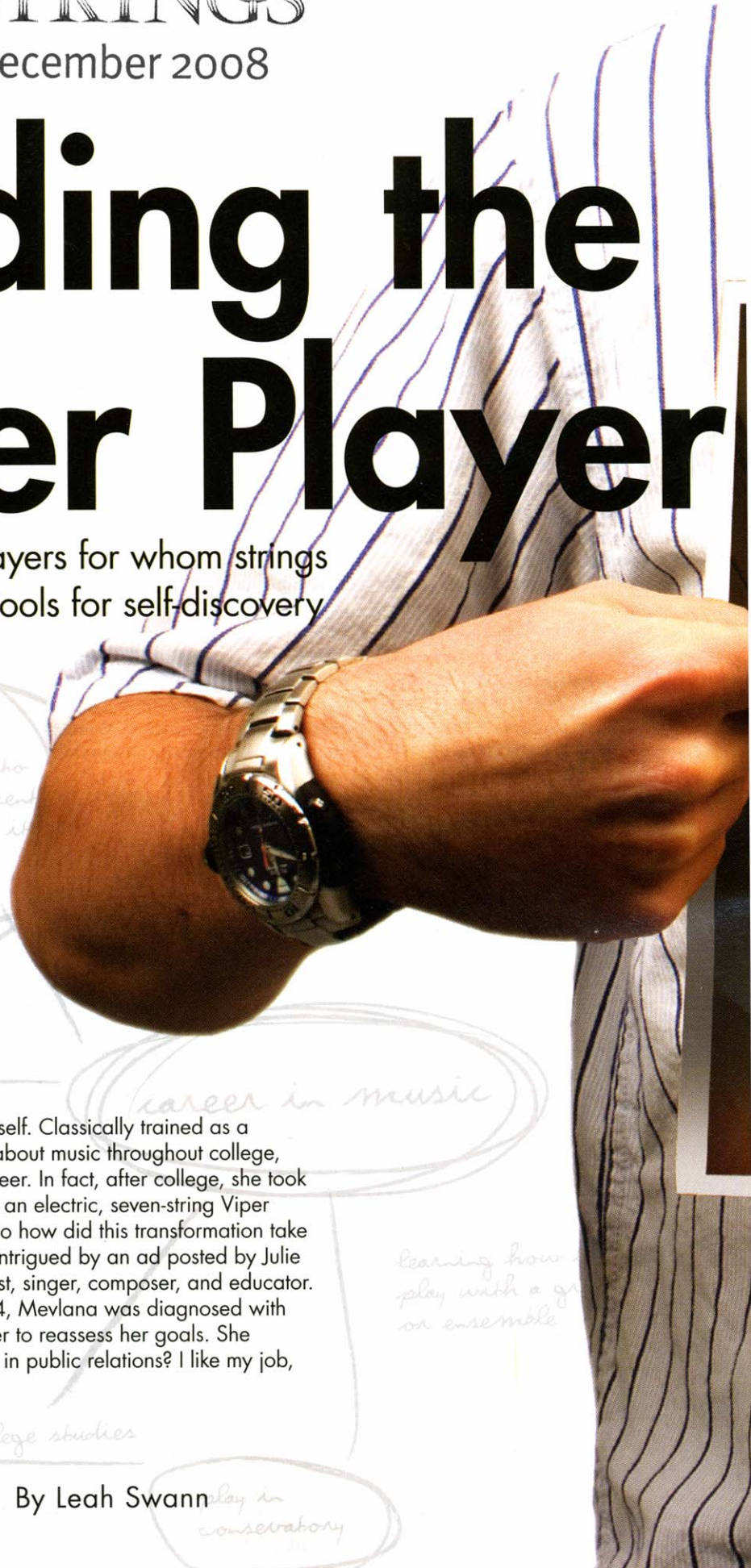


STRINGS

december 2008

# Building the Better Player

Portraits of five string players for whom strings and wood became the tools for self-discovery

