

‘I’m not 90 years old –
I’m only 60 and
I will be until I die
And I want students
to be that way – to be
fresh the whole time.’

The cello pedagogue ALDO PARISOT has worked with some of the greatest musicians in history and inspired generations of performers. As he moves into his tenth decade, he tells his former student RALPH KIRSHBAUM that he’s living the dream

RK What was it like growing up in Natal, a relatively small town in Brazil, in the 1920s and 30s?

AP At that time there were no cars, televisions or luxuries. It was a simple life. Every Saturday my mother would give me ten cents – one for the cinema and the rest for ice cream. There was nothing to do. I spent two hours at school, practised three hours, and swam for four hours – two hours going across the river and two hours back.

There was nothing to learn. Today they try to make people learn too much, instead of concentrating on one thing. If you want to be a concert artist you should make that decision when you’re very young, so you have a great deal of time to master your instrument. But they pile so many things on students now. They want to make them into computers, learning things that are nothing to do with their careers.

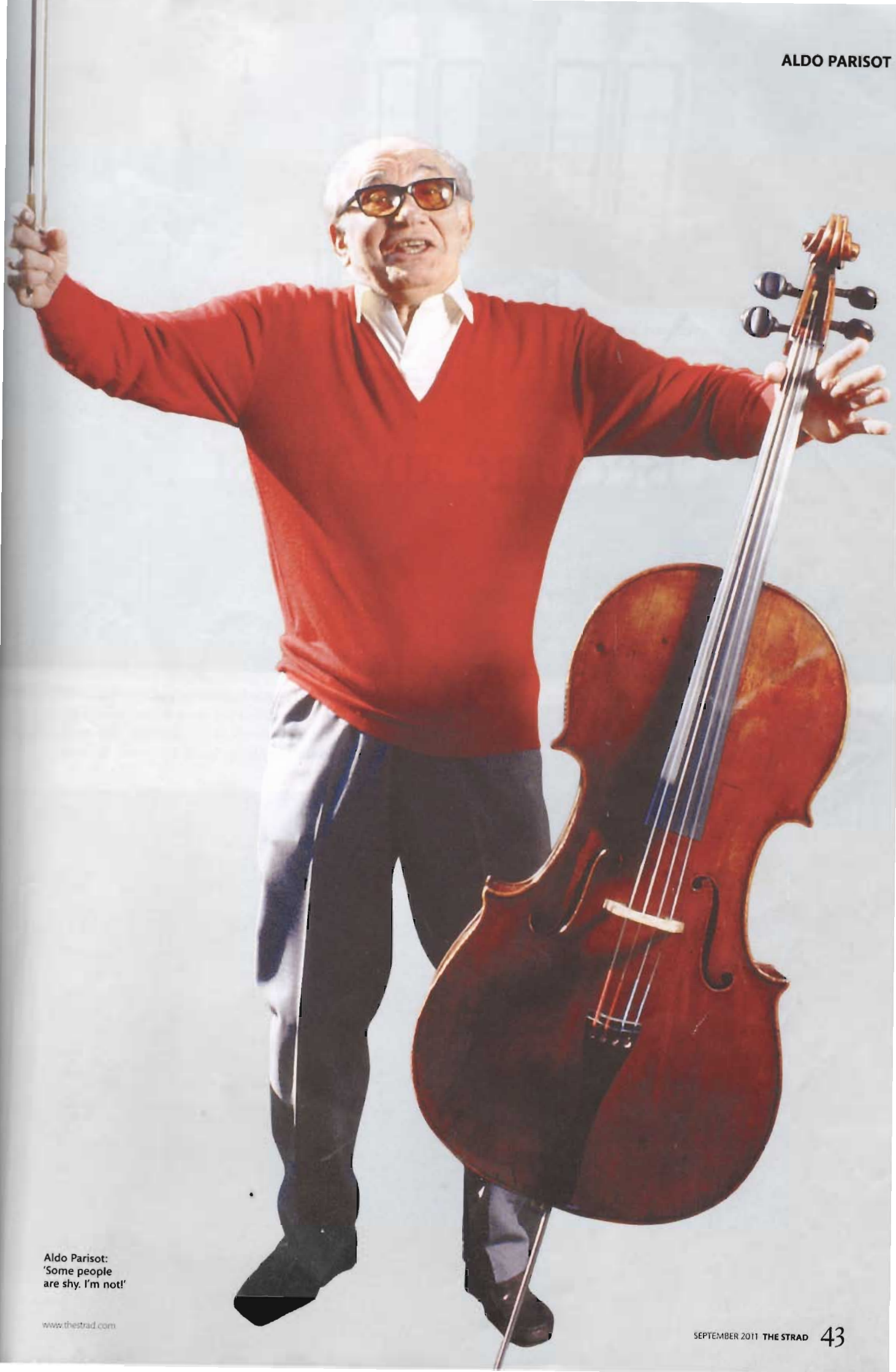
RK How old were you when you started the cello?

