Interview with Eugene Drucker,

violinist with the Emerson String Quartet

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By Alice Hardesty

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AH: Good morning, Gene, thanks very much for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me. Let me start out by saying that I first heard the Emerson about 30 years ago at the Renwick Gallery in Washington DC. You were my introduction to live chamber music and I think I was spoiled by starting out with such a marvelous group. Can you tell me about your relationship with the Smithsonian system?

ED: Yes. For the first four seasons, almost all the concerts in that series were on weekends at the Renwick Gallery. As our time on the weekends became increasingly valuable, we eventually moved to Baird Auditorium at the Natural History Museum, because it seats about 600 people. During our time in DC we were part of a larger consortium of groups called "Millennium" that had an Elizabethan group, the Folger Consort, which is still in residence at the Folger Library, a Baroque music group, the Romantic Chamber Ensemble, which we played with sometimes, and a contemporary chamber ensemble, which had concerts at the Hirshhorn Gallery.

AH: Let's talk about your beginnings as a quartet. How did you four come together?

ED: Philip Setzer and I met while we were students at Juilliard. We met at the orchestra, actually, and decided to form a student quartet together, partly because you had to do that for the chamber music requirement, and it felt congenial on a personal basis because we already knew each other. After all, we had the same role model, our teacher, the great violinist Oscar Shumsky. Meanwhile, we were getting coached by members of the Juilliard Quartet, especially Robert Mann -- who I think is a Portland native -- and also

by Felix Galimir, who had formed the Galimir Quartet, which specialized in 20th Century music.

We had various changes of personnel over the first few years, and when we finished school we had to freelance to make a living. But we always had the quartet as a core of our musical experience. Peter Mennin, the president of Juilliard, heard us perform at a church on the East Side. He felt that we had potential and that we should continue to stay together, so during the 1976-1977 season we got a manager and chose a name (we didn't have a name for the first few years). Since it was the bicentennial year we chose an American name with cultural associations.

AH: And Emerson himself?

ED: Emerson had said some enlightened things about music, but none of us was really an expert in philosophy, so the name was a bit on the arbitrary side. But everyone thinks very highly of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and we knew that he had great influence on the intellectual and cultural life of the United States throughout the 19th Century, so it seemed like a good way to celebrate American history.

AH: You're the only quartet I know of, although there must be others, where the violinists trade places between 1st and 2nd. Why did you decide to do that?

ED: That's something that Phil and I have been doing since our student days, because we wanted to learn how to play both parts. The demands they impose on the violin are somewhat different, and we wanted to gain those skills. Since we evolved so gradually into a professional group, we never felt that there was any reason to crystallize the roles of 1st and 2nd violins.

AH: Can you tell me a bit about the characteristics of each because I think a lot of people who enjoy string quartets don't really understand their respective roles.

ED: The 1st violin part is usually more exposed, especially in repertoire like Haydn and Mozart, where there is some integration of melodic material among all the instruments, but the attention is still focused very much on the 1st violin. Even in later music, where the material might be more equally distributed among all the parts, the 1st violin is usually the highest part, so it's going to stand out acoustically. And composers, in conceiving four-part harmony, will give a lot of detail to the top line. It's a natural way of writing unless we're talking about Renaissance polyphony, where all four voices are doing very similar things, but at different times. Of course, some quartet writing is like that, like the fugue at the beginning of Beethoven's Opus 131. The first violin will usually give the rhythmic cues when all four instruments are playing together.

Now with the 2nd violin, one of the challenges is that you're a few feet farther away from the audience and you have to emerge from the texture if you have a solo part. It takes a bit more work. You're usually in a lower register with regard to your instrument, so it's a little harder to project the lines. You also have a role of organizing the rhythmic cues for the lower three instruments. The 1st violin may be playing a long spun melodic line, but the other three instruments may have more rhythmically oriented material and you have to organize that, so then the 2nd violin will be giving cues to the others.

AH: So there are reasons why somebody would choose to play the 2nd violin.

ED: Yes. You might have a darker sound that's more conducive to that register. You might prefer experiencing the music from the inside. That's why some people play the viola, why Mozart himself enjoyed playing the viola -- because he could experience the texture and harmonies of the music from the inside.

AH: That's very interesting. Speaking of polyphony, I looked on your website and was really interested in the Bach project and I saw the video, which you narrated. Why did you decide to do the Art of the Fugue and what it is about Bach that draws you in?

ED: Bach didn't write any music for string quartet, but with the Art of the Fugue, we had the opportunity to play absolutely great music, one of his valedictory statements. He had written this without specifying which instruments it should be played by, so it gives a string quartet as much right as an organist or a pianist to play this music.

AH: He never envisioned a string quartet playing this kind of thing, but just left it open?

