



# Violoncello Society, Inc.

## Newsletter

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## Rudolf Matz and Luigi Silva: A Study of Cooperation and Reciprocal Influence

by Margery Enix

An important aspect of music history is the study of influence, especially the influence of musicians of each generation upon those of succeeding generations. The story of the association of two cellists, Rudolf Matz and Luigi Silva, offers a variation on this linear pattern for it is an example of cooperation and reciprocal influence of musicians of nearly the same age. Matz was born in 1901, Silva in 1903.<sup>1</sup> They did not meet until they were in their early fifties, by which time both had achieved considerable stature as internationally recognized artist-teachers. Their working relationship spanned approximately seven years and was ended in 1961 by Silva's untimely death. However, as the following essay will show, their association had an immediate impact on Silva and it continued to influence Matz's pedagogical work even into the 1980's; its influence on the generation of their pupils, while not dealt with herein, has been significant and is still vitally in force.

The task of documenting musical influences can be a formidable one. Often such influences are deduced by the historian largely on the basis of indirect evidence from the published works of the musicians under study. In the present instance the task was made considerably easier by the cooperation of one of the principals, Professor Matz. With characteristic generosity, he supplied most of the information on which this article is based in a number of letters written to me since early 1980 and in a series of interviews conducted during my visit to Zagreb in July, 1982.<sup>2</sup> He also sent me copies of fourteen letters which he received from Silva between

1954 and 1957. I am deeply indebted to Professor Matz for his assistance, without which it would have been impossible to tell the full story of this professional relationship.

Luigi Silva first became acquainted with the pedagogical work of Matz around 1953 when Pablo Svilkos, a student of Matz's colleague, Antonio Janigro, came to study with Silva at Yale University. Svilkos brought with him from Zagreb several volumes of Matz's *First Years of Violoncello*. Silva was tremendously impressed with the volumes he saw and wrote to Matz to ask for more and to convey his respect and enthusiasm for the latter's work:

I wish to tell you before anything else that your pedagogical work, "The First Years of Violoncello," is, in my opinion, one of the most important contributions to violoncello pedagogy of our time.

... Now I feel that we have finally *the* modern method of which I have often dreamed and which, in due time, will supplant all that has been printed [up to now]...

The taste and musicianship that shows in the pieces of your composition and in the etudes is of the very first rate.<sup>3</sup>

Silva began to use the *First Years* as well as other Matz compositions in his own teaching; and he encouraged colleagues and former pupils to use them. In the letter quoted above he says, "I will absolutely do all that is in my power to see that your work be adopted on a wide scale all over the United States." His

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early letters to Matz are concerned, more than anything else, with the problems of gaining a wider distribution of Matz's work in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

In a subsequent letter to Matz we find the first mention of Silva's interest in collaborating with him. Silva is writing about thumb position:

I have some very good and *new* ideas about it (have been working myself for years on a thumb position method) and would like to discuss this matter with you. Maybe we could join forces in that line and do some *very* important work.<sup>5</sup>

Upon learning that Matz and his wife were coming to the United States for an extended visit, Silva invited them to stay with him in September, 1955, when the Silva family would be vacationing in Washington Depot, Connecticut:

The place is very beautiful and quiet and restful, and I think that we shall be able to do a complete exchange of ideas and plan some profitable work on several [aspects] of the cello pedagogy which are neglected.<sup>6</sup>

Matz writes of that first meeting, "Our daily discussions and talks on the history of violoncello, the specific features of its technique and a modern approach to the teaching of cello deepened our relationship and we became good friends."<sup>7</sup> During these intensive meetings they agreed on the most important principles of cello playing and identified various pedagogical problems which they might address.

Having established a personal rapport, having concurred on fundamental principles, and having laid the groundwork for the projects they planned to write together, Silva and Matz thereafter kept in touch mostly by letter, eventually exchanging manuscript materials and other information related to publication. Matz and his wife returned to Zagreb in 1957 and later that year the two men met in Venice. Though neither suspected it at the time, they were never to see each other again. Other meetings were planned, but due to various scheduling problems they did not take place. Their exchange of ideas and materials continued by correspondence until Silva's death. Matz sums up the eventual frustration of their collaborative efforts:

Although we have intended to do many things together—some of which we did—the distance, times and conditions of life somehow weakened the zest of our cooperation; nor could I have sensed that Silva's life was nearing its end...he passed away in 1961, too soon and too fast, leaving his numerous students and followers in grief. I, too, was deeply distressed by his death. Much of lasting value we might have done together, because we spoke the same language.<sup>8</sup>

Sixty-six manuscript pages of one of the pedagogical works on which Matz and Silva were collaborating have survived and are now in the Silva Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. It is obvious that had they been able to complete the work, it would have been an important contribution to twentieth-century cello literature.



