

To Lynn, with Love

Remembering the cello titan, whose impact went far beyond his instrumental prowess

By Emily Wright

Born in 1944, Lynn Harrell was the son of two musicians. His mother, Marjorie, was a violinist, and his father, Mack, was a preeminent operatic baritone and one of the founders of the Aspen Music Festival and School. He studied with Leonard Rose at Juilliard and Orlando Cole at Curtis before making his debut at Carnegie Hall at age 17. By then, he had suffered the loss of his father to cancer. A year after his debut, his mother was killed in a car accident on the way to a recital she was giving in Fort Worth. By the end of his 18th year, Harrell was coming into his own as an immensely gifted artist, and was somewhat adrift, with a single suitcase and his instrument.

That came to an end when he joined the Cleveland Orchestra under George Szell in 1964, serving as its principal cellist until 1971. A rare specimen in nearly every respect, Harrell esteemed orchestral playing as highly as that of a soloist, and though he was known to the public for his concertizing, he was an equally prolific instructor. Over the course of his career, he

was on faculty at the University of Cincinnati, Royal Academy of Music, USC Thornton, Juilliard, and Aspen, to name a few. He performed as a soloist for decades, establishing himself as a master of a uniquely lyrical and sensitive style. He touched the lives of students and colleagues in a remarkable way, and his loss is palpable.

This is not simply a tribute to a master of technique and interpretation, although he was absolutely that. This is a love letter to a person whose life was defined by a sense of benevolence and generosity as broad as his hands were large. While part of Harrell's legacy is a generation of cellists who follow his affection for tone, balance in the left hand, and encyclopedic knowledge of repertoire, its essence is something each of us can partake in. Not all of us can play the way he did. But we can carry on the most important part of his legacy in the way we show up for the people in our lives. Let them know they are loved, and seen. Make time for them, and give everything you possibly can. In this, you can live as he lived, carrying forward his kindness.

Lynn Harrell





David Mollenauer

Assistant principal, San Antonio Symphony; SOLI Chamber Ensemble; professor of cello, Trinity University

Mollenauer studied at USC during a time when Harrell was concertizing 200 times a year. Lessons and studio classes were mammoth four-hour occasions to squeeze credit hours into the holes in his travel schedule. As a student, Mollenauer had fallen into a habit of lateness, for which Harrell chastised him repeatedly—and increasingly sternly as it became a pattern. “He was not beneath showing a bit of tough love,” says Mollenauer with a laugh. The last time he ran late to class, he found the door locked. He sat outside and listened to the others play for the whole four hours, chastened. Years later, Harrell played with the San Antonio Symphony, of which Mollenauer was the assistant principal. With a broad smile, he presented his former student with a gift: an alarm clock. Of course.

He was an extraordinary human being, and I think that showed in his approach to the cello. Everything he did when he touched the instrument was through compassion or passion—always trying to seek out the voice of the composer. His color palette was enormous. When studying with him at USC, we would have class, and it was crazy because he’d come in and teach for ten hours a day—these were really intense—and then be gone for two weeks to perform. He would demonstrate something, and everyone would be either in tears or on the brink of tears and absolutely gobsmacked by what we’d just heard, what we’d just experienced.

He tried to get us to play in a way that was vocal; as if we were singing a line. His ideas about lyricism and a singing tone are still the foundation of my approach today.



Ben Hong

Associate principal cello, Los Angeles Philharmonic; cello faculty, Colburn Conservatory, University of Southern California Thornton School of Music

Like other USC students, Hong worked with Harrell during the densest period of his solo career. Despite this, there was complete commitment to

his students during the marathon 8:00–3:00 teaching days. “The enthusiasm, and the focus was stunning. He was engaged with each student the whole time.” And while there was a level of intensity in the interaction, Hong never once saw him get angry or upset. “He was always encouraging, and incredibly funny, too.” Hong pauses a moment. “He was special.”

He was such a towering musical mind compared to any teacher I’d ever met . . . He’d talk about these things—different symphonies, operas, song cycles, periods in art—and I’d

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”

—David Mollenauer

turn to ask the other students if they understood what he was talking about, and most of the time nobody would know!

