

Tribute to Petia Kassarova



This week I do not bring to you a musical treasure chest. I write what I have dreaded, and what I can barely say: On Monday, July 20 our cellist **Petia Kassarova** passed away. She had battled ovarian cancer for five years, for a while winning, but this winter it returned aggressively. She was brave and strong and continued to play and teach through almost all of it. But despite her valor, the disease conquered.

Petia was a founding member of the group and was with us for our entire tenure. She played on countless concerts in a staggering variety of music from early Baroque to brand new works. In a group of sort of staid, scholarly chamber musicians, she was our Maserati (a Bulgarian version of course!): sleek, luxurious and a bit dangerous. When Petia revved up to play a solo, you knew that you were in for an exciting ride. You could feel her engage and great musical fervor would pour out. She took chances and had strong commitment to her ideas. When you play chamber music with someone for so long, you know them intimately and know every nuance of what they will do. A raised eyebrow, the flicker of a smile, a change of posture all translate into your music making. There was something immensely affirmative when Petia would catch your eye after a solo, a warmth exuded from her.

We had so many wonderful, special concerts together over the twenty years that it's hard to pick out which ones were most memorable. Playing Schoenberg's *Transfigured Night* back in 2016 was perhaps a true highlight. The first cello part is so difficult but so gorgeous, and Petia played it commandingly, with her beautiful tone and intensity. The concert was made all the more poignant because it was the first big program she performed after a long round of chemotherapy.

We were all optimistic that life for her would return to normal. Another incredibly special program was the *To A Soldier* concert where the major work was Samuel Gardner's Piano Quintet. This quintet depicts the life of violinist David Hochstein from youth through his death in WW1. It is a brilliant work. The third movement is a funeral march with the melody in the cello and viola, followed by the second violin playing a searing theme in duet with the cello. I couldn't get through this movement without tearing up. Petia put her soul into it.

But Petia wasn't just the cellist in the group, she was my close friend. We shared many adventures and great and meaningful times together, as we did many tears about her cancer. The last time I (and in fact all of Musicians of Ma'alwyck) saw her was at our Viennese Ball on February 29th. She looked radiant, and we had a great time playing waltzes and polkas all night. I choose to remember her that way, with her inviting smile and stylish dress, her eagerness to help and her great playing.

The last time we played chamber music together (and, of course, we had no idea it would be the final time) was in early January of this year. The program included the **Brahms Sextet in B-flat major**, a piece of great difficulty but equally great beauty. Petia, who played first cello on it, played incredibly and this performance showcases everything I loved about her playing: her gorgeous tone production, deep musicality and connection with the piece. All you have to hear is the **second movement at 7:16** to know what I am talking about. The link to that performance is below. The performers were **Alexander (Sasha) Margolis**, violin 1; **Ann-Marie Barker Schwartz**, violin 2; **Andrew Snow**, viola 1; **Theodore (Teddy) Arm**, viola 2; **Petia Kassarova**, violoncello 1 and **Andre O'Neil**, violoncello 2.

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Petia, you will be deeply missed.