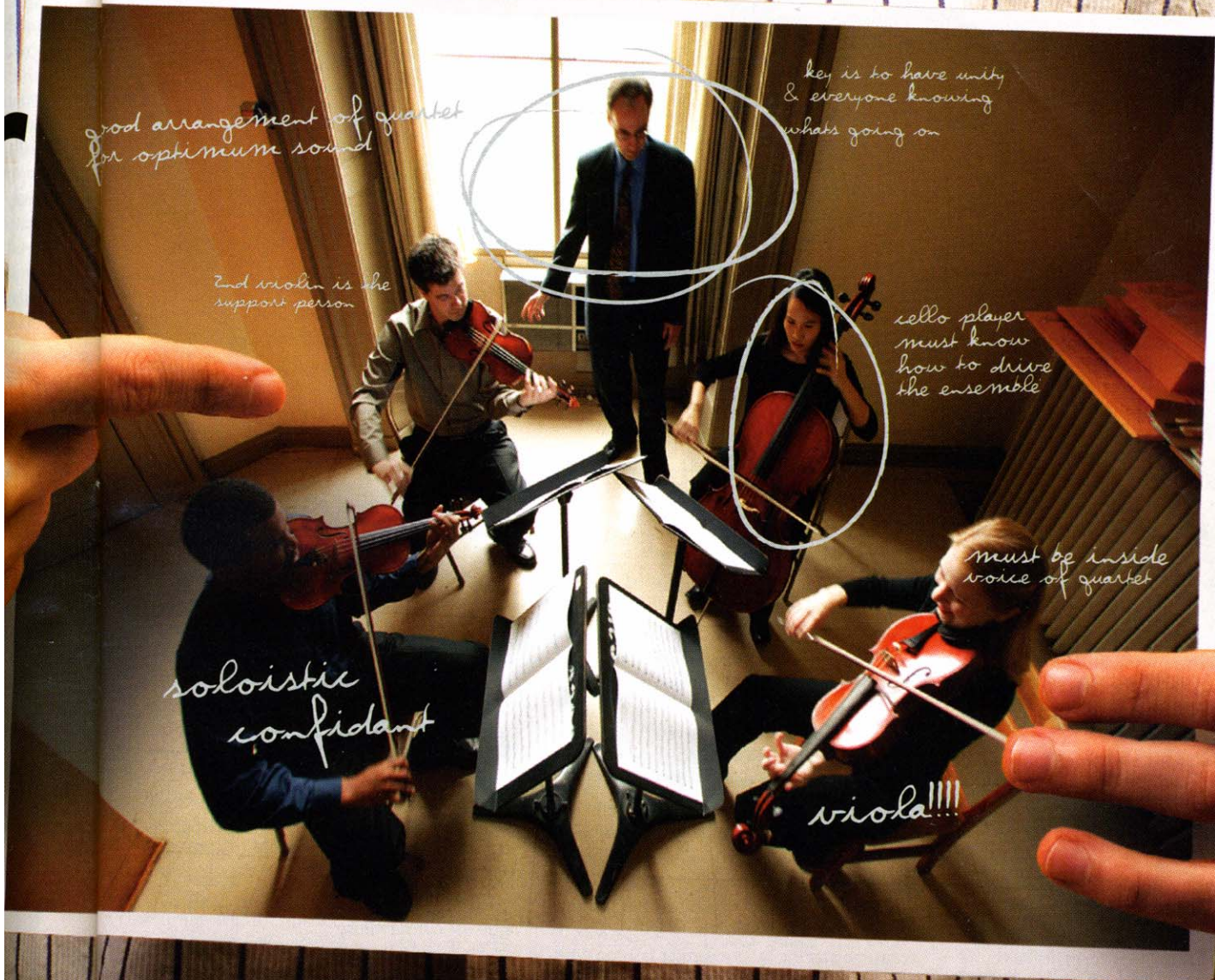


**A**sha Mevlana has reinvented herself. Classically trained as a violinist/violist, she was serious about music throughout college, but never planned a musical career. In fact, after college, she took a job in public relations; now she plays an electric, seven-string Viper full-time with the rock band Porcelain. So how did this transformation take place? While in PR, Mevlana became intrigued by an ad posted by Julie Lyonn Lieberman, an improvising violinist, singer, composer, and educator. So she began lessons. Soon after, at 24, Mevlana was diagnosed with breast cancer, a situation that forced her to reassess her goals. She remembers thinking, "What am I doing in public relations? I like my job, but I want to love it."

By Leah Swann



and how to play it well



good arrangement of quartet  
for optimum sound

2nd violin is the  
support person

key is to have unity  
& everyone knowing  
whats going on

cello player  
must know  
how to drive  
the ensemble

must be inside  
voice of quartet

soloistic  
confidant

viola!!!!