Rudolf Matz

Were that manuscript the only surviving evidence of their relationship, it would warrant little more than a passing reference to "what might have been." Such speculation rarely deserves a permanent place in this historical record. But there is ample evidence that the Matz-Silva relationship produced other, more long-lasting results. Many of Silva's students remember his excitement over the concepts presented in the *First Years of Violoncello*, the way in which he incorporated those concepts into his teaching as well as his inclusion of Matz's compositions on student recitals. As the first well-known cellist in the United States to champion Matz's works, he succeeded in creating an interest in them in this country and elsewhere. That interest has grown over the years and resulted in more of Matz's works being made available in North America.<sup>9</sup>

Another result of their association was the influence Matz had on Silva's scholarly work. Silva sought Matz's advice on problems confronting him in the organization of his monumental *History of Violoncello Technique*.<sup>10</sup>

We had a lot of discussions both in the USA and Italy about [the History], especially concerning the arrangement of the material on the one hand, and the formulation and critical remarks on the other, because we both wanted the work to be as objective and as well laid out as possible.<sup>11</sup>

Although Matz claims only peripheral involvement in the evolution of that treatise and we cannot pinpoint his influence on its structure and content, there can be little doubt that their discussions helped Silva clarify some of the problems he was encountering in writing it. During one of our July, 1982 meetings, Matz described a session which took place in Silva's Washington Depot home in the summer of 1955: "One day the chairs, tables, beds and floors of several rooms were covered with pages of the manuscript. After working several hours, we put them together again in another arrangement." Besides helping him reorganize the treatise, Matz told me he also suggested that Silva devote more attention to explaining the differences in contemporary cello teaching in various countries.

Matz has now outlived his younger colleague by more than two decades. Partly because of this and partly because he possesses an uncharacteristic modesty for a cellist of such eminence, we have more concrete evidence of Silva's influence on him. Matz cites three specific instances in which their exchange of ideas affected the direction of his own pedagogical thinking.

The first concerns the confusion caused by the lack of a common technical vocabulary among cellists and the need for clarification of fundamental principles of playing the instrument. As we have seen, Matz and Silva discussed these issues at length during their first meeting in the summer of 1955. And there were other meetings in which these issues were considered:

Later on, in talks with Silva and some other eminent cellists, we were unable to agree on the various problems of cello playing and teaching. Eventually Silva stopped the discussion by saying: "We can't possibly agree, because we speak different languages, so the same words have different meanings to each of us. Besides, several questions of the cello technique have so far been neither concretely enough formulated, nor uniformly defined, which makes communication and understanding difficult." These words, typical of Silva's perspicacity, revealed the real cause of misunderstandings among cellists. They impressed me greatly.<sup>12</sup>

When Matz returned to Zagreb he continued to explore these problems in his teaching as well as to complete his thirty-two-volume pedagogical work, *First Years of Violoncello*:

All the time the echo of Silva's words resounded in me: "we don't speak the same language," as well as the words he said when we parted: "we are all too busy here to be able to get involved in theoretical problems; your works are set so systematically, elaborated logically, and

organized in a graded way, that I consider you the most suitable person to put down the principles of a language that all professional cellists would understand." I wasn't quite sure whether this had not been said in mild irony or may have been meant as a significant recognition for me, but I'm certain of one thing: those words prompted me to deliberations which I have never yet been able to dispose of.<sup>13</sup>

In the quarter century since their first meeting, Matz has gone on to formulate systematically a set of basic principles which can serve as the foundation of contemporary cello technique. He has also introduced and defined a number of terms which constitute a significant contribution to the development of a "common language" among cellists.<sup>14</sup>

The second way in which Matz says Silva influenced his pedagogical thinking concerns the order and manner of presentation of certain basic principles of left hand technique. Long before meeting Silva, Matz had observed that the traditional manner of setting the left hand in lower neck positions with

all four fingers in a straight line on the string while the thumb is at the other side, opposite the middle finger, is not only physiologically incorrect, but amounts to real violence against the anatomic structure of the [hand] and fingers.<sup>15</sup>

This "violence" results from the fact that in the natural grip of the human hand the second and third fingers are not only interdependent but do not normally spread the distance necessary to play a half step. Matz felt that this anatomic-physiological "handicap" could be overcome more easily if the student were not required to use all four fingers in the earliest stages of practice with the left hand. He was unable to convince his colleagues in Zagreb, notably the young Antonio Janigro, "to accept either the theory or the practical consequences of the proposition," and therefore did not incorporate it into the early volumes of the *First Years*.<sup>16</sup> Later, his discussions with Silva persuaded him to reconsider his original concept. During one of their early meetings, Silva was explaining to Matz that he believed students should be taught thumb position very early:

When he realized from the expression on my face that I was skeptical, he said: "I make this thing considerably easier if the beginning exercises use three fingers only while the fourth is always left out: Q 1 3; Q 1 2."<sup>17</sup>

This proposition confirmed Matz's idea that at the beginning of lower neck position studies only three fingers should be employed: 1 2 - 4 and 1 - 3 4. Encouraged by Silva's point of view, Matz revised his pedagogical material accordingly and remains completely convinced of the validity of this approach.

