

Interview with Asier Polo (II): As a professional, you need to be capable of doing everything

JILL ARCARO GORDON

As a boy during an amazingly fertile 5 years Asier Polo metamorphosed from an eager learner of the cello to the teenage recipient of Spain's most sought after prize for promising young musicians (Concurso Nacional de Juventudes Musicales 1987). Today, twenty years down the road, he is probably among the top 10 players worldwide and fast on his way to becoming, by the time his is forty, among the top three, a star in the micro-universe of classical cellists.



Asier Polo

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In this serie of two interviews he proved to be an avid conversationalist and an intriguing source of information and entertainment. In Part I he discussed the challenge of acquiring a valuable string instrument like his Cremona-built cello in Spain, his ideas on teaching methodologies, his personal experience as a student of cello and marketing in the music world. Here, in Part II, our conversation covered subjects such as the dichotomy between soloist and orchestral musician, talent and finally his recipe for becoming a good cellist with a secret ingredient!

Jill Arcaro. What is your routine for work or rehearsal? Do you have a routine?

Asier Polo. It's difficult. When I was a student, yes, I had a routine. Now, sometimes, I have to adapt to the possibilities as they come. But, in the beginning, I do make an attempt to always do some scales. Then, I go about preparing the repertoire with the slow passages, techniques. Then, I try to create a situation on an artistic level and I do a run through even if, as a musical idea, it has mistakes. Then, I go back again and perfect what was wrong technically, but without losing the musical idea, so that I don't forget about the creativity. Well, it's a little bit unconscious, but, yes, there is a routine.

J. A. Do you improvise the routine?

A. P. No. What happens is that when you work solely with the cello, that's all there is. What I try to tell the students is that you need to take advantage of the time when you are a student because you have the entire year for yourself, every day of your life for yourself. And, later, you don't. Life becomes complicated because you want to buy a house, car, an instrument. You have your family. You want to do things. You need to work to live. And that, automatically, takes up all the time that you had before. Therefore, sometimes, you have to live on borrowed time. You have to live from the work done in the past. What you don't do at 20 or 30, you won't be able to do at 40 or 50 because the time doesn't exist to do it. You've missed the vital moment and it has passed you by.

J. A. If you have been doing something for 20 years, you won't need to work at it as much as when you began.

A. P. Yes, but you need to work at it very consciously. For me, a very professional is a person who can play and also who knows how to explain in words what he's doing. He doesn't do it just because it comes naturally. If you only play with temperament, or with character, moving your fingers without knowing what you're doing, you might wake up one day after you're forty, after 20 years of playing very well, and not know how to play. You might ask why is it that you knew and now it's not coming out and the answer is because you didn't really know. It's like a dancer, one, two, one, two (he counts with his hands). I have to try 20 times and if it comes out good 8 times, I'm on the right path. Then, it will come 10 times. But, if one day I get up and it doesn't come out right, I would have to determine why.

J. A. You do this on your own?

A. P. Of course.

J. A. If you had to make a recipe for a good cellist, how much would you put of each element: education, talent, good instructors, luck, contacts? Do you have a special ingredient?

A. P. That's a difficult question. In the first place, I think you need to have your own criteria that are apart from the idea of whether a person is famous or not.

J. A. Why soloist and not an orchestra musician?

A. P. I think that an artist is a transmitter of emotions and there is an element of egocentrism with all the arts. If you go out on stage, you have to like it. What you're on stage, you have to be totally convinced. You can't go saying, "Well, I'm going to try." (he laughs) You have to be convinced that you're going to do it like no one else. This, also, depends a lot on character. As transmitters of emotion, we want to propose our view, in other words, tell our story.

But, also, another thing that I wanted to say was that I strongly defend orchestra musicians. It's difficult. Each one has to have experience and be a professional for whatever. It's very important. When a soloist plays, it's not the most important thing. I do my job and the others to theirs. If they do it poorly, they hinder me. If I play poorly, I hinder them.

Therefore, it's a group of people that play music together. It is as equally important that everyone performs properly and that everyone is equally respected in order to do a good job.