BEYOND TECHNIQUE:  
Chamber music coach  
Michael Kannen (center)  
encourages students  
to explore "life's little  
curiosities."

ing how to  
with a group  
ensemble



## Building the Better Player

She turned to music with renewed passion, redefining herself as an experimental and improvisatory musician.

"It was terrifying," she says. "The first couple of months were so scary—I had never even tried to improvise before! I had no idea what I was doing. [Julie] would say, 'Play something,' and I would say, 'Play what? What do I play?' I had no idea."

Mevlana stuck with it, working through her fears—about improvising and about her health—on her instrument. Lieberman never allowed her to skip lessons, forcing Mevlana to practice even when she was sick from chemotherapy.

At her lessons, Mevlana learned to play what she was feeling, to face her illness. "Julie would say, 'Tell me about your doctor's appointment today. Tell me about the chemo,'" Mevlana recalls. "Use your instrument."

As a result, Mevlana learned to explore the depths of herself and her music through improvisation. She began playing with Invert, a string quartet performing both free and guided improvisation, and then auditioned

today's society with new artistic models of the classical musician.

Each new model is as unique as the players themselves, personally tailored and defined by each musician's strengths and interests. And as more players join Mevlana in following this path toward becoming a transformed classical musician, each discovers that what lies within one's instrument goes beyond a sweet sound and the promise of a musical career: strings and wood can be instruments of self-discovery.

**M**ark Rudoff came to his current career in music by a circuitous route. Near the end of his fifth season as principal cello of the Calgary Philharmonic, a job he won directly after graduating from Juilliard, Rudoff recalled advice from colleague and friend Warren Lash: "Getting out of New York and going to play principal [in Calgary] is the best thing you can do for your playing. But after about five years, you have to take a real hard look at yourself and ask, am I still growing as a musician?"

## The willingness and bravery needed to try new kinds of artistry are necessary for redefining the modern classical musician.

for bands. She recently toured with the hit neo-soul group Gnarls Barkley and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. "It was just insane," she says. "Tour buses, driving all over the country, playing in sold-out arenas every night, screaming fans—I loved it. It's such a rush to see and hear all the fans, to know that they are enjoying what you are doing."

The tangible energy of the fans has drawn her into this new kind of artistry.

**H**ow many young musicians dream of performing at Carnegie Hall while drilling scales and perfecting etudes, equating success with a high-profile performance career? It often seems that young string players are encouraged to focus single-mindedly on building a life as a soloist. But the musical world is changing. Lack of funding, dwindling audiences, and changes in our society make it necessary for the classical musician to adapt and transform.

Transformation might require a classically trained player to step away from a narrowly defined performance track in ways that are innovative, yet demonstrate a return to musical roots. Many string players are reinventing their personal visions of what it means to be a musician, shaping a passion for music into multifaceted careers and filling

And so, 20 years ago, Rudoff decided to leave his post to enter law. Rudoff took a hard look at himself and realized he didn't have much to say on the cello any more. In law school, he returned to an old interest, and lived "the undergraduate experience I never had at Juilliard; we stayed up late having philosophical conversations, drank a lot, danced too much. I loved it."

Upon graduation, Rudoff secured a job in a law firm while continuing to freelance on the side, playing in weddings and orchestra gigs. But when faced with a big promotion, Rudoff was forced to choose between law and music: he knew he would not be able to continue playing in any regular fashion with a more demanding job. He began to realize that perhaps he had left too abruptly and was not truly finished playing the cello.

It turns out that stepping out of music allowed him to discover just how much he needed music in his life, and provided a chance to define his career in a different way.

Today, he's a professional cellist again. A full-time faculty member at Brandon University in Manitoba, Rudoff coordinates the chamber-music program, plays concerts, has a full studio, and teaches music history. He has directed the Winnipeg Youth Symphony and given workshops for community orches-

tras. When Rudoff was beginning his professional life, colleagues often remarked, "You have so much that you could be doing. You just need to focus."

Rudoff's lesson since then?

"Now I know that I can't [focus on just one thing]," he says, "and I don't have to."

