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Bach
on Bass

Classics for
the Dispossessed

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For 40 years he's been perfecting the Bach cello suites played on a double bass. Now Richard Hartshorne '61 shares his passion and the music with the dispossessed.

The concertgoers aren't typical Bach enthusiasts: 150 criminally insane patients, deeply medicated, walking in circles and holding conversations with themselves.

"This might be the audience I just can't reach," Richard "Dobbs" Hartshorne '61 thinks as hospital staff herd the patients into their seats. Then he draws a bow across the strings of his gigantic double bass, and the warm, tender notes of a Bach cello suite slide from solemnity to serenity to joy and fill the room.

The audience becomes silent—not numbed-out, in-another-zone silent, but intent silent—and, for the brief span of the concert, a linoleum-floored room in Napa State Hospital becomes a wondrously peaceful place. The hospital staff is amazed; Hartshorne is, too. "It reaffirms that people need to hear something so beautiful and organized and relaxing," he says. "The power of music is what inspires me."

BY MARY SEYMOUR

Bach on Bass }

Since 2004, Hartshorne has thrown himself into a unique cause: playing the solo cello suites of Johann Sebastian Bach for underserved communities such as prisons, orphanages, and refugee camps. He does annual concert tours in Palestine and Afghanistan and travels an ever-expanding circuit of prisons in California, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and New York State.

With his bushy gray beard and ample, rumpled face, Hartshorne looks like Santa Claus after a particularly grueling all-nighter. In some ways, that's exactly what he is: a gift-giver on a global scale, using every resource in his workshop to keep his bag of offerings full. His nonprofit organization, Bach with Verse (BWV), founded in 2004 and based in his hometown of Nelson, New Hampshire, consists of himself and an administrator, Sarah Jacques; on the road, it's just Hartshorne and his bass.

"I don't think he woke up and went, 'Oh, I need to bring Bach to people,'" says Gretchen Fisher, a BWV board member

he memorizes his stories in languages including Arabic, Armenian, Pashto, Farsi, Hebrew, and Chinese). The stories, which Hartshorne writes himself and accompanies with music, have universal themes with a distinctly Dobbsian flavor. One favorite begins thus:

Once upon a time there lived a young birch tree named Billy. One day Billy ran off and joined the circus. There he fell in love with a beaver named Brenda; and by good fortune, she loved him in return. Brenda worked as the knife thrower's assistant, while Billy, due to his poor verbal skills, could only find work as the tent pole under the big top.

"His comic pieces are very rich, very accessible, and very surprising," says Andrew Harvard, a longtime friend and BWV board member. "Sometimes they seem a bit like Garrison Keillor, with an extra dimension of sound. You can be sitting with Dobbs in a tavern, and somebody reaches for a peanut.

"He's loved those pieces of music since he was a young man: it's his passion. He's not interested in whether anyone has a technical understanding of the music. It's simply music he loves and wants to share..."



and former inmate. "He's loved those pieces of music since he was a young man: it's his passion. He's not interested in whether anyone has a technical understanding of the music. It's simply music he loves and wants to share—and because of the emotion in it, listening to him takes you on a journey."

Fisher first heard Hartshorne play more than a decade ago, when she was incarcerated in the New Hampshire State Prison for Women. "He really transported everyone in that room. We were free from the walls while he played." She recalls, still with wonder, "He didn't view us any differently than himself. He's a well-known classical musician, yet he seemed to think we were just as important. That's a wonderful message to give."

Before founding BWV, Hartshorne lived a relatively plush life as bassist for the renowned Apple Hill Chamber Players of Sullivan, New Hampshire. He spent 30 years performing for the polar opposite of the Napa State Hospital audience, and eventually it wore thin. "It was time to do something different. I'd always wanted to play in places where there wasn't any music, for people who'd maybe never listened to music."

A typical BWV concert consists of one of the six cello suites followed by a round of comic storytelling, delivered in the native language of his host country (a skilled linguist,