If you are part of a collective, it's more difficult to tell your version of the musical piece. This isn't what an orchestra does. It's the director that does it. There are ten cellists and if you are the fifth, you don't do this. If you are an orchestral musician, what you should like is playing with all the other musicians. Sometimes you don't become a soloist for whatever reason, apart from talent, because you haven't had much luck or for a ton of other extra-musical reasons. You not only have to play the cello well, but you have to also be very intelligent, know how to keep your place in certain circumstances, know how to relate to people well, have a good character, be responsible, be stable. There are a series of conditions that are necessary, speaking extra-musically, to have a good career.

J. A. Can we say that intelligence is the secret ingredient?

A. P. Yes, because if you miss the rehearsals, you are moody or impulsive and ask for strange things; if you forget to study the score and then, another day, you arrive late or you answer the conductor back; or you have a meeting with the orchestra leader and you don't show up, all these are things are just as fundamental.

But returning to your tough question, principally in Spain until now I think people assumed that if a person began studying music, education aside, that he had to finish it. Always! What they didn't take into consideration is that music is more difficult than any other field of study at the university. The determining and principal factor to being a good musician is talent.

J. A. Talent is difficult to define.

A. P. Yes. You can only function with just talent until you reach 20. If you have talent, a good teacher and you work until you're 20, you are forgiven for things only based on your talent. After that, you have to be a professional and this is more personal work and arriving to conclusions for yourself.

J. A. Isn't talent a type of sensibility?

A. P. It's the ability to absorb abstract things easily.

Also, many times, it's the capacity of reaction. In other words, you can do a great concert one year, and the following year you might be on tour for two months working with different programs: travelling, rehearsing, recovering the works. Take into consideration that there are people who take a long time to prepare a piece and it's not going to come out the same as it did the first year. For example, I spent the entire month of August at home studying because I had ten different concerts with orchestras this season, plus a new recital. So, I was preparing everything because in the beginning of September, I was in Málaga doing the Beethoven *Triple Concerto*, the next week I was in Berlin doing Strauss *Don Quijote*, the next week in Las Palmas to play Saint Saëns, the next week I was in Madrid playing a concert by Luis de Pablo, the next week I had Ginastera en Bilbao, the next week

I was here in Madrid doing a recital with Marta (Zabaleta). Therefore, what I want to say is that you have to have the works clear and in four days recover them and rehearsal them, travel, and do the concert to the best of your ability.

J. A. Is that your normal rhythm of work?

A. P. Yes, that's the difference, I think, between a soloist and an orchestral musician. Because there are many people who say, "No, no, no. I can't do that. Impossible." So, it requires effort and, truly, to want and be able to do it.

J. A. Are you in control of it?

A. P. Yes. Sometimes, I stress out ...

J. A. It depends because there might be things that you can't control.

A. P. Of course, but, regardless, I usually do it well and like it a lot.

J. A. What upcoming projects do you have in terms of concerts and courses?

A. P. I have concerts with the RAI of Torino and the Berlin Symphony. I am going with the Bergen Philharmonic to Norway and later with the Dresden Philharmonic to Germany. I will return to Monterrey in California too. I have a concert at a festival in Guadalajara, México this year as well.

J. A. This is all in 2006?

A. P. Yes, starting January. I also play in December with the London Philharmonic and apart from these I play habitually with the Spanish orchestras.

J. A. And courses?

A. P. I do a Master Class in July in Toledo in an international music forum.

J. A. Do you do this regularly?

A. P. Yes, this past summer I began. I think it's a good place and they take enough care of me for me to consider staying. In the future, I would be interested in looking for a stable place where people know where to find me because it's difficult. If not, later, the kids are asking, "Where are you this year?", "What are you doing?". So, if I'm happy in one place, I would like to establish myself there.