The six years I studied with him changed my life and shaped who I am. How often does one get to work with their idol—in their prime? Listening to him play all the concertos, chamber music, orchestral excerpts . . . he was so well versed in every single one of those things. The way he played, you could not find better examples.

There was one occasion at the L.A. Phil Institute where some of the young musicians were sort of jaded or negative about the piece they were playing. He went to the front and gave this speech, saying that these composers, who had put so much into creating these works, deserved more. That this level of effort was not enough. He then turned to the conductor and said, “Now maestro, would you please conduct again? I would love to play this music.” Here is a man leading by example. He didn’t have to be there, playing with us, but he did. How could you not put out the effort after that?



Samuel Cristler

Conductor, cellist, and pianist

My first and last lessons with Lynn stand out the most in my memory. The first was at the Cleveland Orchestra’s summertime Blossom Festival. We were in a classroom at Kent State University, only one year after the massacre of students protesting the Vietnam war. For that reason, it was a creepy place to be, but Lynn’s focus on music pinpointed my purpose and sharpened my attention. First, he asked me to play a four-octave C-major scale with a big tone, ascending and descending, using full bows and slow vibrato. No teacher had ever mentioned vibrato speed to me.

I complied, thinking that this was going to be a boring icebreaker merely to get acquainted; surely he wouldn’t be paying attention. But, on the contrary, when I finished, Mr. Harrell launched into a detailed criticism of every note, every specific inaccurate pitch, every undisciplined shift, and the necessity of matching tone quality by using a fast bow at the top and very slow bow at the bottom. He explained by demonstrating how vibrato, not amplitude, defined dynamics. His delivery was focused, cogent, and transformational.

I suddenly possessed a bracing awareness that a seemingly inconsequential exercise had, in fact, been the most important five minutes of my life. Despite whatever accomplishments I had achieved previously, that moment divided my life; I would never again approach the cello, or music, the same way. In addition to being a joy, music from

John Williams, left, and Lynn Harrell



DANA ROSS/COURTESY OF HELEN NIGHTENGALE

that moment onward also became a serious and mature discipline.

At that point, Lynn had not yet begun a solo career, although it seemed an inevitability. During that final summer as principal cello of the Cleveland Orchestra, he performed two major solos: the third movement of Brahms' Second Piano Concerto, and Strauss' *Don Quixote*. For we students, the Cleveland Orchestra concerts were optional, but we were offered free tickets and I was always eager to attend. After all these decades, I still remember every note and interpretational nuance of those solos. During the next two years, I went on to study with Lynn in New York City and Aspen. He was almost always still available for weekly lessons, and he taught me both of those pieces along with concerti, sonatas, suites, and the entire standard orchestral repertoire. Most importantly, he taught me how to practice and how to play with maximal expression.

My final lesson with Lynn was simple: he said that I no longer needed anyone to

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tell me when I was out of tune or if my rhythm was inaccurate or if my interpretation was handicapped by inadequate technique. He said I was now capable of being my own critic and teacher. He taught me to never stop practicing and to be independent.

It took me a long time to switch from “Mr. Harrell” to “Lynn.” Even though he insisted, I could never really view Lynn as a colleague. But his sense of humor helped me along. While I was principal cello in the Rochester Philharmonic, Lynn came to solo with us in the Donald Erb Cello Concerto. After a rehearsal, I drove Lynn and his then-wife, Linda, to their hotel. My Volkswagen hatchback was crammed with stuff and there wasn't enough room for all of us. Lynn insouciantly loaded his cello in the back and climbed in next to it on all fours. For the entire drive down Main Street, Lynn stuck out his tongue like a huge dog—and barked. I think that is when I was finally able to call him Lynn.