A third Silva proposition, that there are three kinds of left hand posture, "pianistic," "violinistic," and "guitaristic," has also influenced Matz's pedagogical work.<sup>18</sup> He believes that this concept "resolves many problems, especially in

ascending and descending shifts.”<sup>19</sup>

Matz sums up his recollection of his association with Silva by emphasizing two points. First, their discussions confirmed some of Matz’s own concepts, previously rejected by most of his European colleagues, and strengthened his determination to go his own way in future pedagogical studies. Secondly, he revised some of his concepts owing to Silva’s influence and came to new conclusions which he has successfully incorporated into his teaching over the many years since they first met.

What made possible this remarkable professional relationship, so rich in reciprocal influence?

Although their backgrounds and careers were quite different, the two men shared important qualities of mind and character which set them apart from many musicians. Like Silva, Matz is a gregarious person, has an abundant sense of humor, and possesses a talent for organizing groups of people with common interests. Like Silva, he has always been immensely curious about any and all subjects bearing upon the mechanics of cello playing—anatomy, physiology, psychology, the pedagogy of other instruments (especially other stringed instruments), the mechanical and acoustical properties of instrument and bow, the history of the cello and the evolution of the technique of playing it, and so forth. Both men retained a flexible, open-minded attitude toward new discoveries, fresh influences and experimentation well beyond the age when most performers, especially those who have achieved some success, tend to become more or less rigidly set in their ways of playing and teaching. An example of this flexibility is found in Matz’s description of the recent completion of a project which he has had in mind for more than twenty-five years—a study of playing double-third scales in thumb position. After relating to me that he and Silva had once discussed collaborating on such a study, Matz continues:

I began to write this volume four times, but each time I gave up because I was not happy with my work. This time, however, an idea occurred to me, namely that I could overcome the initial difficulties . . . in an analytical way which I have not seen presented anywhere so far. . . . In writing this volume I tested all the statements and exercises on my own fingers, and have gained a potential unknown to me so far in the playing of these thirds, as well as in overcoming the difficulties of the thumb position in general.<sup>20</sup>

This statement comes from a man in his eightieth year!

Silva and Matz belong to the class of exceptionally generous people. Silva was generous almost to a fault. He was always eager to share ideas and reveled in the give and take of stimulating discussion on any subject, but especially on that of his beloved cello and its literature. He loaned music and manuscripts to students and colleagues indiscriminately; several valuable items were never returned or recovered even after his death and thus, unfortunately, are missing from the Silva Collection.

Matz’s generosity is legendary and it continues to the present day. His prompt and painstakingly detailed responses to all of my written questions over the past two years are but one example of his generous spirit and devotion to the cause of contemporary cello education. His willingness, in spite of poor health, to devote most of his working hours this past July to preparing materials for our daily interviews is another.

Given these shared traits, it is not surprising that the association of these two men was so fruitful. The example of their cooperation can serve as a model for present and future generations of cellists. For even in this era of expanded communication, we face many of the same problems which Matz and Silva recognized—the need for a common technical language, the constant necessity of revitalizing pedagogical materials, and the danger of limitations created by adherence to a particular “school” of playing. If we are to overcome these problems and others, we must continue the search for opportunities to exchange ideas, to take advantage of new information, and to test the validity of various concepts in our own playing and teaching.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For a biography of Matz, see my article, “Rudolf Matz: Cello Pedagogue, Composer, Humanist,” in the June 1982 issue of the *Violoncello Society Newsletter* (reprinted from the *American String Teacher*, Vol. XXXII, No. 1, Winter 1982). For a biography of Silva, see Elizabeth Cowling’s article, “A Tribute to Luigi Silva,” in the February 1980 issue of the *Violoncello Society Newsletter*.

<sup>2</sup>In a forthcoming article, “Report from Zagreb,” I will describe this visit in detail.

<sup>3</sup>Silva to Matz, 12 June 1954.

<sup>4</sup>Early attempts at U.S. distribution of Matz’s works were hampered by difficult economic conditions in Yugoslavia which caused a paper shortage and other problems related to printing.

<sup>5</sup>Silva to Matz, 3 September 1954.

<sup>6</sup>Silva to Matz, 5 July 1955.

<sup>7</sup>Rudolf Matz, 12 December 1980: personal communication.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, the two-volume condensation of Matz’s cello method entitled *The Complete Cellist* by Matz-Aronson (New York: Tetra Music Corporation, 1974 and 1977). Those wishing information about the most recently published Matz works should write to Dominis Music, Ltd., Box 11307, Station H, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K2H 7V1.

<sup>10</sup>For a description of this work, left incomplete at the time of Silva’s death, see my article, “Luigi Silva’s Contribution to the History of Cello Technique,” in the February 1980 issue of the *Violoncello Society Newsletter*.

<sup>11</sup>Rudolf Matz, 12 June 1980: personal communication.

<sup>12</sup>Rudolf Matz, 12 December 1980: personal communication.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, Matz’s article, “Some Essential Fundamental Principles of Cello Playing,” in the May 1978 issue of the *Violoncello Society Newsletter*.

<sup>15</sup>Rudolf Matz, 12 December 1980: personal communication.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>For a brief explanation of these postures, see the article cited in note 10 above.

<sup>19</sup>Rudolf Matz, 12 December 1980: personal communication.

<sup>20</sup>Rudolf Matz, 17 October 1980: personal communication.

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