

Alisa Weilerstein on what it means to be a classical musician



April 19, 2017 - Alisa Weilerstein is an American classical cellist who began performing professionally at the age of 13. She was awarded the MacArthur "genius grant" in 2011.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1864 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#).

What does the idea of creative freedom mean when you're a classical musician? You're playing these well-known, exacting pieces of music.

There's this idea that we have a literal script in front of us. This is always the subject of debate—what is the role of the performer? Is it to be an interpreter? It's tricky, especially if it's a composer like Beethoven, who was specific about what he wanted. Most classical musicians regard his work as sacred in terms of *really* abiding by exactly what he wrote, in terms of dynamic markings and tempi and that sort of thing. However, even with a very specific composer like that, there is tremendous room for interpretation. It's not about expressing the performer's personality, but that inevitably happens. Everyone brings their perspective and insight into what the composer actually meant. It's a balance we have to strive for—to protect what the composer intended, yet keep the music alive so it doesn't become a museum piece, or simply an archive. You try to treat the score as something that's living and breathing, and therefore, malleable. It's a nice challenge to have. It's a constant challenge, too.

When you're playing with someone new, do differences in interpretation ever cause problems?

That's a constant discussion. But again, you crave that kind of thing. I've found that my happiest collaborations with conductors, where I'm playing a concerto with them, have been times where you come together from very, very different places. But if both of us are open to different orientations or interpretations, that can yield a really interesting interpretation and performance. That's an important skill, unless you are someone who only plays alone always, you have to be able to communicate. You have to have a willingness to collaborate. The work is better as a result.

You made your professional debut at the age of 13 and were often referred to as a child prodigy. How did you feel about that at the time?

I never liked that word. I think of Mozart as a true prodigy. Who are any of us next to Mozart? I also heard of other people of my generation being called a prodigy as if they were simply a precocious kid. I thought the connotations of being considered a prodigy implied living a very different life than the one I lived. I was never subjected to abuse or was made to practice 10 hours a day while locked up. Those were the kind of stories you heard. My parents were very conscious to give me as close to a normal childhood as possible, so I had friends, played outside, went to normal school. I was interested in other things. I read a lot of books. I had a real life.

People might assume that a talent like yours must have been fostered at the expense of everything else.

People assume that this is the only thing you know how to do, or that your talent is a kind of idiot-savant type of thing. I certainly didn't want that and no one around me wanted that for me. So that was a very important thing. I always hated it when people would try to label me in any way.

I got management early on. I was 14 when I went with my manager. She's the same manager I have now, 20 years later. She knew exactly what to do and what not to do with a young person. My management was very careful to get me as much experience as I needed without overexposing me or taking over my life.

What's a typical day like for you?

I'm always juggling a lot of repertoire at the same time, which requires a lot of rehearsal. I also have a young daughter, who is 11 months old. I'm constantly trying to budget my time properly so that I have enough time and head space to really work on the things that I need to do in a practical sense, but also grow as an artist.

So you budget accordingly. The helpful thing is that a lot of repertoires that I have to play are repertoires that I've done before. For example, the Schumann concerto I've played many times. But for this upcoming performance, it'll be my first time that I play it without a conductor, so it should be interesting. I've been looking forward to working with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra because they don't play like a typical orchestra with a conductor at the head, in which case you just follow the conductor's beat. They're chamber music players, which means that they're listening to each other individually. There's the potential for a really deep kind of collaboration with them, which is kind of unique. If you have played these pieces many times, as I have, this is the sort of thing you crave.

How do you nourish your creative life when you're not working?

If there's a piece that I've been playing over and over again, it's very helpful to put it away for a while. Then you come back to it with a new and fresh perspective. I do that with great repertoires a lot. For example, I'm about to play the Elgar concerto with the National Symphony in Russia. I haven't played the Elgar in a long time. I have actually recorded the Elgar with Daniel Barenboim. I have played it countless times, but there was actually a long period of time where I was not playing it, maybe five or six months. So to return to it was actually really wonderful, because I found all sorts of new things in it. That's a great advantage of playing these real masterworks, because they're so rich in detail that you can always find something new, no matter how many times you've played them. In that sense, there's no substitute for time away. The perspective gives you something. It gives you a totally new tool.

