

Misha Krutz: *Musician, Father and Master Artisan*



W

hen Antonio Stradivarius, the famous violin maker of Cremona, Italy, died in 1737, he left behind a legacy of great instrument-making that is being carried on today by one of the Kansas City Symphony's very own musicians, Michael Krutz.

Krutz, who plays bass with the Symphony, has established a world-renowned shop—KC Strings—in the business district of Merriam, Kansas, where artisans are dedicated to creating some of the finest instruments since Stradivarius.

In eleven short years, KC Strings has made a name for itself. From *The Kansas City Star* to the National Geographic Channel, the media has been eager to tell the Krutz story, which includes the opening of two sister shops, St. Louis Strings and Springfield Strings, both of which do business under the wing of KC Strings and carry their line of instruments and bows.

The day that I visited KC Strings, I was greeted by music.

In the corner, a young woman, a patron in her early twenties, was scaling the fingerboard of a taut, vibrant violin, one of the many that line the walls of Krutz's shop. Not just violins: crowding the modest shop were also violas, cellos,

and scores of double basses, wrought by experienced hands from the rough timber of spruce and maple then varnished to perfection. Each instrument has its own special character, a kind of personality that permeates both the musicians and the music they render.

Michael Krutz (friends call him "Misha," a common nickname for the Russian "Mikhail") and the artists and engineers at KC Strings are carrying the torch of superb craftsmanship, creating some of the finest instruments since Stradivarius to musicians all over the world. Some of the Kansas City Symphony musicians play Krutz instruments; other fans include maestro Zubin Mehta, the

By Ellen Fangman



named for Alexander Glazanov, the first dean of the Conservatory after the revolution. The stipend was the family's bread and butter, but it was short-lived.

"When I was three and a half, my father died," says Misha, "and so my mother took her singing career on the road to support us. She performed all over Russia for many years."

As for his own career, Misha attended violin school at an early age and began playing bass when he was 16. For four years, he studied double bass at Rimsky-Korsakov Music College, and for another five years he attended the St. Petersburg (Leningrad) Conservatory. Along with his mother, Misha's primary musical mentors were Mikhail Kurbatov and Roma Vayspapir.

"Roma was, and still is, a wonderful influence upon me," says Krutz.

Vayspapir, a famous Russian double bassist, studied at the Leningrad Conservatory and played with the Leningrad Philharmonic and the Leningrad Symphony Orchestra. Misha gained Roma's favor and admiration while studying under his tutelage in Leningrad.

After playing as a substitute with the Leningrad Symphony, Misha won a seat

musicians of the Israel Philharmonic, and famed violinist Leila Josefowicz.

Krutz's love of music began at an early age in the city of Leningrad, Russia, where music has always been a hallowed art. His native country, though torn by revolution, was home to some of the world's most celebrated composers and



performers—Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Rimsky-Korsakov and Stravinsky, to name a few—musicians Krutz has admired and played since he was a boy.

"Music was a family event for us," says Misha. "My father was a violinist and composer, and my mother was an opera singer."

Both parents graduated from the Leningrad Conservatory, where his father was a recipient of the Glazanov stipend,

with the Kirov Opera/Kirov Ballet Orchestra, performing with them from 1970-1975 alongside greats like Baryshnikov and Nureyev.

Then, in 1976, Misha seized the opportunity to move to New York City with his son Anton; soon after, his mother and sister joined them. In New York, he played two seasons with the New York City Opera and repaired stringed instruments on the side.

A Fresh Start

Misha came to Kansas City after auditioning with several orchestras. The Kansas City Philharmonic offered him the best contract, and his family followed him to the Midwest.

In between performances with the Philharmonic, Misha continued repairing instruments from his home. Word spread, and soon students were bringing their instruments to Misha for repairs. Meanwhile, Misha's son, Anton, was developing a strong interest in art and craftsmanship.

Then, on a spontaneous trip to a violin shop with his dad, Anton found a focus for his creative talents. "I was on my way to a violin shop," Misha recalled, "and I invited Anton to ride with me—he was 13 years old. Inside the showroom, Anton asked if he could see the back room where repairs were made. I finished my business and then went to get my son. 'Come back for me at five o'clock, pop,' he said. 'I am going to stay here.' Okay. So I came back for him at five o'clock and Anton tells me, 'Pop, I am going to come here every day after school. Will you drive me?'"

Misha did, every day, until Anton could drive himself.

Anton later went on to study at the Violin Making School of America in Salt Lake City, and both father and son explored the market for making stringed instruments. They found a niche, and in 1992 Misha and Anton co-founded the shop that flourishes today.

A Family of Musicians

Always the performer, Misha has been a member of the Kansas City Symphony for more than twenty years. His wife, Kimberly, is also an avid performer. She played twelve seasons as primary contrabassoonist and bassoonist with the Kansas City Symphony, and she currently subs with the Symphony and other area orchestras.

Both have shared their knowledge and love of music as teachers; Misha

taught for eleven years at both the University of Kansas (KU) and the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Now, work and family take precedence over teaching. And Misha is proud of his sons.

"Anton brings vision, passion and expertise to the team at KC Strings, and his instincts have helped us become who we are today," he says.

Misha's second son, Lev Alex, earned his political science degree from KU and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Army ROTC while attending that university. He is now obtaining his master's degree in business administration.

