

PERSONAL LETTERS FROM RUDOLF SERKIN AND HIS
WIFE IRENE

PAUL'S WRITING ABOUT THE PIATTI STRADIVARIUS
CELLO, LOANED TO HIM FROM MARLBORO AND
RUDOLPH SERKIN

ALICE TULLY LETTER

CELLIST
Paul Tobias

265 RIVERSIDE DRIVE, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10025 (212) 749-8161

March 5, 1979

Dear Mr. Sedain,

It is now already over a month since Liz and I gave our recital at the "4" in New York and I am very tardy in acknowledging that wonderful, thoughtful telegram which we received from you upon arriving at the hall. It was with very special appreciation that we read your encouraging message, both on account of the wonderful experiences these past summers at Marlboro and because of your truly monumental generosity in regard to the cello.

The years with the "Piatti" were very special ones to me and I hope you will excuse and understand the hesitation I have felt before putting pen to paper to attempt some adequate & how could there be one? verbal expression of my gratitude to you and the Marlboro Trustees. Time to live with any great work of art is more than precious and I shall never forget your investment of faith in my abilities to caretake the instrument which had been put into your hands. Since I returned the cello to the Francais office at the end of January I have continued to feel the enrichment - which I imagine will be life-long - of this incomparable experience.

Now that I am concentrating my energies on acquiring an instrument of sufficient power and

quality for my concert needs, I can report some real progress — both in the long-range project of finding a fine old instrument and in also commissioning a fine maker for a cello to be made expressly to my needs. Clearly, the modern cello cannot replace the other, but Leonard Rose considers this main work to be the finest sounding ^{modern} cello he has seen and played.

I am applying for institutional assistance in the commission which may be ready for me to play by sometime next month (I fortunately a bit late for the Marlboro tour with Shlomo + Yefim which begins March 31.) If it would be possible that you might consider sending me some acknowledgment of the care ~~which~~ ^{with} which I played & maintained the Beattie, it could be a big help in coordinating the necessary assistance for both projects, in terms of potential patrons, etc. This I would appreciate more than I can say.

As you no doubt know from Tracy C, Liz and I are going to be taking a real summer off this year — to travel and have a large unscheduled block of time together. Our concerts have been going very well and many more already coming for next year — an unprecedented number of fine orchestral concerts too, I am delighted to report.

Again, we both thank you for the message at the "y". Our very best to you and here and love to the Marlboro family. Please tell Cecile we think of her often — and Louis too!
Love, Paul Tobias

R.F.D. 3
Brattleboro, Vermont
05301

December 31, 1975

Paul Tobias
156 West 20th Street
New York, N.Y. 10011

Dear Paul;

This is just a note of New Year's wishes and greetings to you and Piatti.

We are talking of you very often. It was marvelous to be with you at Marlboro, and we are looking forward to next summer.

Thank you for your good letter which arrived during our ten-week absence on a tour around the world.

Affectionate greetings from both of us.

always yours,

Rudolf Serkin



Telegram

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ICS IPMMTZZ CSP

8022544353 TDMT BRATTLEBORO VT 14 01-17 1022A EST

PMS PAUL TOBIAS, DLR

MUSIC AT THE Y

92 ST AND LEXINGTON AVE

NEW YORK NY 10028

THINKING OF YOU WITH WARM AFFECTION. WISHING YOU THE BEST TONIGHT
AND EVER

RUDOLF SERKIN

NNNN

Mr.

Paul Tobias - Piatti

many thanks, dear friends,
for remembering me on my
birthday, it warmed my heart!

affectionate greetings,
yours
Rudolf Seikm.