You received the MacArthur Grant. This means people can now refer to you as a genius in an official capacity.

Yes, that is weird. I'm going to give you a similar answer to what I would say about the label of "prodigy." Of course, these labels are flattering. Nobody would say otherwise, but I try not to pay too much attention to that. Labels are generally very, very unhelpful. Human beings are far more complex. It's nice, and of course, it's a great honor. For me, the greatest honor of the MacArthur Grant was that it's something given not only to musicians, but also to scientists and writers. To be included with these amazing people, that, for me, was the biggest honor.

For aspiring classical musicians, what kind of advice can you offer other than practice, practice, practice?

Don't do it for anybody else. Do it for no other reason than that you love it and can't imagine doing anything else. Because it's hard enough, even when you love it. Without real love and doggedness and tenacity, it's still nearly impossible.

Also, you can't be afraid of performing. Luckily, I didn't ever have that fear. I count myself incredibly lucky in that respect—or maybe I was just very stupid, I don't know—that I wasn't afraid to be in front of people. It certainly made things easier to not have that fear, to not have to unload that fear or deal with it. For me, it didn't matter whether I was playing in front of people or not. Music is about communication. It's about communicating ideas which are inexpressible in words. So that's how I always looked at it.

What do you think of as being the most important creative resources for doing what you do?

Well, something that I'm trying to do more of is simply being mindful to get enough exercise and to do good stretches. This is important for any musician. Playing the cello actually takes tremendous upper body strength. You have to be in good shape to play the instrument well. You also have to deal with the traveling, which is very tough on the body. Just making sure to get enough sleep, and to have enough space in between engagements, those are things I'm not too good at. I tend to say yes too often, but I'm trying to get better at that. People might not realize that the further you go in this business, the more travel is absolutely a part of the job description. I am traveling almost all the time. Literally. There are only a few weeks of the year when I'm not on the road.

At this point in your career, how do you define success? Is it always about reaching for some higher goal?

That's the beauty of it. There is no end point. I'm still going to always try to improve as an artist and to be a more insightful interpreter. The goal is always to know these scores better, to truly live with the great masterworks—like the Bach Suites, for example. To keep growing with them. The other goal that I have is to try to help create a twenty-first century repertoire for the cello, much in the way that Rostropovich did in the twentieth century. He was the muse for Shostakovich and Prokofiev, and he premiered over a thousand works over the course of his lifetime. He's a great inspiration for me in that sense. I want to keep fostering relationships with composers, help expand our repertoire, and create a cornerstones of twenty-first century repertoire. That's something that I'm really trying to do.

For anyone in the classical music world, being able to expose other people to these great works is always something you hope to do. I know many people who say, "I got inspired by such-and-such conductor when my school took me on a field trip to hear a concert," or "such-and-such musician came to my school, and then I knew I loved classical music." The goal is not necessarily that they'll all become musicians, but just that this music will be part of their lives.

Essential Alisa Weilerstein:

Alisa Weilerstein & conductor Daniel Barenboim - [Elgar & Carter Cello Concertos](#)

[Dvořák: Cello Concerto](#)

Alisa Weilerstein: [Master Class \(Česká filharmonie / Czech Philharmonic\)](#)

Alisa Weilerstein and Inon Barnatan - [Rachmaninov's Sonata for Cello and Piano in G Minor](#)

Alisa Weilerstein plays [Bach's Cello Suite No.3, Gigue](#)

Recommended by Alisa Weilerstein:

One book I would recommend to anyone who's interested in music would be Alex Ross's [The Rest Is Noise](#). I think it's a fantastic resource, and he writes so beautifully. It's filled with really, really good information.

Something I return to every so often is Kundera's [The Book of Laughter and Forgetting](#). Fresh, moving, timeless, and some of the most beautiful writing I can think of.

[There Will Be Blood](#). Daniel Day-Lewis' tour de force

[Cecilia Bartoli](#)...I love virtually everything she does.

[The Wire](#)...need I say more?

Carlos Kleiber's [live recording](#) of Brahms 2nd Symphony reminds me of what utter joy and inspiration sounds (and looks!) like

Name

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Vocation

Cellist

Fact

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