Rudoff was willing to transform his career. Law school taught him the organizational skills necessary for a multifaceted musical life, and his experience working in law taught him that he loved music too much to leave it. Rudoff realized that it was necessary to redefine his relationship to music; he had to incorporate many different musical activities into a career to find fulfillment and sustainability. Drawing on the same strength that enabled him to leave music, Rudoff returned, newly aware that he needed more than an orchestral job. He was a pioneer to venture outside music, but ultimately he needed to be one within it.

Rudoff now sees himself as a "teacher at large," encouraging his students to realize that each is "a person and a musician first, and an instrumentalist second."

He guides students towards multidimensional musical careers of their own, teaching them how to meld together opportunities to encompass their whole personalities.

**C**ellist Margo Drakos has always looked for a way to bridge her academic interests and a fulfilling musical career. Now that she has published articles about protecting human rights in multinational companies, played in a premier string quartet, held prominent orchestral jobs, and begun a groundbreaking new business, she realizes that the skills learned by musicians in the practice room are very easily transferable to other activities.

Drakos is keenly aware that starting a new company is not vastly different than mastering a shift or a new piece of music: the discipline and focus necessary to accomplish goals in practice can accomplish goals outside the conservatory.

A "musician" is defined by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics as someone who might "play one or more musical instruments or entertain . . . in recital, in accompaniment, or as a member of an orchestra." According to the BLS, 46,600 musicians were employed in the United States in 2006. Their mean hourly wage was \$27.51. The BLS also reported 547,710 lawyers employed in the United States, with a mean hourly wage of \$54.65.

— L.S.





*clockwise from left:  
asha mevlana, david wallace  
michael kannen, margo drakos,  
and mark rudoff*

Drakos discovered early that her musical career could be broad. After graduating from the Curtis Institute, she became principal cellist of the Oregon Symphony and shortly thereafter, associate principal in Pittsburgh. Two years later, she joined the American String Quartet, multitasking and focusing as she had been trained in conservatory, learning 30 new works within weeks. And she began to use these skills outside of music. While teaching at the Manhattan School of Music and continuing with the quartet, Drakos enrolled in graduate school at Columbia University studying human rights, a longtime interest. She became immersed in designing a Human Rights Impact Assessment to help protect emerging countries—new territory in its field. Soon she found herself exploring new territory in classical music as well.

Drakos is now chief operating officer of InstantEncore.com, an online business launched last September that aims to “organize all of the world’s information about classical music, just as Google wants to organize all of the world’s information.”

Drakos realized that hundreds of classical concerts are presented every year, yet only handfuls of classical CDs are released. What if concertgoers could “take the concert home,” downloading a free recording of the concert they heard hours earlier? What if a worldwide

audience could be created, where anyone could download that concert for a fee?

Drakos—with a diverse array of business partners—set about designing a sustainable organization that could create new audiences, actively involving both the donors and the artists. Her knowledge of music and her training in policymaking combined to help her along this path. InstantEncore offers online resources linked with concert

**‘You have to develop  
as many skills as  
possible, and you have  
to be open to anything.’  
—Michael Kannen**

tickets, providing free access to relevant articles about the works, composers, and performers. After a performance, users can download that very concert. Artists control their involvement with the website, offering links to recordings (boosting their sales and marketability), concert schedules, bios, and downloads from previous concerts—expanding the world of classical music.

While she began Instant Encore as a quest for personal fulfillment and “a way [to make] classical music sustainable without selling out,” she now hopes the company will help facilitate a transformation of the classical musician.

Drakos has combined seemingly diverse interests with the help of practice room tools: working wisely, scheduling diligently, and taking on the world one day at a time.

**W**hat the world demands now,” says cellist and pedagogue, husband and father, chamber musician and administrator Michael Kannen, “is versatility. You have to develop as many skills as possible, and you have to be open to anything.”

Versatility and open-mindedness have been themes of Kannen’s life. “I’m an OK cellist,” he says, “but there are millions of OK cellists.”

In Kannen’s case, “OK” might be an understatement. He recalls days at Curtis. “We were told we were the cream of the crop,” he says, “and that was that.”

Kannen focused on chamber music, but never gave much thought to his career, moving after Curtis to the New England Conservatory, where the abundance of great cellists was eye-opening. He applied successfully for a teaching position at the University of Texas in El Paso—never having taught before—and adored it. After two years, Kannen left to pursue a master’s and DMA, but six months into studies at Indiana University, he was called to join the Meliora Quartet for its last season. He enthusiastically agreed, realizing that every time he began to form a trajectory for his life, life itself changed his plan. He recalls advice from Lawrence Lesser, his teacher in Boston: “You throw out your net, and then you reel it in, and you take the biggest fish that you can catch.”