AP My father died when I was four, and mother remarried when I was five. My stepfather was Thomazo Babini, a

wonderful cellist, and when I heard his beautiful sound I showed the desire to play immediately. I had to ask my mother to ask him to teach me because he was a big man and I was scared of him. He didn’t believe I wanted to learn, but I kept insisting and he decided to try. But before he would give me my first lesson he taught me solfège for two years – I didn’t play the cello until I was seven. In the US solfège isn’t important, which is why Americans don’t know anything about rhythm.

RK You think solfège makes that much difference?

AP Absolutely! Solfège is not just a bunch of people singing chords. You beat the bar with your hands. With the system my stepfather used, the first book started very simply, but by the third volume every single note had a different clef. This was as easy as drinking a glass of water for me. I could beat bars with my hands or my feet. In Brazil everyone has to learn solfège and it’s the same in most of Europe, although maybe not in England. The English brought their bad habits to America! ▶



Aldo Parisot:
'Some people
are shy. I'm not!'

RK Your stepfather obviously saw how enthusiastic you were.

AP The system my stepfather was brought up with in Italy was that you had nine years of set repertoire. I did it all in three years, so he became encouraged because I had an enormous natural facility. He would sometimes surprise me and say, 'Let's play Romberg no.9 together,' a piece that is really difficult. First thing in the morning, he would get me to watch him as he timed himself to see if he could make one bow last two and a half minutes – close to the bridge. He would ask me to do it too. He had an incredible bow arm – there was no end to it and he was very proud of it.

As a teacher my job is to say, 'Okay, you have a different idea? Let me hear it. Do it. You have a choice.'

RK At that time of your life, who were your musical inspirations or role models? You say you didn't know Bach or Beethoven.

AP I heard my stepfather – he was the only cellist I ever heard until I went to Rio de Janeiro. The first real concert cellist I heard was Casals, when I was 17.

RK That's not a bad beginning!

AP Well it was a bad beginning, because I remember I didn't have a staccato and he played the Locatelli Sonata, so I was excited about seeing how he did it. But he slurred it all so I was disappointed! But what a beautiful sound and elegant bow arm.



Aldo Parisot and student Ralph Kirshbaum share a joke

RK What dreams did you have at that age?

AP I had a burning desire to tour the world and play with big conductors and orchestras. And I wanted to teach at a big university. People laughed at me. But everything came through! I did everything that I wanted – I have no regrets. I was never jealous of anybody and I don't believe in being jealous. I tell my students: 'You are unique – you have a special fingerprint among seven billion people. Nobody can imitate you and you shouldn't imitate anybody else.' We eventually find ourselves.

RK I had many great lessons with you during the time I studied with you and you know how grateful I am to you, but there are certain things and particular lessons I remember. There was one lesson in which I was arguing with you over a particular idea. You accepted that I had a different point of view but you said that my assignment was to come back next week and play that same phrase in four different ways – not just the way I'd made up my stubborn mind I was going to do it, but four other ways, and to be convincing in each of them. I learnt so much from that lesson. There are different ways of conceiving of a phrase and you have to at least explore that phrase because then you learn more about it and you have more to say about it.

AP How can you say, 'I don't believe this' and 'I don't like that' if you've never tried? You have to try if it works by yourself. It forces you to find your own way. I believe that if I give you an idea, you should at least try it and master it. Eventually you can say, 'I can do it the way you want, but I have a different idea.' As a teacher my job is to say, 'Okay, you have a different idea. Let me hear it. Do it. You have a choice.' I give you my idea, but it doesn't mean you have to imitate me – it's a point of departure. That's the way I teach. I learn from my own students. Every day they surprise me. They come and do something and I think, 'Why didn't I do that before? I never thought about that!'

I often used to go to New York to listen to Leonard Rose – I loved his sound. Many people used to ask, 'What are you doing here?' and I replied, 'I'm here to learn something – he does something that I don't know how to do.' We are all individuals. I may disagree with someone's interpretation, but I admire the fact that it's genuine.

RK It's genuine, but also, even if you don't agree musically, if someone does something from that feeling, but does it well, it becomes convincing.

AP If I tell ten people how to make a table they'll all make it the same – it can be explained. But music making is so abstract. There is no such thing as an answer to how to phrase something. You can never sign your name the same twice. Today you play one way, tomorrow another – however good you are.

I learnt to be a better teacher when I stopped playing in front of my students. There are many people who imitate their teacher. I hate the idea that there's someone in the world who sounds like a little Aldo Parisot. You've got to be yourself. We've all got to find our own way. We have all the equipment for it.

RK If you think back on the many things you've done in your career, what are some of the highlights that you are really grateful for?

