

## Interview with Jeffrey Solow

- HKCS: Mr. Solow, a pleasure to have you in HK. It is a great honour to have you here teaching a masterclass and also to have the opportunity to listen to you play.
- Solow: Thank you. I am delighted to be here.
- HKCS: What age did you start playing cello? And why did you choose cello instead of other instruments?
- Solow: I started when I was 7. The reason that I started playing the cello is because my mother played the violin and my father played the piano, and they wanted to have a trio in the family. My older brother had started cello, but he only played for 6 months. But like lots of younger brothers, I wanted to copy him, and I somehow knew that he had played the cello, so when my parents asked me what instrument I wanted to play, I said, "cello!"
- HKCS: No other instruments in your life?
- Solow: No.
- HKCS: When did you start to have a professional experience in learning the cello?
- Solow: Well, right from the beginning I started with a very well known teacher in Los Angeles, California. Gregory Aller was a Russian cellist. He was the grandfather of Felix Slatkin, who is a famous conductor. I started with private lessons immediately, right from the very beginning.
- HKCS: From the press and also the internet, we know that you have had great success, teaching as well as touring. We also know you have been nominated two times for the Grammys. How do you feel about that?
- Solow: It was very exciting! It would be nice to win the actual Grammy award. But one
- time Perlman won and the other time Leonard Bernstein won, even though he was already dead. It's because they re-released his record.
- HKCS: I see. When was that?
- Solow: One of them was 1979, quite a while ago. The other one was... I can't remember exactly. 19... 1991!
- HKCS: I see. You mentioned that you have been here many years ago.
- Solow: Well, this is my third trip. First time was in 1979, when I played a recital with Gabriel Kwok, now the head of the piano department of the Hong Kong Academy of Performance Arts. It was wonderful to see him again after many years. And then I was here the second time probably 15 years after that, with the California Chamber Symphony. It was an orchestra and all the members of the orchestra were soloist. Everyone in the orchestra played a concerto with the orchestra. This time is completely different. I mean the city is of course completely different, with the new airport and many new buildings, and the tunnel, the harbour, very many differences.
- HKCS: During the master class, how do you find the students, overall?
- Solow: It seems like that they are all being taught very well! They are very enthusiastic, which is really wonderful, and very receptive to learning things, as the audience was too. I guess in the audience there were also some cellists and probably parents of cellists. It seems like everyone was very enthusiastic, which makes it fun.
- HKCS: Since you have many students all over the world, how do you compare those from different geographic areas?

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## Upcoming Events

**Wong Ka Lap Cello Recital**  
19 December 2010 (Sun) 7:30 pm  
20 December 2010 (Mon) 8:00 pm  
Multi-media Theatre, HKICC Lee  
Shau Kee School of Creativity, HK  
\$240, 200  
(\$200, 180 for HKCS members)  
Tickets available at URBTX outlets starting 19 Nov 2010  
Ticketing Enquiries 2734 9009  
Programme Enquiries 2728 7906  
Credit Card Telephone Booking 2111 5999 In-  
ternet Booking [www.urbtx.hk](http://www.urbtx.hk)  
Programme website: [www.hkcellistsociety.org](http://www.hkcellistsociety.org)

## Note from Founder

This year, HKCS is pleased to present a new program called the Young Musicians Performance Program (YMPP) in July. Musicians nowadays experience much difficulty in getting acknowledgement for their talents. Those who chose music as their career often find themselves without any opportunities to perform. To evolve into a great performance artist, they need the chance to gain these valuable performing experiences. However, in our world, things tend to work in a more commercial sense. Often organizations will only seek out those who had already won some big competitions or someone who had already made a name for himself, thus those who are struggling will always be forgotten. We hope to help these people of outstanding potential to nurture and develop their professional performance career by giving them a chance to perform in an outstanding concert. We are honoured to have the sponsorship from Shui On Land, enabling us to bring great music to the city of Dalian, China, and at the same time, giving this year's YMPP Fellowship Recipient Wong Ka Lap a chance to share his music with the people of Dalian. I am most excited when I am able to share and communicate through music, bonding two cities closer, enriching the Arts and Music cultures to an ever-growing music lover population.

