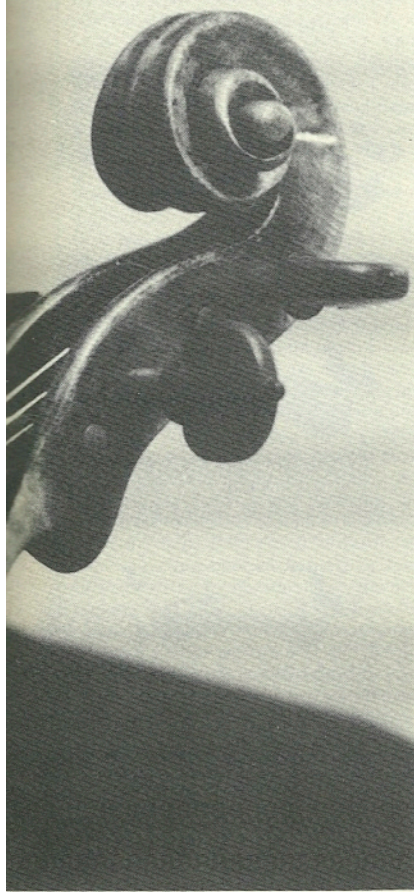




DOUBLE TAKE

Charles Libove speaks to R. D. Lawrence about his career and approach to violin playing. Portrait: Chris George



Merkin Hall, located in the shadow of Lincoln Center on Manhattan's Upper West Side, has never struck me as a particularly warm or ingratiating recital space. But it seemed for all the world to be a large yet cozy living room during a performance of Grieg's Sonata No.2 in G last February 2. There were several reasons for this transformation. The audience was intimate and contained many friends and colleagues of the performers, violinist Charles Libove and his wife, pianist Nina Lugovoy. More importantly, the music-making reached out to, enveloped, and transported us to a more relaxed, genial, bygone era.

Creating this kind of atmosphere is at the heart of Libove's philosophy of violin playing. 'From the very first note of a piece – let's say *La Folia*, "The Devil's Trill", or a Beethoven sonata – I feel that the quality of sound should carry within it something of the ambience, the drama of the music. Sound cannot be indiscriminately applied, like a specific colour of paint, to everything that has notes. It must *bespeak* the feeling. The voices of singers do this all the time: in an operatic aria which is sad, one hears a plaintive quality in the voice – so must it be with the violin.' We are sitting in the living room – a real one this time – of Libove's spacious apartment on West End Avenue in New York City, chatting and listening intermittently to a performance of the Frank Bridge Sonata which he and his wife recorded for the BBC at the end of 1985. His tenor voice is mellifluous and animated, his words carefully chosen, savoured in their enunciation. The uncanny vocal range and expressiveness of the violin playing in the background reinforce his message.

Libove is a short, cherubic man whose smooth, ruddy complexion and inquisitive blue eyes give him an ageless appearance, belying his sixty-one years. Since the early 1960s, the economic foundation of his life in music has been commercial work: studio recordings for phonograph, radio and television. Much of his employment has been in the "jingle" field – music recorded for thirty-second radio and television advertisements. If a jingle catches on, it can accrue years of residual payments for the players who record it. The flexible nature of this livelihood – its short, irregular hours – allows Libove ample time to practise, concertise and devote his weekends to teaching at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore. It has

also taught him how to shift musical gears in a hurry. 'I was once in the position of finishing a rock and roll recording at the old Columbia 30th Street studio at 12.30 and then had to race like mad to get to LaGuardia Airport to fly to Salt Lake City to play the Wieniawski D minor Concerto. This life style can make you a bit schizoid, but it certainly makes for flexibility. And you come to appreciate falling back on yourself as a financial resource to subsidize concerts.'

He performs those concerts on a beautiful Strad, the "Lord Norton" (illustrated on p.522). From the famous Hottinger collection, this instrument was the last violin completed by Stradivari at the age of 93. Libove recently built his own recording studio, adjoining the country home in Shady (Ulster County), New York where he and Nina frequently go to escape the hustle and bustle of Manhattan. They particularly like to sequester themselves there to have long, uninterrupted rehearsal hours to prepare for recitals. They generally appear at least once a year at Merkin Hall, presenting original programmes that never fail to explore the less travelled byways of the duo literature. Finadar, the classical division of Atlantic Records, which released their album of Ravel's works for violin and piano back in 1980, will soon produce a recording of the three Villa-Lobos sonatas and other unfamiliar works.