AP One is playing with Leopold Stokowski when I was a nobody. I'd played with the New York Philharmonic in 1955 but no one had heard of me. Stokowski had a farm in Greenwich, Connecticut, and I found his address and wrote him a letter. ▶

COURTESY ELIZABETH PARISOT



Few conductors today enjoy accompanying soloists, according to Parisot



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I still have his answer framed on my wall. I'd written: 'Maestro, I know you're an admirer of Villa-Lobos, and I have the Fantasia by him, dedicated to Koussevitsky, which no one has ever played in America. I wonder if you would give me the honour of playing this piece for you.' I forgot about it because I thought he wouldn't answer. Five days later an answer came in the form of a huge telegram. He said how much he admired Villa-Lobos and his music, how curious he was to hear this Fantasia, and that it would be a great pleasure. I couldn't believe it.

I went to his farm and played the Fantasia, but when I finished, he didn't say a word, so I thought he didn't like my performance, but I was glad to have played for him. I was resigned to the fact that this was the end of the story. After lots of conversation it was time to say goodbye. He shook my hand, looked at me and said, 'We shall play together,' and I almost fainted. So I played the Fantasia with him in Pittsburgh, and he treated me as if I were as famous as Casals. He was a man of his word. He tried to encourage me – this was dramatic music and ensemble was not easy. It's so rare to find this today: there are very few conductors who actually enjoy accompanying. Stokowski was great in this way – as was Barbirolli.

RK Barbirolli was a cellist himself, of course.

AP Sure, and when I played with him he said, 'I understand you have Feuermann's Stradivari: can I try it?' So in the rehearsal break I gave him the cello. He was sliding up and down. That was the style in those days. It was a real glissando rather than a position connection. Have you heard the gamba sonatas he recorded? They're fantastic!

I remember playing Tchaikovsky's 'Rococo' Variations with Pierre Monteux. He screwed me up beautifully in the last

movement. I used to play it very fast and when we rehearsed it was fine. But in the evening he went off too slowly and I was pushing, pushing, and but he wouldn't go. He wouldn't move! I banged the podium with my foot, but I regret that, because he was an old man and a great musician. Finally I got to the trills in the last variation and waited for the orchestra – I was four bars ahead. I felt horrible. I went backstage in a hurry to apologise to him, but he came to me to apologise! He was a phenomenal guy and a wonderful musician.

Paul Paray was another bad accompanist. When I was in the Pittsburgh Symphony I played the Dvořák Concerto with that man 16 times. We were never together. I always had to wait for him. He would not go with me – he was behind and I was ahead. When I heard from my manager that the conductor for my second appearance with the New York Philharmonic in 1956, playing the Dvořák, was going to be Paray, I thought it was going to be a disaster. In the introduction I was waiting for him forever and he made a huge ritardando that we hadn't rehearsed. He didn't care about the soloist. I have a tape somewhere and it sounds horrible. But in French music he was fantastic.

RK What was it that originally prompted you to begin your teaching career?

AP I began teaching when I was about 13 years old. My stepfather passed me two students. One was a nun, but she always came to the lesson with another nun who made sure I didn't touch her. The second nun would sit right next to me and watch every time I touched the other's bow arm – she would check if I was having fun holding her hand. That was my first student. After that I had many other private students – although no more nuns. >



← Villa-Lobos at the piano with Parisot, who performed the composer's Fantasia with Stokowski

↑ Parisot with Yo-Yo Ma (above) and teaching at Yale (below)



RK Was Yale your first real teaching position?

AP Yes, and I've been there since 1958. In the beginning I only had four students and I was touring a lot. I had no idea what teaching was about and all my students just imitated me. And I was happy to see people imitating me, but I was wrong.

RK It's interesting that you say that when you started you didn't have any idea about teaching, but you certainly have an idea about teaching now, as over 50 years of successful teaching demonstrate. You've helped so many wonderful cellists – not only cellists who have become famous and well known, but ones who are doing things in productive ways all over the world. When you look back over these 50 years, what are some of the highlights?

AP The highlight is to see people like you going around the world performing. Players such as Jian Wang, Roman Jablonsky, Shauna Rolston. This is an incredible pleasure for me. Seeing people like you having success and knowing that I had a bit of influence puts me on top of the world. That's why I do it.

RK What advice do you give young cellists regarding the choices they face when they go out into the musical world?

AP I want students to understand that Yale School of Music is a Walt Disney dream land. Real life starts when they get out of here. Everything is black. Every door is shut. It's as tough as hell. You've got to be responsible and it starts right here. I set an example. I've been teaching at Yale for 50 years and I was never one minute late for a lesson. I leave home one hour ahead of time and I'm there twenty minutes before the lesson. Another example: you're supposed to come here and know every single note of a score. And if you're playing in orchestra, regardless of whether you like the conductor or not, your job is to do it well. You have to do the maximum, to squeeze yourself, no matter what you do in life. Please yourself, be happy, but don't regret anything. If you do your



best when you're young and try the hardest to fulfil your dreams but you don't succeed, then at least when you reach 80, you can say, I didn't succeed as I wanted, but I know I tried.