Solow: In general, I find, although there are exceptions, the best students come from cities because they have so much more music around them. When people grow up in small communities, even though there are recordings available, it's still not the same as having people around you playing live. So the standard is much higher in big cities in the United States, along the coasts, and like in Chicago. Of course one can find talent in other places, but it's rarer you would find someone who comes from a small community who is really good. But it certainly happens!

HKCS: Nowadays, as the cities are getting more developed, do you think classical music would have a more important role?

Solow: Depends on which country you are talking about.

HKCS: Sure... but in the United States, or in Asia – is there a difference?

Solow: Well, yes I find a big difference... I think that so far on this trip the audiences are much younger than the classical music audiences usually are in the United States. Young people in the United States are not so interested in classical music. Some people of course are, but in terms of large numbers, much less so. I think in the United States, there actually was never a huge interest from the younger generation.

HKCS: As far as a cellist is concerned, do you think cello is for everyone? Do you think the cello is more of a welcoming music sort of instrument compared to other instruments?

## Wong Ka Lap Cello Recital - From My Life

Anyone who has ever had the pleasure of hearing Wong Ka Lap play cello would have inevitably been drawn in by the immense charisma of this young virtuoso. His debut at the 2010 Hong Kong Cello Festival was a tremendous success. He performed a beautiful piece by Frederic Chopin, Polonaise Brilliant Op. 3. The audiences were entranced by his captivating performance. It offered everyone a glimpse into his usually private world. There is no doubt in anyone's mind just how brilliant this young cellist is. He has a natural affinity with music and is able to make the music come alive with a seemingly effortless grace.

However, his music journey is anything but effortless. In fact, he has had very limited formal music training. He started taking cello lessons under Ms. Monica So when he was in Primary 6, and later with Mr. Artem Konstantinov. In merely three years time, he received his Associate Degree from Trinity College of London. He continued his training until Form 4, when academic demands made him slow down in his music practice.

He then pursued other interests for a year, but soon discovered his passion ultimately lies in music. Just he was about to immerse himself into the study of music, unexpectedly he developed some health problems which stopped him cold in his tracks. Undeterred by this sudden turn of event, he refused to give up and began to self-teach by listening to various cello masterpieces. By simply listening and learning, he was able to play and interpret these demanding pieces in his own special way. This young man has an extraordinary gift and with sheer determination he fought through his health problems and emerged as a bright, shining star. In this moment, he is poised to take the next step in his music journey, prepared for what is yet to come. And so he takes the stage of life once again - sharing his heart full of music with you.

Solow: Well, I guess I think of not so much cello as its own thing, but string instruments, compared to other piano, or wind instruments. In the United States, wind instruments are much more popular because most schools have bands. Only 20% of schools have orchestras with string instruments. String instruments could be for everybody but of course people have to get acquainted with them. There are things that are part of string instruments that are different than any instruments. One thing is that they are very difficult. Of course that can in a way be a problem because it takes you longer to learn something. But at the same time it's a really good challenge. I only have a couple of younger students. Just a couple of weeks ago, I was talking to a student and his mother and we were discussing the difficulty of things he has to do in school and with cello... and it was no question that he said the most difficult thing he did was playing the cello - much more difficult than any of his classes in school. So I think that actually is an important aspect of learning to play a string instrument, not just cello - that it is a difficult thing to do, and is very rewarding when you learned to master it. But there are things about it that are different than other difficult things that people do in life, or even in other aspects of music. For instance if you play the piano most of the time you play by yourself. With a string instrument you play with other people and that is a really important thing. Especially for students, you have to have discipline on your own to learn the instrument and then you have to learn how to do it with other people where you work together. Of course in sports you work together, but in sports you are always working to beat somebody else.

HKCS: Music is different. It's about harmony.