ED: Yes. It's absolute music, music of the greatest purity that's not tied to the characteristics of any instrument. It turned out to be a surprisingly good seller when the CD came out. We were asked by Deutsche Grammophon to follow up with another Bach recording a few years later, which was very difficult because all of the other music was written for specific instruments. We looked at some of the organ chorales, and a few of them came out very nicely in quartet form, but with others we didn't feel like we were adding anything by playing them as a string quartet.

Then somebody found these transcriptions from the Well Tempered Clavier. Of course we knew about the Mozart transcriptions, and we had played those earlier. But Mozart transcribed only five of them, and those are the ones we played in Portland last night. Somebody from DG found the Förster transcriptions of the whole Well Tempered Clavier, 48 fugues altogether, which were done in the late 18th or early 19th century. We read through some of them and decided to do all the four-voice fugues and two of the five-voice fugues, for which our producer, Da-Hong Seetoo, who is an excellent violinist, played 2nd violin and I played 2nd viola. That CD came out a couple of years ago, just called "Bach Fugues." Some people say that you can follow the lines more easily horizontally when played by four different instruments rather than all of them being played on the same keyboard.

But we've come back to the Art of the Fugue in our concertizing because it's absolutely pure music, not necessarily intended for any particular instrument. It's got an instrumental neutrality, which I think is wonderful.

AH: You mentioned in the video that the last few measures of the final fugue end abruptly because they think that Bach died at that point.

ED: So the story goes. It was written close to the time of his death. I think some people have over-dramatized the story, imagining the pen on the page, and then he just expires. I don't think it was quite like that. But he did stop at that point.

AH: Did anyone finish it?

ED: No. Maybe some people have attempted, but the edition we use just ends there. It's not a question of tying up a few loose ends and making a nice cadence that doesn't end abruptly. Most scholars think that he had a very big project in mind for that particular fugue. As it is, it has three large sections. Some of the material is not related to the main fugue subject of the whole collection of the Art of the Fugue. People think that his intention after finishing this third section, which carried his name BACH in musical notation, was then to bring back the main theme from all the other fugues, the simple triadic theme, and have all four themes going on simultaneously – a very ambitious thing to do. He was blind when he was composing this, and he must have been dictating it to somebody.

AH: I didn't know that!

ED: Yes, in his last few years he had lost his sight, so you can imagine the complexity of trying to dictate this to somebody while he was composing it in his head. I think it broke off because at that moment he couldn't quite see how to round off such an ambitious fugue. So it breaks off at this very personal part because, of course, it has his signature: B-A-C-H in German musical notation is equivalent to our spelling of these four notes -- B flat, A, C and B natural. You don't hear this theme just once. He has a whole exposition developed out of this fugue subject. But it doesn't go on to the fourth section that most people think he was contemplating.

AH: Speaking of unfinished works. Last night in Portland you played as an encore this charming clarinet quintet fragment by Mozart. And when you ended, as if in mid-air, there was a huge reaction in the audience, part laughter and part sigh.

ED: The way Phil had set it up in his announcement, it was quasi-humorous.

AH: Yes, but it was also sad, and the sigh represented longing for more! So has anyone thought about trying to finish that one?

ED: Yes. I can answer you very simply. It has been finished pretty ingeniously by Robert Levin.

AH: I was going to say that if anyone would have done it, it would be Robert Levin.

ED: We have the music. When we were rehearsing it yesterday, I might have preferred to do the whole thing, but then David Finckel [Emerson's cellist] said that if we do the whole thing it's not as special, because then it becomes about Robert Levin's tremendous musical intellect rather than the fact that the audience has taken for granted all these *completed* masterworks by great composers. So once in a while it's healthy to show them that there are things that got lost or that composers didn't finish. I think he wanted to spotlight the act of creation.

As Phil said, in this case it seems as if Mozart had finished at least one movement. I wouldn't assume that he wrote a full four-movement work, but there's nothing to prove that he didn't, except that he kept a catalogue of his own work. The point is that when there's an unfinished fragment, it usually breaks off in a more jagged way. One or two instruments will stop playing, not having any more material written for them. But in this case, everything clearly is fully formed, and we're just missing subsequent pages.

AH: Have people searched in libraries and archives?

ED: I'm sure.

AH: Have you performed the whole thing or recorded it?

ED: We haven't recorded it. The last time we played this was many years ago with David Shifrin [clarinet]. This time we rehearsed the whole thing before we decided what we were going to do.

AH: Well it was very effective, anyway. I also wanted to ask you about the Mendelssohn Octet project, which I learned about on your website. The idea of recording over yourselves I thought was kind of unique.

ED: It's fairly unique within the realm of classical music, as far as I know. Actually I do know of a couple of other examples. Jascha Heifetz recorded the Bach Double Concerto with himself, and I assume that when he made the first pass it was with the orchestra and then he added the other solo part, rather than doing it twice with the orchestra. Then there's this interesting recording that was also done in the 1960s of the Brahms Horn Trio with one guy playing all three parts. Frederick Vogelgesang, who was extremely versatile.

