

Speaking *Freely*

Cellist Ovidiu Marinescu, who will perform March 18 in Keene Valley, grew up in a country where individual choices were few. Today, his decision to continue as a performance artist is a choice.

By Benjamin Pomerance

The boy had never spoken before. Like any good second-grader in the Socialist Republic of Romania, he lived for unending hours in the shadows, barely seen and never heard. Statements from grown-ups were gospel truths. Orders from adults were commands to be followed. Nothing less would be tolerated.

But this would be a different day. On this morning, the hidden child would sense something instigating a movement so visceral inside him that he could no longer keep peace with himself underneath a cloak of invisibility. And to the surprise of everyone in the room — and to the shock of himself most of all — Ovidiu Marinescu would demand to be heard.

It occurred while a cavalcade of experts roved around a classroom, recruiting kids to audition for their music school. They would approach each student, request that the pupil sing a few notes, render their judgment, and move on. When the dour-looking jury stopped in front of Marinescu, the execution was quick. “You’re not good enough,” they declared bluntly before moving down the aisle.

Now, the music school’s leaders were about to leave, their slate of conscriptions signed and sealed. As they headed for the door, Marinescu abruptly felt like his insides were about to be torn out. Something precious was walking out, something that he couldn’t understand but suddenly desperately desired. Before he knew what he was doing, he was shouting as loudly as his lungs would bear. “Hey!” the boy announced. “I want to make music, too.”

And in that second of impudent courage, the walls melted. The cellist assuming center stage in Keene Valley on March 18 for a recital with pianist Mark Livshits exists only because of that ill-advised schoolboy who allowed his feelings to boil over. In the aftermath of that one blurted-out sentence, the rush of speaking freely overcame the previously restrained child with oceanic power. From that day forth, he’s sought every possible chance to replicate that sensation.

For on that inauspicious second-grade morning, the adults listened. The drab cluster of humans walked back to the youth who had dared to speak. They asked him to sing a song. The boy complied. This time, the judges heard what they wanted to hear in the child’s voice. By the time

they left, Marinescu was holding an invitation to audition for the music school.

Still, even after Marinescu’s outspoken insistence, the whole escapade nearly became a false start. Months later, Marinescu’s grandmother received a call from the music school’s administrators. Marinescu’s audition would take place in two days. Yet Marinescu’s grandmother knew nothing about her grandson’s schoolhouse rebellion that had earned him this opportunity. Instead, she thought that it was some bizarre species of sales pitch. Before the school’s leaders could utter three sentences about their intentions, she hung up the phone.

If it weren’t for an offhand comment that night at dinner, the entryway would have closed. But Marinescu’s grandmother happened to mention something about the silly phone call that she had taken that morning, and Marinescu piped up and declared that the call wasn’t silly at all. Marinescu’s parents asked if their son really was serious about wanting to audition for the school, and Marinescu announced that he was quite serious indeed. And two days later, Marinescu and his family were on their way to his first-ever tryout.

Sure enough, the school opened its gates to him. Yet the ink was barely dry on the acceptance letter before the academy’s governing body started pushing him around. “You could not choose your own instrument,” Marinescu remembers. “In Romania, lives were carefully controlled and programmed. There were higher reasons behind everything. So even though my parents preferred that I study piano or violin, the school had already met its quota of pianists and violinists. I was given no choice but the cello.”

He had never even heard of a cello before. But the lessons quickly turned into a love affair. The instrument felt sculpted to his hands and fingers. Within a couple years, he was reeling off pieces that plenty of adults couldn’t play. The grown-ups were paying attention, too, with teachers gathering to watch the burgeoning artist at work. The once-shy youth was now the center of attention. “I would be lying,” he admits, “if I told you that I didn’t like all of the approval from my peers and from adults that my playing received.”

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Yet there was something more. “The major stuff that happens to us as we grow up tends to get buried, especially when you’re a kid,” the cellist explains. “Feelings of inadequacy, injustice, yearning, loving, dreaming all tend to get slammed for one reason or another. If we wear our heart on our sleeves, people tend to be very cruel.”

He stops. When he resumes, the words come with all the exacting precision of his interpretations of Bach’s Suites for Unaccompanied Violoncello. “So these feelings and emotions must come out of you in other ways,” he concludes. “As an artist, we are able to connect with the average Joe or Jane and help them work through all of this stuff that they have accumulated. You tap a bit into their subconscious. And when you do that, it is a healing process for both the art receiver and the art maker. That is a large part of what kept me going.”