J. A. Who sponsors it?

A. P. The Ayuntamiento of Toledo and I think now the Comunidad Autónoma will be beginning to as well.

J. A. Do you prefer contemporary or classical music?

A. P. That is very complicated. When you begin, when you're young, what you enjoy the most is romantic music, logically because it's the most expressive and revealing. But, as a professional, you need to be capable of doing everything. Even if you like it less, you have to do it seriously and equally good. Therefore, right now I have to do a lot of things that, probably, I'm trying. One has to know what works well and what doesn't. In the future, most likely, I can better decide what I want, but when more years have passed, calmly. So, contemporary music is something that, at first, doesn't come easily. What happens is that when you get used to it, it becomes interesting. Working, with living composers is definitely very enriching for me because they show you many things. Aside from that, I am very fortunate to work with colleagues, with composers that have dedicated pieces to me. You can't deny that it's a privilege. It's an honour that they compose pieces for you, think of you, and dedicate the pieces to you and to premiere them. It's fantastic. I do a lot of Spanish music because I consider it my job, also, to spread contemporary pieces. There are international composers like Dutilleux, Lutoslawski and Penderecki, that are known and played, but I don't think there are very many Spaniards. I also like to recuperate pieces that have been neglected for a long time and explore the potential of Spanish composers with the cello. In a way I believe that from quantity we find quality.

J. A. Do you have anything recorded?

A. P. Yes with Claves, RTVE, Marco Polo and Naxos.

J. A. Do you record with a specific label?

A. P. Not at the moment. I don't have a label. That is something separate from my real career. You have to have a lot of luck with record companies. They are in crisis and it's very difficult to record things now that have been recorded so many times before. It's difficult to achieve.

J. A. And have you experimented with other genres? Jazz? Rock?

A. P. I have experimented a little bit but classical music requires a lot of dedication. It's a genre that doesn't permit a lot of flexibility. Many times I have been contracted and I have to try a piece. And if I don't do it, someone else will. In other words, maybe in the future I can choose better what I want to play and what suits me. Right now I have to try everything and learn, on stage, what I can and can't do. If you do Baroque, that will help you play Romantic even better. If you do Contemporary, you are going to utilize those resources to help you play classical better. Everything complements each other a little bit and I think it's good to do everything.

J. A. Are you a good improviser?

A. P. We don't have the culture, information, to improvise. There is no teaching of improvisation in classical music. I don't know how to do it, honestly.

J. A. And in life, are you a good improviser?

A. P. No, I don't like improvising. It's a handicap of my personality. Well, I consider it a problem or a virtue because I organize myself with ample time and I am a stickler for order. Therefore, I program myself way ahead of time and I don't like when outside factors change that plan. So, I'm not partial to improvising a lot. I anticipate things a lot. If I don't, I get stressed. I like to improvise when I am relaxed, when I am on vacation, when I'm like this.

J. A. Have you suffered from stage fright?

A. P. Yes, horrible. The first time that I played Schumann in the Lisbon Expo, for example, I panicked because they were tremendously complex pieces. In a situation that, perhaps, is the first time you appear in a new place, you get a little bit scared, you're not too sure about the piece. You think that you can't do it, that you're not cut out for it, that it's better that you do something else, that you should leave, just leave it. I had to push myself to go out on stage. The director forced me to go out and I did what I could. Later, the next day, I played phenomenally. I told myself that it couldn't be. You have to have a lot of self-respect. You should never throw in the towel. Many times you have to reinforce your self-esteem and personality because this is a tough career. Also, the one who makes it is the one who withstands the most, the one who has that self-love. You have to insist.

J. A. But, you need to have a bit of luck?

A. P. Yes, a great deal. I feel fortunate. I have always had luck. Sometimes, it's you who brings luck to yourself.

J. A. But, you have a certain type of personality -emotionally and socially intelligent, sure of yourself. Have you always been such a good communicator, so extroverted since you were a child?

A. P. Yes, but in a superficial way. With music, alone at home, I have many insecurities, many fears, many doubts. It's a profession that's very abstract, that you can't get a grip on. You need someone to tell you what you are doing and what you are not doing right. Many times, you have a lot of doubts because you can't say: 4 and 4 is 8. Perfect. It comes out fine. The thing is it can be done like this, and this, and this. And the higher the standard, the harder it is to overcome. You go crazy thinking: how could I have been better? How can I take a step forward? Each step is like a pyramid. Each time it becomes narrower and more difficult to reach the next step. And there I am, but that's the way it is.