Solow: Yes, right. So I think that's a really important difference. And then when you get good enough, you are able to play really great music. There is that other element when you are playing great music, you are participating in some of the greatest achievements of human beings throughout history. And I think that also affects people. When you play the great music of Beethoven, you are not the same person afterwards. It changes you, for the better.

HKCS: So as far as the great music you are talking about. Do you have any great cellists in mind that you really like?

Solow: Of historical cellists: Casals, Feuermann, Piatigorsky, and now that Rostropovich just died I can consider him a historical cellist. Lots of other cellists too I love things about their playing... Pierre Fournier, Leonard Rose, János Starker... I don't love everything that everybody plays... same thing with myself, I don't love everything that I play, although I am always trying to play as though I love it! And I always try to learn the things that I like the best from other cellists and steal them for myself.

HKCS: Mr. Rostropovich passed away recently. Would you think it is a loss to the cellists' world?

Solow: An absolute loss to the whole musical world. He had made such a contribution to music and cello... and everybody dies at some point... so it's sad when they die, but he made his mark in a way that will never disappear. He has been the most influential cellist of our time.

HKCS: I agree.

Solow: I would say that Casals was the most influential cellist of his time. And other cellist, Feuermann had a lot of influence, but I would say that for huge impact on the cello, Casals and Rostropovich.

HKCS: I see.

Solow: At least in my life time. Although most of Casals' impact was before I was born... but he was still alive and I played for him.

HKCS: Was he a very strict teacher?

Solow: Well, except for this one master class I never studied with him, so I don't know what he was like as a regular teacher. But for some reason he had some funny feelings with my teacher Piatigorsky, and he knew that I studied with him... so he was saying all kinds of not very nice things to me... at one point he said, but it's not your fault. So actually I think it didn't have anything to do with me.

HKCS: Sure. Don't take it personally. As far as other great cellists are concerned, with musicians nowadays, one usually chooses either performance or the teaching side. For you, which side do you prefer to go?

Solow: If you divide by how much time you spend doing one or the other, in my life, it has been more towards teaching. But I have always performed. Most people do both. There are very few people who perform who never teach. I guess there are teachers who never perform. Almost every performer teaches. There are certainly performers who don't teach regularly at schools. They may only teach master classes or possibly have one or 2 private students. I guess there are people like that. There are very few cellists in the world who make their living completely from performing, very few.

HKCS: How do you achieve the balance between teaching and performing? How do you manage time? It's very difficult.

Solow: I think your life takes you where it takes you. You don't always have control over where it is going to go. Balance of time can be very difficult. You just have to do the best you can and plan ahead. Planning ahead is very important. When I have an important concert coming up with music I have to practice very hard for, I start planning and working way in advance. So by the time the concert comes, I am ready for it.

HKCS: Where are you heading to after HK?

Solow: Tomorrow I am flying to Fuzhou, and playing a recital there and also giving a master class. And then from there I go to Naning, where I am playing Saint-Saëns' concerto with the conservatory orchestra and some other pieces with the string quartet. Then to Wuhan where I am playing a recital and also giving master classes. And then I fly back to the States. (A very long flight) The day after I arrive I have to get on another plane and fly to Pittsburgh and rehearse for a concert and play it the next day. So I will get to see if I can play during my sleep.

HKCS: Seems like a very busy schedule for you. I am sure music makes a very important part of your career...

Solow: Music is the largest part of my life.

HKCS: Apart from music do you have any hobbies or interests?

Solow: Absolutely! I love to read, which I maybe spend the largest amount of time aside from cello. I have a microscope and I look through that. I go scuba diving and take under water pictures. I have a pretty big fossil collection and every so often, I go hunt for fossils!

HKCS: That's great! And do you plan to come to HK in the future?