RK Here you are, one of the most gifted cellists of our time. You've heard thousands of cellists throughout your time at Yale. What do you feel about the level of cello playing today?

AP It's different to how it was in the 20th century. Violinists and cellists today have to cross strings for every phrase, which becomes unvocal. The human voice shifts the whole time and the shift is part of a string player's vocabulary – pianists and wind players can't do it. In the 20th century everybody had a different way of shifting. Today they teach violin and cello by crossing the string because it's the easiest way. ▶

PHOTOS COURTESY ELIZABETH PARISOT



Cello contemporaries:
Parisot with Janos Starker



Parisot: 'I had a burning desire to tour the world and play with big conductors and orchestras.'

RK When you're dealing with your students today, do you emphasise that they must make those shifts?

AP Absolutely, but the decision to do it is theirs. They should be able to shift properly in order to colour a phrase. There are several combinations and speeds for shifting – there are so many colours, like with the human voice.

RK How do you help a player who wants to become a soloist?

AP They have to tell the public, 'Here is my message,' and to be a bit of a showman. When Rostropovich first came to the US in 1957, he didn't make a success at Carnegie Hall. I was there: it was incredible playing, but sedate. When he got back from the tour his manager Sol Hurok said, 'I know nothing about cello playing, but I heard your tour wasn't a success. I can't re-engage you unless you do something to make yourself a success. America is a country of show business. Unless you do something, I can't sell you.' When Rostropovich came back to America, I was there to listen to him and I couldn't believe it. He entered the hall very quickly, sat down and was playing straight away. It was as if he had hit me on the head with a hammer, it was such a shock. He was an entirely different man to the one I remembered. He was smart, because he kept doing that and it was incredible show business. Hurok was right.

RK You heard it and it was like a hammer, but did you like it?

AP I liked the playing, but I didn't like the exaggeration. I like someone who shows personality but not an exaggerated personality. But in order to learn how to be a showman you have to exaggerate. If you want to make a crescendo, try to make a huge one to six fortissimos. It does not exist in music: no one ever wrote such a thing. But by finding the maximum you discover what a happy medium is.

RK Do you encourage your students to do that?

AP I encourage them to do it to develop their personalities. It's like acting. We are delivering a message to the audience. If you give a small theme to Barak Obama or Bill Clinton, they're going ▶



to make a masterpiece of it. They'll improvise on it; they'll touch the public and force people to believe what they're doing. But some players exaggerate so much that it becomes ridiculous.

RK So how do you teach them where expressing your personality ends and over-exaggeration begins?

AP I just tell them, 'Okay, now you understand my point but that's too much, do a little less,' until I feel it's a bit more natural and people will understand.

RK What else do you emphasise with your students?

AP I try to make students believe in themselves, and that includes without the cello. Sometimes it takes a few months for the person really to show who they are. There's some psychology to this. If I know who they are as a person I can help more. Some people are shy. I'm not – I'm full of life. I'm not 90 years old – I'm only 60 and I will be until I die. And I want them to be that way – to be fresh the whole time. I tell them of my experience. When I was 18, I was so shy. One day, I decided that I wasn't going to be shy any more. I went and talked to people and started being not shy. It's as simple as that. It's up to you.

RK That's a significant point: knowing as a teacher the importance of psychology in leading students to believe in themselves.

AP They know I'm their friend. Sometimes they need money and I know they're too shy to ask for it, so I just put it in their

pockets. I have to. Not that I'm an angel – I can be pretty tough. They've got to be your friend, but there are many ways of being a friend. I want to joke with them as if they are my children, which they are in a sense. I do the best I can. 'You're in trouble, let me know! You're not practising because you didn't eat today, let me know! Spend a week in my house and fill up your stomach!' It's our obligation. As teachers we're privileged to have a wonderful extended family. There's no other way. We give the best we can.

RK You certainly have done and you continue to do so. When you look back on your career, would you have done anything differently?

AP No, everything that I planned when I was very young, that everyone laughed about, came through. I have no regrets.

RK What a fantastic thing to be able to say.

AP I just hope I can live a little longer to hear these people make success. That's not to play 60 concertos with big orchestras around the world. Success manifests itself in different ways. It's what you do for people. I never paid a penny to study, so I have to give that experience back somehow. So many people helped me along the way. The people who helped me don't need anything, but there are many who do. My way of doing that is to give back what little I know about the cello. I have letters saying, 'Mr Parisot, I remember you telling me this and I'm doing it. Thank you for advising me.' And every word is like a million dollars to me. ■