

The Wonderful Cellist of Oz

By Jeffrey Ragauskis

A woman approaches as I pack up my cello at the end of the concert.

*"Young man. Young man!"*

*"Yes."*

*"You are quite talented at cello. I enjoyed watching you play."*

*"Well, thank you."*

*"Who is your teacher?"*

*"Oh, I take from Mark Lekas."*

*"Who?"*

*"Mark Lekas. He is an amazing teacher. He plays in the pit orchestra for 'Wicked' downtown."*

*"Oh..."*

If I had a penny every time I got a blank stare from someone who didn't know who my teacher was, I wouldn't have to worry about affording his lessons. Even in this state of confusion, these random strangers have always asked a question I myself have pondered for many years: Who is Mark Lekas? When I first met him, he was my cello tyrant, but now I consider him one of the most influential people in my life. After finally sitting down with this man for a one on one conversation, I quickly learned that we weren't in Kansas anymore.

~

*Happy birthday to me...*

*"I just wanted to say thank you for all your time, Emily. You really have helped Jeff progress"*

*I sat in the room as my dad spoke to my cello teacher, Emily Mantell. The look on her face shifted from a smile to a look of pure anger.*

*"What do you mean, 'Thank you,' Mr. Ragauskis?"*

*"Well, Jeff has decided he would like to pursue other teachers, in order to improve at a quicker rate. He has enjoyed his time here, but we think it would be best to see if he progresses quicker elsewhere."*

*"There is a process. You should have called me first. This is so sudden. He is not allowed to leave!"*

*Her voice seemed to get louder and louder with every word she said. Happy birthday to Jeffrey...*

*"Well, I'm sorry you feel that way Emily, but this is how we chose to handle this. The last time we checked, we hired you. I'm sorry again for any inconvenience."*

*My dad got up and headed for the door. I decided at that moment that I should follow suit for it had gotten incredibly awkward. I walked quickly towards the door and looked one last time at the blank stare on her face. It was off to meet Mr. Leks. Happy birthday to me.*

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It started just like ever Sunday at 10:30 did. I walked into that nice house in Willowbrook, Illinois with my father and was greeted very warmly by Mark's wife, Michelle. Moments later, my dad got jumped by two blurs of light, one being Mark's daughter named Sophie, the other his son named James. I took this opportunity to unpack my cello and head

downstairs. I thought of how routine this was to me by now. Walk in. Dad is attacked. I run downstairs to make sure I don't damage my instrument.

I walked into the very familiar studio that is at the base of the stairs in the finished basement of the home. I sat in my chair and looked around for a moment to soak in the many things in the room that I had gotten so used to. There were a few cellos in the room. One on the floor, another on a cello stand and possibly one more in the big white Bobeleck case with the White Sox sticker on the front. I looked over to his computer desk, and I was surprised to see that it was turned off. Usually the computer was buzzing with some sort of music, or news article that always seemed to grab my attention while I would wait for his arrival. My focus on the room is shattered by the familiar rattle of the basement staircase. In walks a Greek man about 5' 10, early 40's. He has jet black hair, but not all of it. He has lost some of it on the top, but what he has left is very black. You can tell by the way he handles himself that he is confident. He asked me the usual questions, such as how was school, any new girls on the front, and many other things that have come to be normal. I then took my lesson. I was a little distracted, because after this hour, I would get to learn things that I have wanted to know about this mystery man in front of me. After he was done sharing his knowledge, it was time for him to share his life.

According to Mark, his life started "the same way everyone else's did". He was born on December 11th of an undisclosed year. I know Mark very well, so it makes sense to me that he would not share his age. I asked him about what got him started on cello, and his answer surprised me. Mark first started taking piano lessons at the age of six. His mom, who was a professional pianist, was his teacher and he took steady lessons with her all during his youth. At the age of ten, he was given the opportunity through school to join orchestra. His brother Steve was studying violin at the time, so his mother encouraged him to stay within the string family.

He chose to play the cello because it was his mother's favorite instrument. I chuckled to myself when I heard this, for I heard a little of myself in that answer. Not only did he do orchestra because his brother did it first, he was also a momma's boy. Maybe I connected so well with Mark because we were so similar. I dug deeper, now more curious than ever.