Solow: I am certainly hoping so. I would love to come back. Another thing I spend a lot of time doing is that over the last 10 years I have written a lot of articles for magazines... such as Strad magazine, Strings magazine, and American Strings Teachers Magazine. And the other thing that will be using up a lot more of my time is starting next May I will be the president of the American String Teachers Association. Which will use a lot of time... and right now I am the chair of the department of instrumental studies at Temple University where I teach. So there are a lot of things I have to take care of administratively that way. And as of 2 weeks ago I was just elected president of the Violoncello society of New York. So I have lots of things that are stealing my time.

HKCS: Yes, definitely. Usually in Chinese we have a saying that if we are very talented or have many abilities, we will make ourselves very busy. I think this is your case. Have you been thinking of retiring as you have been performing for many years?

Solow: No. I have some friends who are thinking of retiring, but it's actually kind of interesting that I find I am adding many more things to my life rather than cutting things out.

HKCS: And I know that many great musicians like János Starker still teaches at the Indiana University and still playing...

Solow: He has stopped playing in public now... he has retired from public performances. But he is 85... so he is allowed to do that.

HKCS: Are you going to continue to teach? And perform at the same time?

Solow: Absolutely yes.

HKCS: Thank you very much for your time. Finally, please tell us the story of stopper that brought you to Asia.

Solow: Well, there are 2 things that ended up bringing me here. One is the American String Teachers Association and the other is Otto Musica. With the American String Teachers Association, there is a program with 10 levels of playing, with repertoire and skills that different players are supposed to do. They have this for violin, viola, cello, and bass. They asked me to write, decide what the repertoire should be for the 10 different levels. Part of that repertoire were scale books and arpeggios books. I discovered that I didn't know a lot of books that are out there, so I started studying them. And I realized that there are probably other people like me that didn't know these books, so I decided to write an article about them (what was in all these different books) I published it in the American String Teachers Magazine.

A couple of years later, I got an email from a cello professor in Naning who wanted to translate it into Chinese and publish it in the Conservatory music journal. So we had some email correspondence about different parts of the article, and this ended up with an invitation to come there to Naning and Wuhan.

Then I had seen an ad for the cello and its stopper in Otto Musica. In the ad, the company was based in eastern United States in Philadelphia where I live. So I found the phone number and called them up. I talked to Mr Daniel Yeh and discovered that he had been trying to meet me through the American String Teachers Association but we never met.

He sent me some samples of his acoustic stoppers which I just love and I use it in all my concerts now. Not just concerts, in my practice, I use them all the time. And when I told him I was coming to China, he said, "well let me see if I can arrange some things if you have time, before that, for Taiwan." So he started with that. Then, he contacted Sarah, and Hong Kong entered the picture. And then he had known someone who it turns out that I knew from the past teaching him in a master class, Professor Wang Hong, who is from Fuzhou originally. So through that contact, he arranged the concert there. It's kind of remarkable how these different threads connect together. So here I am for 3 weeks... travelling!



## Cello Trivia

Q: What is special about Chopin's Cello Sonata, Op. 65?

A: This Sonata was Chopin's last significant piece of music. It was written for and dedicated to his cellist friend, Auguste Francomme. Francomme often performed with and became close friends with Chopin. According to Francomme's own inscribed copy of this piece, there is a note citing "The violincello part of the sonata for piano and cello by Chopin is written by me according to his dictation. Francomme." This sonata debuted to great acclaim at what was Chopin's last concert on February 16, 1848, a few days before the 1848 French Revolution. Francomme took part in this concert and his deep friendship with Chopin lasted until the death of the composer.

Interestingly, the cello was the only instrument apart from the piano that Chopin composed substantial amounts of music. Chopin had struggled with this sonata because he mostly composed the cello part first and was forced to curb his keyboard tendencies. He discarded a large amount of material and redrafted most of his ideas before deciding on the final form of the work. A great amount of care was put into distributing the material equally between the cello and piano. The end result is a unique, un-Chopin-esque piece of work.

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If you would like to volunteer to the Hong Kong Cellist Society or contribute to the newsletter, feel free to contact us at [lillian@hkcellistsociety.org.hk](mailto:lillian@hkcellistsociety.org.hk) for ways you can help.



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