Irène Serkin RFD3 Brattleboro, VT. 05301

165

140

Dear Paul,

Thank you so much, for your dear letter.
Your dear thoughts made me very happy.
And you are starting your Tour now - I wish,
I could hear you all and Mr. Piatti
and Miss Gnadagnini - but I am
afraid, I will miss it, unless you are
engaged to play in Brattleboro! I am
planning to spend this month quietly
at home, while my husband works
hard all over Europe. Thanks again
and fond greetings yours,

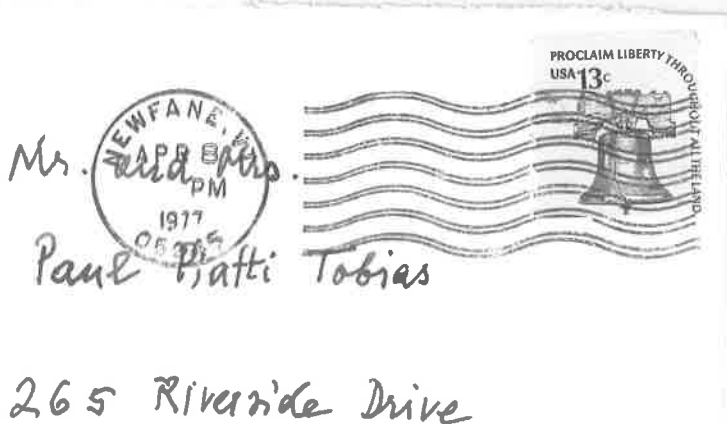
Irène Serkin
P.S. How was Dinner at the Calimiro's?

Dear Paul,
many thanks for your kind greetings
remembering my birthday, it made
me feel happy. Also regards to Mr. Piatti.
Please tell him how sorry I am that I have
to miss hearing you two today, but such
is my life and fate.

Kindest greetings to you,
dear Paul,

Yours cordially,

Rudolf Serkin.



Mr. ~~Paul Piatti~~
Paul Piatti Tobias

265 Riverside Drive

NEW YORK, N.Y.
10025

The background of the cello is in the Hill book. The instrument was made in 1720 but nothing of it is known until 1818 when the first accounts (pages 137-140) are given. It is considered by the Hills to be one of the three great Strads. In 1901, upon Alfredo Piatti's death, the instrument was acquired by the Baron Robert von Mendelssohn, a relative of the famous composer. The cello later came into the hands of Francesco di Mendelssohn, a great great great grandnephew of Felix Mendelssohn and a childhood friend of Rudolph Serkin and also of Gregor Piatigorsky. It was upon his death several years ago that the instrument was bequeathed to Serkin with the intent that Serkin should direct it into the hands of a qualified and deserving player.

Serkin happened to be traveling on concert tour at the time in Los Angeles where he had supper with Piatigorsky. He asked what should be done with the instrument and Piatigorsky suggested, and the words he used were, "Paul Tobias is the only person to play it."

I had for several years previous to that (while studying with Piatigorsky) been borrowing a fine Gofriller cello from a collector in California and Piatigorsky knew the special care I took of it. Piatigorsky himself owned and played the Batta,

which like the Piatti is one of the three great Stradivari celli, and was also a great collector of Impressionist paintings. He called me the next morning and in that unmistakable Russian-accented voice asked, "You know the Piatti Stradivarius?" and asked whether I would like to play it. And naturally I nearly fell off the chair on which I was sitting. And it came to pass that I did borrow the instrument and actually fell in love with it. To facilitate the loan, Mr. Serkin gave the cello to the Marlboro Music Festival (of which is is the Artistic Director). I went there in the summertimes ~~and played~~, and also toured extensively with Music from Marlboro groups, "playing my rent" as I used to say. But this was also a marvelous opportunity for me to learn the chamber repertoire and play with many wonderful people. For example, we were invited to play for President and Mrs. Carter at the Inaugural Reception, a fitting Head of State occasion for a great cello.