All musicians can remember the first time they played their instruments. I remember the first time I played cello. I practiced that first night for almost two hours. We learned only the open strings, but I just wanted to play. When I asked Mark to recollect this experience his eyes lit up the same way they do when I actually play an assigned passage correctly. (That rarely happens, for Mark never settles for good—he wants great.) *I played in many youth orchestras. The first was the school orchestra at Highlands Jr. High. I remember to this day. My first few moments playing in that orchestra—drawing my bow with the full string section—the sound and feeling came over me and I teared up.* I wasn't sure if I should laugh at this point, for I did not know if this was another one of Mark's great sarcastic comments, or the truth. I decided I'd let that go.

Mark decided his sophomore year of high school that he wanted to be a professional cellist. *I was winning competitions and nearly always placing first chair in orchestras. I think it was my calling.* Mark applied to many prestigious music schools, including Eastman School of Music, Indiana University, Peabody and Illinois Wesleyan. He was accepted at all these schools, but chose Eastman School of Music. When I asked the reason her responded, *"They gave me the most money. Also Paul Katz wanted me in his cello class. Wow I said."* I did not know who Paul Katz was so I ran home and looked him up. Paul Katz is known to classical music enthusiasts as the cellist in the Cleveland Quartet, which during an international career of 26 years, made more than 25,000 appearances on four continents. He has received countless honors, including

“Chevalier du Violoncelle”, awarded by the Eva Janzer Memorial Cello Center at Indiana University for distinguished achievements and contributions to the world of cello playing and teaching, The Richard M. Bogomolny National Service Award, an Honorary Doctorate of Musical Arts from Albright College. Katz was a student of Gregor Piatigorsky, legendary Janos Starker, Bernard Greenhouse, Gabor Rejto and Leonard Rose. I was very impressed that a man of this caliber had requested to teach my teacher. I never realized until then how lucky I really was.

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*I walked back to the car still shaking, trying to make it to the car before I burst into tears. I had heard from Mike Schieber, my stand partner at school that Mr. Lekas was a tough teacher, but I thought this man was a maniac. He told me countless times that I couldn't play. It's my first time with him, and here I am crying. My dad looked at me and asked how it went and then saw my expression.*

*“How did it go?”*

*“He said I suck, but he asked me to come back.”*

*“Why would you come back? Look at you, you're bawling.”*

*My father brought up a very good point, but inside I knew I wanted to come back. There has to be a reason he wants me to come back. I'll show him who can't play. I'll show him.*

~

After some introductory questions, I thought it was time to ask exactly what his job was. *I am a professional cellist. I do what I can to make money.* He smiles after that comment. I think of all the times Mark has told me that he would never let me be a professional musician because the life is so hard. *My career has many advantages, but is loaded with disadvantages.*

*The main advantage is that I get to do what I love for money- play the cello. The disadvantage is that work can be really slow, which can lead to anxiety followed by depression which leads to suicide.* I laughed here, because I knew that he didn't mean that last sentence, but at the same time he was right. Making money as a musician isn't exactly easy. I asked him what kinds of paying jobs he has had in his lifetime that have to do with cello. *I play in orchestra, chamber concerts, solo and concertos. I have recorded TV and radio jingles, but I have done more recordings in Nashville for country artists. I teach privately.* He winked on that one. *I even play in weddings and substitute for the Chicago Symphony. I enjoy playing for musical theater and am currently playing Wicked in Chicago. I have played dozens of shows.* What is it like playing for something like "Wicked"? *It is the same damn notes every night all week, but it pays the bills.* I still really didn't understand what kind of things he did, so he summed it all up in a very simple phrase-*I am a commercial cellist. More money in it I guess.* I continued to press for more details on his job. His favorite "gig" was when he played a few rock concerts with Phish and the Who. *Tens of thousands of screaming fans—what can beat that?* I am pretty sure it doesn't get any cooler than that.

I was curious since I wanted to be a professional cellist myself how much money he was making doing these different things. He wouldn't give me direct numbers but I beat around the bush. *Money, what's that? Musicians don't have any.* I looked around the house and told him he wasn't exactly in a box with his cello somewhere on State Street. I asked him what his best paying gig was. He told me of a time he did a Sears jingle for a TV commercial. He only played a one hour session and was paid \$10,000 dollars. As great of a check that is, there is also the other extreme. Mark could think of many jobs that he did "out of the goodness of his heart." As a musician myself, I know that is the nice way of putting that you weren't getting paid and you

found out after you took the job. *I learned a very quick lesson from that—never be too afraid to ask how much it pays!*