Kannen was freelancing in New York after his Meliora year when Misha Amory asked him to join the nascent Brentano String Quartet. The Brentano’s career blossomed, but after six years of extensive traveling, Kannen reevaluated: “I looked at my life, and I said, ‘Is this what it’s going to be? Hotel rooms and airplanes and spending as much time with my quartet as with my family?’”

After months of agonizing and chance events, including a dangerous car accident



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and several job offers, he left the quartet and landed a job as Peabody Conservatory's director of chamber music. In this role, Kannen can teach, administrate, coach, guide, and perform. Kannen encourages his students to heed "all of their little curiosities," to be open-minded. He speaks excitedly about his discovery of Baroque cello at Indiana, his recent exploration of improvisation and jazz at Peabody.

For Kannen, the learning does not end, but sustains him. "It's the variety in my life," he says. "The variety in the kind of playing I get to do now. I never stop exploring, and there are always new things to try."

### Wallace strongly believes that each musician must personally define the kind of artist he or she wants to be.

Kannen's versatility facilitated the transformation of his own career when he accepted Peabody's offer. It was "the best of all possible worlds," he says.

Kannen's story seems an almost-perfect example of the variety one can find in a musical life: administrator and teacher, concert-planner and chamber musician. However, it is inevitable that some classical musicians will branch out even more.

**E**nter David Wallace: violist, fiddle player, interactive concert organizer, teacher, creative thinker. Wallace strongly believes that each musician must personally define the kind of artist he or she wants to be. Although he grew up "musically bilingual," studying classical violin throughout the school year and playing Texas fiddle in the summers, Wallace never considered a musical career. After trying a beautiful viola—an "instrument that could make me quit playing the violin"—he redefined his career path, realizing that music could challenge him for a lifetime.

He moved to New York, studying viola at Mannes School of Music and Juilliard, where he was paired with a public-school teacher as a Morse Teaching Fellow. Discovering a natural penchant for teaching, Wallace focused on pedagogy. The more he invested in bringing music outside the conservatory and concert hall, the more he realized that the musicians he respected the most were those most versatile. He began to sense that "the era of specialization had passed," and returned to his fiddle-playing roots. He soon brought

back the piano, an instrument he'd played earlier in life, and violin. He refined his composition skills, and began experimenting with electric instruments.

Wallace jokes that this trend recalls an earlier definition of "musician"—centuries ago, all musicians played several instruments, and were familiar with a variety of styles. A musician was expected to do more than one thing.

As word traveled that Wallace was good at working with children and preparing outreach concerts, opportunities began to spring up. He spent two weeks in an artist-residency program in Michigan, designing and performing in community concerts, working with schools, leading master classes, and planning workshops. He presented at the American Symphony Orchestra League's annual conference, and suddenly orchestras began calling him to act as a consultant, offering residencies and partnerships, hoping that he could train their musicians. While working as a Teaching Artist for Lincoln Center and the New York Philharmonic, he accepted an opportunity at the Hudson Valley Philharmonic. Despite the career risk, he recognized his need to be "challenged in a new way."

After five years, Wallace left Hudson Valley to focus on other possibilities, and wrote a book about creating an "interactive concert." *Reaching Out* was recently published by McGraw-Hill.

Wallace cites Mark O'Connor's summer string seminars as a primary inspiration. "You see so many different kinds of people up there onstage, learning together and playing together and jamming all night," he says, "and you realize that we've got to be willing to try things, to be open to just anything."

Wallace now combines teaching and mentoring, administrating and decision making, and performing in a seemingly flawless union of interests.

Wary of stagnation, of the "danger of becoming your job description," Wallace constantly reevaluates and redefines his career.

**T**hese are, indeed, challenging times for musicians, but, as these players demonstrate, a willingness to change what it means to be a musician, to incorporate past standards along with fresh perspectives, can yield a dramatic—and life-saving—transformation.

Just ask Mevlana. She now lives in LA. She still plays weddings and classical gigs and teaches violin—incorporating ear training, theory, and improvisation into lessons—but her main gig is playing the Viper violin with Porcelain. "Classical technique is actually great preparation for trying new things," she says. It is simply about working up the nerve to try. □