So he kept going — even when common sense kept waving stop signs in his face. “In the heyday of the Internet, kids in other professions were becoming overnight millionaires,” he recalls. “And you say, ‘Look, I’m not stupid. Why am I struggling like this? How long do I really need to go on being a starving artist?’”

It had seemed so glorious when he made up his mind in seventh grade, a vibrant sound in a universe that otherwise felt voiceless. Resolving to become a professional cellist was such an easy decision in those days, divorced from the career’s less-pleasant realities. By high school, when international offers to perform some of the greatest concertos in the repertoire began rolling in, the decision seemed perfect. Spotlight-centered glory felt like his birthright.

“It was very glamorous in the beginning,”

Marinescu remembers. “I liked that.” He pauses. “But then there comes a point when you go into the doldrums. There comes a point where you aren’t breaking into the highest professional circles fast enough. There are many levels of success, and you find yourself depressed because you are working hard every single day and still there are so many people above you.”

Right at that moment, he hit the jackpot, climbing up to Montsalvat and coming down with the Holy Grail. When Romanian President Emil Constantinescu made a diplomatic visit to the United States, Marinescu received an invitation to perform at a gala concert in New York City for the leader of his homeland. The venue was Carnegie Hall. The night felt like perfection incarnate.

Then he thought about what he could do for an encore. When it seemed like nothing else could possibly compare, he considered hanging up his bow entirely. “I thought about becoming a day trader,” he states. “You know — make a quick million dollars. And I honestly went after that career thinking that it would make me happy and rich. In a society where you’re judged by what we wear and the model of our cars, it’s hard to say that this is not important.”

But a funny thing happened on the way to the bankroll. “You find yourself getting depressed because you can’t work through your feelings,” Marinescu remembers. “Without music, my voice was gone.” He laughs lightly. “So I didn’t make my million. And I had to look at myself in the mirror and consciously make the choice to be an artist.”

Every day since, he has awakened and stared inwardly and made that decision all over again. The rewards have brought him plenty of musical

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wealth: concertos and sonatas in halls from Moscow to Cleveland to New York to Paris, invitations to prestigious chamber music festivals, recordings galore with the Parma label. Conducting, a pursuit that began on a whim when he

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accepted a part-time job teaching kids to play hymns at a Korean Presbyterian church in Pennsylvania, now takes him to major orchestras and recording studios around the world.

Still, after the famous halls and red-letter engagements, many of Marinescu's musical hallmarks have occurred in and around the site of the cellist's March 18 program. In 1995, a violinist from the Philadelphia area who had spent summers in Lake George proposed a project focusing on bringing chamber music to the Adirondacks. The Adirondack Trio was born that summer, the start of a seven-year stint of performances and school workshops in places that Marinescu never knew existed: Old Forge, North Creek, Keene Valley, Glens Falls, and more.

"I remember that we scheduled this concert in the tiny hamlet of Johnsbury," Marinescu recalls, "and I initially

thought it was the stupidest thing ever, because there are only 300 people in Johnsbury and I thought that very few had any experience with classical music. Then we had our first performance, and to my complete surprise, 50 people showed up. And after a couple of years, every concert that we did there was sold out. This story repeated itself in so many Adirondack communities. It was inspirational to us, the story of a dream coming true."

But if you ask him to describe his most important dream coming true, the cellist ranges beyond the instrument. "In 2002, when I became a citizen of the United States," he remembers, "I slept with my American passport under the pillow." He drops into silence for a moment. "I wanted freedom to be myself," he finally continues. "That's why I left Romania. I wanted to pursue my goals, to not be discriminated against, to say what I believed without fear. I was not used to that before I came here."

Yet there were glimpses. A second-grader refusing to let his future walk out the door. A teenager expressing every suppressed emotion through a bow on strings. An ambitious artist performing at Carnegie Hall and wondering if he could ever do anything greater. A seasoned pro playing in Adirondack villages with half of the town sitting in the crowd. And each day, when facing his question about whether to keep pursuing this elusive ideal, he returns to the instrument that brought him his voice and does what it taught him to do, speaking as freely as ever.

Ovidiu Marinescu plays music by Beethoven, Schumann, and Grieg with pianist Mark Livshits on March 18 at 7:30 p.m. in the Keene Valley Congregational Church. For tickets and more information, call (518) 576-4329.

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