Piatigorsky's vision and conviction was that the instrument should not be traded off from one person to another but remain in the hands of one reliable artist. This was not totally appreciated nor shared by some others. (Some of the Marlboro trustees are neither musicians nor collectors of art, so their values tend to be different.) Despite Piatigorsky's insistence that I should not be responsible for upkeep and insurance, for example, I was pressured to some extent on this

matter. After Piatigorsky's death, two and a half years ago, the value of the cello was increasing so astronomically (twenty to twenty-five percent a year) that there arose many good reasons to consider selling it. ~~It~~ ^{now} there is a good possibility that the instrument may be sold and the income invested for more tangible and ~~profitable~~ ^{"creative"} purposes than the protectorship of great art.

For some time it has been apparent to me that my use of the cello was coming to an end and I felt it was healthier for me to establish a cut-off date than to leave it to anyone else. There was never any security in the circumstances of the loan and I wished at least to pilot the ship to harbor by myself. That final concert was the recital on January 18, 1979, and I should be returning the instrument now any day.

I might also add that part of Piatigorsky's reason for choosing me to play it had to do with the way he knew I would feel about it and therefore handle it. (The instrument is in remarkable, virtually perfect, condition. However, as with all great pieces of art there is certain up-keep necessary from time to time. In the case of this cello, there are things which need to be done for its good.) Despite pressure to do extensive and costly "restoration", I would not allow major work to be done on it, in keeping with Piatigorsky's wishes and my own judgment.

There is a good possibility that, given a buyer Serkin can live with in principle, they probably will sell it. I would hate to see the instrument go into a collection and not be played, but such a possibility does exist owing to recent actions by the trustees and the entry into the picture of a collector known for sequestering great instruments. That would not be in keeping with the intent of Mendelssohn's will or Piatigorsky's dream.

The previous owner, Francesco di Mendelssohn, was a good amateur cellist, a man of independent means, who lived first in Europe and later in New York. He enjoyed playing chamber music, and very much liked chamber music parties with friends. He loved good times and parties and as a result the life of the cello while it was in his possession seemed to radiate a charm that protected it from catastrophe after catastrophe. Like a cat, it had nine lives, some of which were used during Francesco's scandalously careless years with the cello.

A prominent member of the Rembert Wurlitzer family told me the following fantastic but true anecdotes from the life and times of the Piatti. Wurlitzer was the leading dealer in fine instruments in the United States until his death about ten years ago and many of the great instruments, including the Piatti cello, passed through his hands. In the U. S. he was what W. E. Hill and Son were in England and still to this day any instrument which had papers from Hill or Wurlitzer during their lifetimes were and are considered to be absolutely authentic.

While living in Europe Francesco Mendelssohn at one time had an open-backed Bentley and one day was taking a ride. The cello, in its hard wooden case, was in the back seat. About 40 kilometers into the trip, he stopped for petrol only to discover to his horror that the cello was not in the car. So he carefully retraced his route. Sure enough, about ten kilometers back, where he had sped around a sharp curve, the cello must have catapulted off the car and landed miraculously on the soft shoulder of the road. Someone evidently had come along and set ~~it~~ up upright against a white picket fence where it could be seen, "should its owner come looking."

A few years later when Francesco was living in New York, he had played late at a party, come home thoroughly inebriated. Parking his car, he took out the cello, set it down while he locked the car door, and went upstairs to bed. The next morning his doorbell rang and there was the superintendent of the building saying, "Mr. Mendelssohn, here is a musical instrument case from the garbage near your car. It still looks pretty new. Are you sure you want me to throw it away?"

Wurlitzer once interceded with ~~Francesco~~ Mendelssohn at a time when he was going to Dallas to play chamber music with friends. He impressed on Francesco the good sense of leaving the Stradivari with him and taking one of ~~his~~ ^{his} own cellos.

This turned out to be most fortunate ^{for the Piatti since Wurlitzer's own} ~~since the instrument that~~
^{cello} Francesco did take was burned completely in a hotel fire caused
by Francesco and a dropped cigarette.