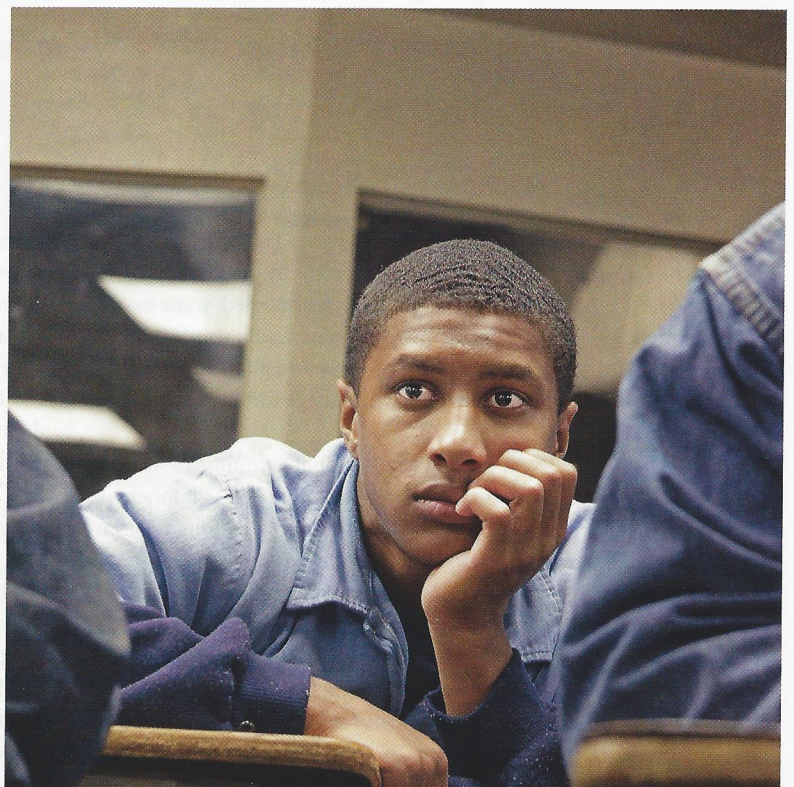
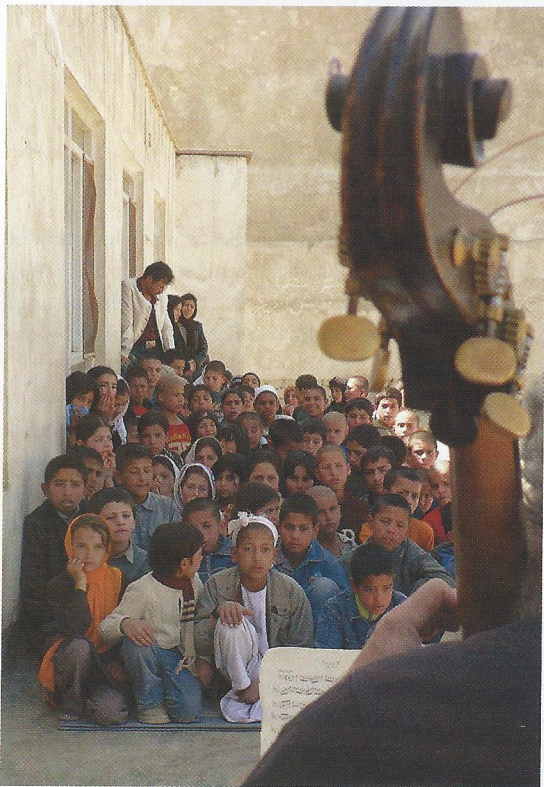
Ten minutes later the story of the peanut has five characters, and there's a back story. Six months later, the peanut comes back—but now there's an army of peanuts. Two years later, you get a CD of stuff he's working on, and the peanut sonata is right in the middle.

"It really is transcendent, watching him perform," says Harvard. "The comic stuff is wonderful, but there's also extraordinary peace in those Bach pieces. When he's playing for people for whom it's new, or a tonic, or a relief from devastation, the notes suddenly become the voices of people who have no voice."

Top: Hartshorne played with Palestinian musicians for children at a refugee camp in Nablus on the West Bank.

Left: Music and storytelling held the attention of orphans in Afghanistan.

Right: Through a program called Arts in Prison, Hartshorne has performed at California prisons and connected with many inmates, including this young man at San Quentin.



Hartshorne comes from an academic rather than musical background: his father taught religion and philosophy at Colgate University. Nevertheless, Dobb (a childhood nickname that gained an “s” at Mount Hermon) took up the piano at four, then the clarinet. At 12, he started playing bass when his school got one and needed someone to play it—however, practicing wasn’t in his lexicon. “I was playing music,” says Hartshorne, “but it wasn’t any good.”

Things began to shift when he came to Mount Hermon in 1959. Dazzled by the sound of Christmas Vespers, he signed up for the choir, and director Al Raymond became his hero (though Hartshorne was too shy to brave a conversation). Next he joined the school dance band, the Hermon Knights, writing tunes and helping record an album in New York. Late in his senior year, he decided to become a musician. “I knew nothing about classical music; I knew rock and roll, and I liked jazz. I didn’t realize that deciding to become a musician at 17 was unusual.”

He took a year off to practice, spent two years at Oberlin, and then transferred to Juilliard. “After three years there, I



Hartshorne kept children at the Palestinian Qalandia refugee camp enthralled with his music and storytelling.

do so on bass. He still plays from the same scores he used in 1967; their pages are tattered and held together with tape.

Playing and perfecting six Bach suites for more than 40 years suggests a tenacious, challenge-embracing nature, also evident in Hartshorne’s love of mountain climbing (he’s scaled McKinley and Kilimanjaro) and running (four to eight miles every other day; he used to run his age in miles on his birthday, but scaled back after 57 due to injuries). This year he’ll

“When he’s playing for people for whom it’s new, or a tonic, or a relief from devastation, the notes suddenly become the voices of people who have no voice.”



finally caught up with everyone else,” says Hartshorne, who, while his fellow graduates zigged into traditional musical careers, zagged into the Peace Corps; he married, went to Bolivia to work in a music program, and had a son in 1970. Presenting small-troupe versions of Swan Lake to natives who’d never seen a Western instrument before was gratifying beyond words.