The newest addition to the Krutz family is a daughter, Stephanie, who was born to Misha and Kimberly in 1999.

Misha's Musical Sense

Misha believes that player and instrument are deeply connected.

"An instrument has an energy and an intelligence just as we do," says Misha. "The more it is played, the more it is absorbing the intellect of the player, and the good players help it to develop a kind of tonal quality. Everything is inter-related, performer and instrument."

Misha plays a bass that his son Anton created, a seven-year-old instrument that he favors for its rich tone and ease of response. (For a closer look at the bass, check out the cover of this magazine—that's Misha playing the Krutz bass). The

age of his instrument is immaterial. What matters to Misha is the quality of its sound.

"My instrument responds to my musical tastes well," says Misha. Then he pointed out that his is the only five-string bass in the Kansas City Symphony. This fifth string allows him to play some of the lower notes in the repertoire—notes that must be played an octave higher by four-string players...or simply skipped.

When I asked which composer he enjoys playing most, Misha replied simply, "I like the one I am currently playing. But I will always love Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Rachmaninoff."

Misha also admits his proclivity for the Russian authors—Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Turgenev—whose prose sings with a musicality of its own. But despite his love of *Anna Karenina*, Misha confesses that his boyhood hero was Jack London's Martin Eden, a far cry from the cold and cunning Alexey Karenin.

Aside from reading and enjoying time with his family, Misha has found that the best preparation for playing in concert is a good night's rest. It's a wonder he finds time to rest, considering the long hours he devotes to KC Strings, a business which he says "is more than a business. It's a passion."

The Making of a Masterpiece

Centuries ago, the great Italian masters designed many models of instruments, all





with different arches and graduations. Misha, Anton and the team at KC Strings have devised their own models and have a highly refined method for creating each instrument.

Inside the shop are various molds, and Anton uses what is called “golden section geometry.” A golden section, he says, “was considered during the Renaissance to be a divine proportion, a holy section. It is how life and sound evolves.”

With this geometry and their own advanced techniques, KC Strings reaches a formal precision unparalleled even by the Cremonese masters.

From planning to shaping to shading, the process of making an instrument is a long and arduous one. A violin can take nearly 180 hours to build. Cellos can take twice as long, and a bass three times as long. If you’re counting in regular office hours, that’s nearly three-and-a-half months.

“As for the finish,” Misha says, “it can make the instrument sing gloriously or it can kill it.”

The ground (or base coat) with the varnish creates a warm or cool sound, and it is the final step in the process of building the perfect instrument. Hanging in the musty varnish room at KC Strings is a violin from 1797 that serves as a model for the new instruments due to the quality of its finish.

Nothing but the Best

Misha’s clients sing the praises of their Krutz instruments. They have the sound of a master’s touch.

Michael Hanan is the principal cellist of the Israel Philharmonic. He played a

Krutz cello in November, then picked up paper and pen to write Anton: Your cello “has a special singing quality, and I enjoyed playing it so much that I found it hard to stop playing.”

Sergey Katchatryan, a violinist who appeared on the Harriman Arts series, played one of Anton’s violins for half an hour and said there was “nothing lacking” in the instrument. He admitted his own violin had several “wolves” (notes that do not respond properly), but Krutz’s instrument was perfect.

Leila Josefowicz, a highly acclaimed soloist since her debut in 1994, says of her Krutz violin: “It is amazingly responsive and resonant; the lower strings are very rich, and it produces a lot of volume throughout all ranges.”

Another touring soloist, Joseph Swensen, had the presenter of a concert in Bamberg, Germany, convinced that his Krutz violin was a great Stradavarius.

The Next Step

Misha and the team at KC Strings are not content to rest on their laurels.

“It is my dream,” says Misha, “to create an entire symphonic set. I do not believe that this has been done in the twentieth century, and for us to do so would make history.”

A symphonic set consists of 25 violins, 12 violas, 8 to 10 cellos and eight basses. Each piece would take months to build and would cost \$12,000 to \$30,000.

“Finding the funding to fulfill this dream is a thought that is with me day and night. It would require at least a two million dollar investment,” says Misha.

Misha has already found an interested recipient, the Israeli Philharmonic.

“This November, when the Philharmonic visited the United States, the principals played our instruments at

Carnegie Hall,” says Misha. “Conductor Zubin Mehta and the players were impressed, especially with the violins.” Specifically, Mehta declared, after hearing the concertmaster play the Krutz violin, “I want that instrument in my orchestra.” The principal bass player traded his instrument on the spot for the Krutz bass. Misha now recalls the words of Maestro Mehta with obvious eagerness: “It is a good start,” Mehta told Misha.

KC Strings would lose some of its revenue in repairs if they take on the daunting task of building a set, but they are, nevertheless, excited about the prospect. They have already begun building a new addition to the shop, a display room that will give them more space to work.

If making the symphonic set required only passion and dedication, Misha’s dream would certainly be a reality. Add a generous donor to the project, and you have all of the elements needed to achieve his ambitious goal.

“It may be immodest to say,” said Misha as we parted, “but I believe that in the twenty-third century, Kansas City will be remembered for what we are doing here today.”

For Misha, the love of music is a never-ending affair. You can see it sparkle in his eyes to the tune of his contagious laughter. And it spreads all around him to those fortunate enough to hear and play his instruments.

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