I decided that I didn't want to press on about money, so I moved on to a new topic. Do you love your job? *I love my job because I love to play the cello.* Best moment of your career to date? *I would have to say winning the Columbus Symphony job. I was still in College and won this major symphony job. \$32.2 K in 1986. Not bad for a first job, don't you think? I had money for the first time in my life. Also, I won the concerto competition at the National Repertory Orchestra in Colorado as a college student. I have always been told I played like a soloist. Imagine that. It felt great to play the way I wanted and to have what came out of my cello MY intentions.* I laughed, for I have been yelled at so many times that I play like I am the only one who matters. Maybe that is a quality I picked up, but I have a sick hunch I was born with it. I asked him what his worst moment was. *Oh god, working the dish crew at Eastman—I was the scraper. Also, there was that wedding on Oak Street Beach. It was windy, and the hot sand was blowing in my eyes, while my endpin was sinking in the sand on the ground. My posture sunk, causing me to have a terrible back ache.* We spent the next several minutes exchanging stories about weather affected gigs. His were better than my rain soaked music wonders. He has years of experience on me, so there is hope for mine yet.

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*I practiced really hard for this week's lesson. I think Mr. Lekas might even be happy with me. I know all the parts really well. I walked in confident and sat down and played. After I was done, he looked at me: "Jeff, that was a disaster. It was like . . . a snow ball coming down a cliff. As you kept going, more and more things went wrong until you have this avalanche of bad cello playing." Back to the drawing board. . .*

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I realized that a lot of time had passed, but I was still filled with questions for him. I asked him what was so compelling about teaching lessons. Inside, I had my own answer, because I have a few students of my own. I would never teach them the way Mark teaches me. They would not be able to handle the abuse at that age. *I love to watch the progress of my students. Very satisfying and rewarding.* Who was your favorite teacher? *My favorite teacher was Zara Nelsova. I studied with her at the Music Academy of the West. She was full of energy and had a passion for making her students sound their best.* I laughed inside because that description is exactly how I would describe his teaching. Well, she might not have been as aggressive.

~

*"So did you read the paper yesterday, Jeff?"*

*Shut up, Mark.*

*"If I am not mistaken, the Sox may have won the World Series."*

*Shut up, Mark.*

*"Where were the Cubs? Oh wait they were at home." He smiles big.*

*I hope you're enjoying yourself, can I play now?*

*"Sure, just don't choke on the fast passage again. You'll pull a Cub."*

*He laughs hysterically, and I get ready to make him eat his words.*

~

By this point of the interview, I felt like maybe I should ask Mark more random questions since I seemed to believe I was done learning about his job. I asked him what college was like for him. I was expecting to finally to see the wild side of Mark that I have heard about, but was severely disappointed. *I enjoyed college very much. The wonderfully talented students and*



*faculty. He cocked his head upward as he soaked in memories. The hours and hours of practicing. It was a place where the students and faculty all spoke a similar language-music. So all you did was music? Oh no they tried to culture us with crap like psychology, English and math. Oh, so like real school. He smiled. Sure.*

All musicians have lives after music, we just hide them well. In Mark's case, he hides it very well. *Besides music I really enjoy cooking Asian and Greek foods. I also like taking care of the house, composing music on midi software, reading and investing. Having a beer with a friend.* In my head I imagined what it would be like to someday grab a beer with Mark. It only took me a moment to decide that was now a goal of mine.

I decided it was time for my edgy question of the day-Why the White Sox? *Why, the White Sox are the best!* I chuckled, trying to listen seriously and tame my inner Cub fan. *I mean were the best. I have so many memories of going to Sox games as a child with my friend Mike. We would bike to Western Springs Station, get on the Burlington RR, take the Red Line to Sox Park. What fun. Sox rule.* I am pretty sure that he said that last sentence was to be a jerk, but that would be Mark. He always likes to play with your head.

~

*Is same time next week ok?*

*"Yeah, that is fine"*

*All right, I'll see you next week.*

*"All right, see you buddy. Good work this week"*

*Mark's compliments are always worth a million times more than anyone else.*

~

My time that Sunday with Mark was more educational for me than any day I have had in a long time. I unwrapped the mystery which is my cello teacher, and on this journey on the “yellow brick road,” I found a lot more than a wizard of cello. This time I paid attention to the man behind the curtain, and I find I return to the cellist of Oz because of the wonderful things he does.

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