After a three-year stint in the National Symphony Orchestra of Costa Rica, Hartshorne joined the Apple Hill Chamber Players. His marriage ended, but he started a lifelong project: playing Bach’s suites for solo cello on a bass, exactly as they were written for the cello. Back in 1967, a Juilliard professor had suggested that he get a score of the suites and try them on the bass. “It will be a good challenge, but it’s nothing you’ll ever perform,” the professor told him.

And so an obsession was born: Hartshorne spent the next 25 years trying to master the six cello suites. Between 1992 and 1995 he recorded all of them, becoming the first person to ever

tour California, Afghanistan, and Palestine while juggling the responsibilities of fatherhood (he and his second wife, Emily, had a son in December). In November 2008 he released a self-recorded CD of Johannes Brahms’ cello sonatas, played—of course—on double bass.

“There are two cello sonatas by Brahms: one I played at my debut concert in Lincoln Center in 1978; the other is much harder. I didn’t even think it would be possible until five years ago, when I started working on it,” he explains. “I’m hoping the recording will generate some interest in the media so I can talk about Bach with Verse as well as the Brahms sonatas.”

Still, those Bach cello suites lie closest to his heart, and they’ll remain the centerpiece of BWV. “They provide really simple music that’s emotional and available to anyone. In a small room with 50 people, the bass is a big, impressive instrument—it’s not daunting the way an entire orchestra can be.” Besides, he says simply, “They’re absolutely fantastic pieces, and I’ve spent my entire life learning how to do them.” ❖

BACH ON THE ROAD:

From Dobbs Hartshorne's Journals

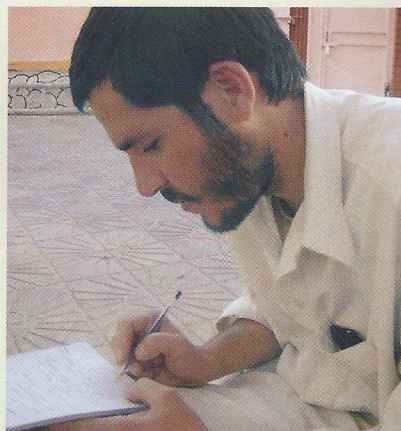
PALESTINE, SEPTEMBER 2006

I played 33 performances in 21 days. Two Bach suites, three stories in Arabic, the Fauré elegy and "Vocalise" by Rachmaninoff, and almost an hour of Arabic and Turkish music. The Arabic music has gotten under my skin; the four musicians I played with are probably the finest young players of traditional music in Palestine. I began to find my voice in the improvisation, inspired by what I heard around me.

But the heart and soul of what I did was playing for children. I did 26 concerts in three private schools and five refugee camps. I was partnered with Saed, an oud player and media student at Birzeit University. He introduced me, and I played the prelude to the first cello suite.

"This music I'm playing is 300 years old," I would say as Saed translated. "It's by the greatest musician who ever lived, Johann Sebastian Bach. He wrote music for people to dance to. While you listen to this next one, you can imagine people dancing." Then I would play the courante.

"This next one is very slow and beautiful. When I play, it makes me feel something." I touched my chest. "While you're listening, think about how it makes you feel. Maybe it brings you a memory, or a picture." I played the saraband to absolute silence, then listened to the things the children thought of.



Thinking about the amazing listening these kids do, I realized what I'm doing, not only in Palestine but also in prisons and wherever I'm performing. It's about the silence. I thought it was the Bach. Or the funny stories. Or the sound of the bass. Sure, all of those things are important, but the real gift is a chance to listen to music in silence.

AFGHANISTAN, MAY 2008

In Kabul I lived in the YAAR (Youth Assembly for Afghanistan Rehabilitation) guest house.

YAAR is an Afghan NGO and does many different things, including building schools. The guest house is available to men who need a place to stay when they come from the eastern provinces and Peshawar. What was interesting for me was seeing the constantly changing cast of characters. The director, Amir, was very gracious to me, and the four kitchen and garden boys adopted me. One of them, Zargul, asked me one day when I would stop playing my big guitar. I replied, "When I'm dead." So he wrote out in English for me that he didn't want me to die. Amir was particularly happy when I was in Afghan dress because he thought I looked like the attorney general, who has fair skin and white hair and beard. On one occasion the real attorney general came to YAAR for a meeting, and I met him briefly. Neither thought we looked like the other, but a couple of people mistook me for him and rushed over to shake my hand. Amir thought this was the funniest thing he'd ever seen. From then on, when I needed a laugh, I mentioned my twin—the attorney general.

Above: Zargul, a kitchen boy where Hartshorne stayed in Afghanistan, labored to write him a brief letter in English.