What we did by comparison didn't show much versatility because we were all playing the instruments that we normally play. However, we decided to record two parts each on two different instruments, so that we'd have more diversity of sound than if each of us played the same instrument twice.

AH: Yes. I thought that was intriguing, and I believe it was Lawrence Dutton [Emerson's violist] who was narrating the video, and who said that it was difficult to tell which instruments were being played at the moment.

ED: We did a test to decide whether or not the project was feasible. The blend was so smooth that we thought we were going to need more distinctness among the voices, and

that would be mostly a question of microphone placement. But that was when we decided to use two different instruments, each of us, so that you'd be able to distinguish the voices more easily amid the thickness of the texture. Of course I can tell the difference in my own playing because I was playing the 1st violin part and the 4th part, and there's a big difference of range for those two parts as well as the soloistic nature of the 1st violin part. But I know what he means, that if he's listening without the score he might not always be able to tell when it's the 1st viola part and the 2nd viola part because the piece is so well integrated – the textures are masterfully handled.

AH: About your book. I've read your book, by the way, and I found it very interesting, powerful, and, well, depressing. [Note: Eugene Drucker is the author of a novel that takes place during the Holocaust, "The Savior" published by Simon and Schuster.]

ED: Yes, it's hard for me to say to anybody when they buy the book and I autograph it, "I hope you enjoy the book."

AH: I suppose you could say, "I hope you find the book interesting."

ED: Or I usually say I hope the book resonates for you, or something like that, in keeping with the musical metaphors.

AH: I was wondering, after you wrote it and had to go through all of that, did it have any effect on your perception of German music, both old and modern.

ED: You know, 75% of the music I play is German music. I've been involved with that world since my earliest studies. What it might have had an effect on is my performance of the Bach Chaconne, partly for very practical reasons, that in promoting the book I've done 25-30 readings in various parts of the U.S. in which I play the Sarabande and Chaconne and then read passages from the book that describe that music. So my interpretation of those movements would have to evolve, or at least I hope it would, through sheer repetition and practicing for each event. I usually give an introductory

speech about why I wrote the book and what the basic story is about. Otherwise it would be difficult for people to understand, if I read some of the most extreme passages from the book out of context.

The most interesting thing for me recently is that it has been translated into German, and that's been very intense. I've tried to improve my command of German – I did speak some before, but I took some lessons so I could give readings in German in Berlin and Freiburg (the quartet was on tour there) in early March, as well as five or six interviews. I have another reading in late August when we're going to be on tour there, at a festival in Bavaria.

AH: And how were you received?

ED: People were very interested and sympathetic.

AH: Yes, I can imagine. Do you tell in your lecture why you chose the Chaconne?

ED: People have asked me that, and the answer is very practical. There isn't a huge amount of repertoire for unaccompanied violin, and the violinist in the novel had to play a number of works by Bach. The Chaconne has risen above the context for which it was written -- that Partita -- and is a work that has attracted a great deal of attention because other composers have transcribed it, usually for piano. Brahms did a piano left-hand transcription, and even though it is a highly instrumental work, as opposed to the Art of the Fugue, there is a kind of universality about it that does seem to transcend both the instrument and the context of that set of six sonatas and partitas that Bach wrote for solo violin. The Chaconne is a work of vast emotional range, and that's the main reason why I would have chosen it for an emotionally charged novel.

AH: Who is the Savior?

ED: Well, the title has a certain degree of irony in it, if you look at one meaning of the word as a person who saves or rescues other people. Though Keller might have hoped that he could save his listeners, it didn't work out that way. On the other hand, there's the Christian meaning of the word Savior, and Keller has a tormented relationship with his own religion, Christianity. Both he and the guard Rudi have an unwilling identification with Judas, the man who betrayed Christ, and so "The Savior" refers more to the idea that something has been denied Keller and Rudi: the idea of salvation.

Certainly there is no easy salvation available to them because of the horrors of what's going on around them and their participation to a greater or lesser extent. Two interesting footnotes about that. One is that "The Savior" was not my original choice of title. That was suggested by Simon and Schuster, and it took me a little while to get used to it, although eventually I liked it. I liked the double meaning, and because of that double meaning in English, it became difficult to find an equivalent in German. Those two meanings are separated in German: somebody who saves other people is *ein Retter,* and the religious connotation of the Savior is translated as *der Erlöser*. So we bypassed the whole problem, and the copy editor suggested "Wintersonate" for the title of the book.

AH: I was wondering if music was the savior, or perhaps Johann Sebastian Bach.