LYNN HARRELL ON DISC

A selected discography

Tchaikovsky Piano Trio in A Minor, Op. 50, with Itzhak Perlman (violin) and Vladimir Ashkenazy (piano), Warner Classics

Beethoven: Piano Trios with Itzhak Perlman (violin) and Vladimir Ashkenazy (piano), Warner Classics

Russian Cello Sonatas with Vladimir Ashkenazy (piano), Decca

Sergei Tanyev: Chamber Music, Deutsche Grammophon

Paul Hindemith: Kammermusik, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Riccardo Chailly, cond., Decca

Strauss: Don Quixote, Op. 35, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, Gerard Schwarz, cond., RLPO Live

Shostakovich: Piano Music, Chamber Works, Decca

Across the Stars, Deutsche Grammophon

Beethoven: The Cello Sonatas, Decca

J.S. Bach & Handel, Decca



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Thalia Moore

Associate principal, San Francisco Opera Orchestra; acting assistant principal, San Francisco Ballet Orchestra

Moore enrolled at Juilliard in 1976, intending to study with Leonard Rose. Shortly after auditions, she was assigned to Lynn Harrell for the year (apparently an interloper had auditioned fabulously and usurped her spot). She would remain in Harrell's studio through 1980.

I arrived at my first lesson and was greeted by a tall man with hands the size of at least two of mine. He draped his half-length coat on top of his cello case, and it went nearly all the way to the floor! The first thing he had me do was throw a wadded-up piece of paper into the trash can. Then he said, "OK, do it again, and this time, *really try*." I threw it again, missing the trash can by a mile. Lynn said, "It was more difficult when you

really tried, eh?" Thus began a remarkable journey with the most amazing teacher in the entire universe!

When in a lesson with Lynn, he was always *completely* focused on your playing. During that hour, you felt as though you were the only other person in the world. His ability to concentrate 100 percent on the cello and on the music was a hallmark of his style, not only while teaching but also in his own performance and practice. While his observations were always very detailed, they were delivered in a positive way, without judgment.

Since Lynn had a busy touring schedule, there would sometimes be gaps in between my lessons. So, prior to leaving town, he would assign me work to do while he was gone. Once, he assigned me an entire book of études, to be completed in just two weeks! When he returned from tour, I apologized: "I'm terribly sorry. I was only able to prepare half of the book."

He said, "Half of the book?! How much did I assign you?"

I replied, "The entire book."
 He exclaimed, "What a bastard!" We both laughed.

A principal tenet of Lynn's teaching was that one's internal dialogue affects both the work process and the resultant playing level: Prior to studying with Lynn (and still to this day, if I forget Lynn's advice), I suffered from a lack of confidence due to persistent negative thinking while practicing. Lynn taught me how to observe things that could be improved objectively, without judgment. For example, Lynn would say,

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—*Samuel Cristler*

"Play that again, and treat it as an opportunity for an exciting search. Ask yourself, 'What caused it? The shift before the note? The arm weight? The bow speed during the shift?' You will find that practicing is much more pleasant if you don't berate yourself for every mistake."

Lynn said that one main goal of practicing is to improve your weaknesses to the point where their level is so close to that of your strengths that no one can tell the difference.

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I had mentioned to him that often, in order to avoid the pain of solving my technical problems, I would find ways to avoid them. For example, I would finger trills with any finger *other* than my fourth, even if this resulted in audible glissandi, awkward fingerings, and heightened difficulty in the rest of the passage. Lynn told me that he had experienced the same problem with fourth-finger trills, so he changed all his trills *to* the fourth finger, and in doing so, discovered ways to solve the problem. As a result, he said, his fourth-finger trills became his strongest.

Lynn was an incredibly generous person. When I performed the Brahms Double in 1979, the violinist had an Amati and I had a pleasant but not particularly outstanding instrument. Lynn lent me his second cello—a Testore—and sent me to the luthier, along with a sealed letter. The luthier read Lynn’s letter and said, “Your teacher is a great man.”

I said, “I know.”

He replied, “No, I mean *your teacher is a great man!* He has told me to do whatever

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you need to have done with the instrument, at his expense.”

After the concert, Lynn made it possible for me to own that cello, which remains my principal instrument, 42 years later.

I last saw Lynn in January 2020, only a few months before he passed away. He spoke about his plans to retire from performing, and his concerns about his mortality. I said something like, “But you are immortal, you know! Your voice will live forever in your fabulous recordings and videos, and also within all of your students. When I am practicing, it is *your* voice I hear inside.”

And thank goodness, too! That voice is always full of great ideas for solving problems, and full of encouragement and positive thinking. I realize now how much I think about Lynn, how often he comes to mind. I miss him so much, but I know that he is immortal in a sense. He will live forever within all of us who were fortunate enough to cross paths with this remarkable man. ■