At a time when Mendelssohn was living in a brownstone
apartment in Manhattan, one with a walk-up front stoop, he had
been playing again until late at night. When he came home, he
walked up the outside steps, put the cello down and tried to open
the door. The lock resisted his efforts and it only gradually be-
came apparent to him he was at the wrong house. So we went to
the adjacent one, opened the door, and went to bed. The next morn-
ing a police car was cruising by, saw the cello case, and rang
all the apartments of the house in an attempt to find the owner.
Unsuccessful, they took the cello in its case to the police sta-
tion where, upon examination, they found the name of Wurlitzer in
the case. They phoned him to describe what they ^{noticed} felt had been
abandoned and described it as a violin, only larger. Wurlitzer
asked them to look through the F holes in the top which they did
and told him it said "Stradivarius 1720." Upon hearing that and the
address of the discovery, Wurlitzer instantly knew what instru-
ment it was.

^{The next day the}
~~Not long after that~~ Mendelssohn family decided the in-
strument would be safer in the Wurlitzer vault where it was ^{to which it was removed for} for
almost a quarter of a century. When ^{Francesco} he died, it was willed to
Serkin and thus found its way to me.

played and protected the Piatti cello

During the time I have ~~had it~~, I have never taken ~~the~~ *it*
~~cello~~ anywhere without a taxi. I purchase a seat for it on
airplanes. (In fact, I have not taken flights because they did
not have a proper place for it.) I never leave it at home when
I am away. So it has never been subject to any hazard that I
could foresee.

Not long before his death, I visited Piatigorsky and
we had the Piatti, the Batta and the Baudiot (the one he played
in concerts) with the two of us standing outside on the lawn
and someone took a picture. We never got a print of that but *I trust that*
it exists somewhere. *Had only* if he lived longer (but for ~~his~~ cigarettes
and lung cancer) it is probable *that* the three great Strad cellos
would ~~could~~ have been united (with Rostropovich) ~~and the Dupont.~~
*for the first time: the Batta, the Dupont
and my friend the Piatti.*

Paul Tobias
January 22, 1979

A L I C E T U L L Y
H A M P S H I R E H O U S E
1 5 0 C E N T R A L P A R K S O U T H
N E W Y O R K , N E W Y O R K 1 0 0 1 9

February 27, 1974

Mr. Paul Tobias
265 Riverside Drive
New York, New York 10025

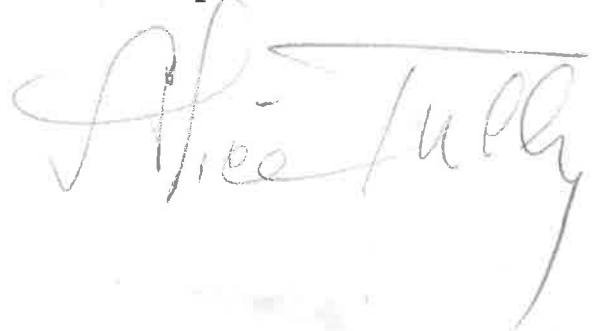
Dear Paul:

As I was unable to reach you by telephone after receiving the wonderful record, I am writing to tell you how delighted I am to have it and how touched and grateful I feel that you spent so much time just before leaving for your tour in seeking it out and dropping it off for me. It is a splendid recording by an extraordinary artist of a most beautiful and, unfortunately, neglected work and having the Kodaly Sonata on the other side is marvellous, too.

I am sure you will be glad to know that Concert Artists Guild sent me a copy of the letter from the Mary Biddle Duke Foundation expressing their intention of sending \$2,750 towards the commission of a new concerto from Chou Weng-Chung and today I have sent to Concert Artists Guild, for this same purpose, a check for \$1,000 which will complete the "matching" part of the grant. I am certain that this work will be of great interest and, of course, will prove a most welcome addition to the very limited repertoire of cello concertos.

With all very best wishes for a highly successful tour and my deepest and warmest thanks for your great kindness and the record,

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alice Tully". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name "Alice Tully".

AT/a