ED: Well, I think that Keller is so intensely involved with music, his whole sense of himself is wrapped up in it and yes, his only chance of achieving a kind of salvation or sublimation of some of his feelings is through music. Rudi has similar feelings about music, which is an intensely charged subject for him. In the end, Rudi is lamenting the fact that German music can never be the same, or so it seems at that desperate dark moment because it's been dragged through the mud by the Nazis.

AH: I read in the interview you did with the New York Times that a poet has said that there will be no more poetry after Auschwitz.

ED: Yes. The philosopher Theodor Adorno said that. And of course that's not really true because there has been poetry, some of it very powerful poetry that has addressed what happened in the Holocaust, like the poetry of Paul Celan. And of course there has been music written since then. But it's hard for us to fully imagine what it must have felt like in the ruins of World War II.

AH: Are you contemplating more writing?

ED: I would love to. I've been thinking about it for a couple of years. It took me so long to get this novel accepted for publication that it seemed like I should finally try to do something else. One of the obstacles before you've ever been published is the fact that you've never been published. So once you've been published, if you have something inside you to say, you have a better chance of getting it said. I have some time off fairly soon and I hope I can find the right mental space in which to do something.

AH: And musically, any interesting projects planned for the future?

ED: The Emerson is going to collaborate with James Galway next season at Carnegie Hall, in Boston, and in Los Angeles in Disney Hall to do a sort of mixed program. It will include a Mozart flute quartet and Arthur Foote's Night Music, which is a quintet for flute and strings. Galway's going to play Debussy's Syrinx, and we will play the Debussy Quartet, but at the end of the first half of the program we're going to play a new quartet written for us by the English composer Thomas Ades, which was commissioned for us by Carnegie Hall.

We have another premiere coming up at the end of next season by the composer Pierre Jalbert (from Vermont) commissioned by the Houston Friends of Chamber Music. He's an excellent composer, so I think we have two exciting prospects for next year. We're not quite sure of our next recording project. All I can say is that our next two projects will be the late Mozart quartets, the "King of Prussia" quartets, and something from the

Second Viennese School, probably Verklärte Nacht by Schoenberg, perhaps the Lyric Suite by Berg, or else the Schoenberg Second, something along those lines.

AH: Anything else?

ED: Yes, I can add one more thing. Another creative project of mine has been to set to music a few Shakespeare sonnets for baritone and string quartet. They've been played and recorded by a young group whom we've mentored called the Escher Quartet. Originally it was a set of four songs, only nine minutes of music. I've now added two more to what I had composed earlier, which was performed at SUNY Stony Brook in the spring of 2008 during a year of premieres mostly from professional composers. I volunteered for this kind of quirky program they have called "Find a Composer." So I looked in the closet and found myself!

The head of the department graciously accepted my proposal to donate my services, and there was enough money left in the kitty from this project to make a couple of CDs of some of the pieces that had been premiered. The CDs have just come out on Bridge Records and there's going to be a release party next Tuesday in Greenwich Village at the Poisson Rouge, an up-and-coming venue in NY where a lot of cutting edge music is played. The Escher is going to play some Zemlinsky and Bartok, and in between they'll play my piece, and there will be other pieces that were premiered on the recording.

AH: So you had the fun of putting Shakespeare sonnets to music, working the words and music to fit together.

ED: Yes, it's another much more minor aspect of my combined interest in music and literature. I've subsequently added one more sonnet and a soliloquy from the first act of Hamlet.

AH: Which soliloquy?

ED: "O that this too, too solid flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew…." And that was a really tough one for me to do. I've tried to preserve what I imagine to be the speech rhythms of the text and the intonation of spoken language. I'm sort of on pins and needles because in the fall the Escher is going to learn the two new settings and there are four performances lined up between November and February: Haverford College, Brooklyn Public Library, Bronxville Public Library, and the Symphony Space in NY. And I'm actually struggling now to set another sonnet because I keep trying to add to it, to give the project a little more weight and heft. I think what I've completed so far adds up to about 15 minutes of music.

AH: Have you listened to recordings of this spoken material?

ED: I have listened to some recordings, like John Gielgud, which are wonderful, very stylized and different from the way I had imagined it in my head when I was composing it. There are many ways to imagine the words being spoken. Some might depend on your interpretation of the meaning of the text, some on the timing, pacing, or pitch relationships of the different syllables within a line. One thing I noticed was that there should not be, in my opinion, a lot of extreme intervals, because when you're speaking English or even reciting verse, your voice is not going to go way up and down within a line.

AH: Not like Swedish.

ED: Or French in that way. I made a few exceptions for reasons of meaning, like this one sonnet about lust, where he uses the word "extreme," and I have a large interval like a 7th – "*exTREME*" -- like that, so it's highly intense. But most of the time it's all within a narrow intervallic compass.

AH: It's been a long interview and I thank you so much. It's been very interesting and I'd like to talk to you for about 20 minutes more, but some other time, I guess. Thank you again.