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Libove first felt the allure of the violin at the age of four, in the guise of a Heifetz recording of *Zigunerweisen*, and began playing shortly thereafter. His father was a tailor with a passion for music. 'My parents were part of a whole group of Jewish immigrants from Russia and Poland who were very geared towards culture. They would save their lunch money for a half year to walk into Manhattan from Brooklyn to go to Carnegie Hall to listen to Kreisler, Heifetz or Elman. This love of culture was transmitted to their children.' Although his parents did not push him to practise, Libove laughingly recalls: 'When I was four, my mother would move the clock back to make my fifteen minutes of practising a little longer, and that's how I soon learned to read time. Eventually, when she would leave, I'd move the clock ahead.' His early teacher was Rudolf Larsen, a student of Auer, who supervised the precocious youngster's musical development until he was ten. Then, with Larsen's encourage-

ment, he was awarded a scholarship to the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia to study with Lea Luboshutz, a disciple of Ysaÿe.

Libove fondly recalls his four years at Curtis as a period of great musical stimulation and ferment. Along with Luboshutz's tutelage, he continued to draw inspiration from Heifetz 'for the wonderful, spectacular drama of his playing,' and also came to admire the warmth and nobility of Kreisler's inimitable sound. He was also influenced by gifted fellow students, particularly Oscar Shumsky, outside whose practice room he remembers standing, raptly listening. The Curtis Orchestra at that time was the equal of many major professional symphonies. Conducted by Fritz Reiner, it included string players like Rafael Druian, Leonard Rose and Samuel Mayes, and performed on weekly radio broadcasts. Shortly after Libove joined this august group, Reiner decided to test the brash youngster from Brooklyn, asking him to play alone from the back of the second violin section a difficult passage from Wagner's *Meistersinger* Prelude. He emerged unscathed from this trial by fire, and came to enjoy playing in the Curtis orchestra, but knew from the beginning that the structured, predictable career of an orchestral musician was not for him. Chamber music, which Libove discovered at Curtis, would prove to exert a stronger pull. Haydn's "Sunrise" Quartet was his introduction to the genre, and he played regularly in a string quartet while at school.

In 1941, Libove left Curtis to study privately in New York with Ivan Galamian, who had only recently moved to the United States from Paris. When Galamian began teaching at Juilliard, Libove entered his class as a scholarship student, but was soon called away for three years of military service during World War Two. He returned to Juilliard for a few years after the war, and then concluded his formal study with the Greek pedagogue Dimitrios Dounis. 'Dounis was unique in that he inspired the questioning of accepted empirical teaching – all those apparent truisms that have strangely worked for some, but not for most. He was not just a teacher of technique; rather, his approach pointed to the inescapable fact that technique is only the fulfillment of an absolutely positive musical point of view. Simply put, you must hear exactly how the music should sound and feel in all its details. Then one may say that it is true technique that fulfills the details of those musical wishes.'

During the post-war period and on into the 1950's Libove supported himself by playing in pit orchestras for musical shows, gradually making the transition to studio work. In those days, it would not be unusual for him to play a matinee performance of "The Boy Friend" and appear as soloist the same evening in the Beethoven Concerto with Thomas Scherman conducting the Little Orchestra Society. He remembers giving a series of recitals with pianist Eugene Helmer, Milshtein's former accompanist. Helmer eventually withdrew from the concerts – which paid somewhat less than a king's ransom, Libove wryly recalls – but not without recommending a student of his, Nina Lugovoy, who had recently arrived in New York after studying with Isabelle Vengerova at Curtis. The



Charles Libove, aged 3

basis for an enduring musical – and life – partnership was soon formed.

In 1957, Libove's career turned in a new direction. 'I was convinced by a very dear colleague, violist Lotte Karman – the kind of friend who takes a parental view of friendship – to do something better than playing commercially. That's when I auditioned for and entered the Paganini Quartet as second violinist.' Henri Temianka was the first violinist of this Los Angeles-based group so named because its members performed on a quartet of Stradivarius instruments formerly owned by Paganini. Particularly noted for its interpretations of French music, the Paganini recorded the Debussy and Ravel quartets as well as quartets of Haydn and Mozart, and toured widely during Libove's four years in the group. 'We did 150 concerts in my first season, including the Beethoven cycle. It was a marvellous musical experience for me. After playing the quartets of Beethoven, you really have a view of things – and that includes not just the Beethoven concerto, but Wieniawski as well.' Libove certainly didn't neglect his solo playing during this period. In 1957, he entered the Enesco Competition in Bucharest and was the only American to capture one of the top prizes.

In 1961, he left the quartet and returned to New York, admittedly a bit soured on life in a string quartet. 'As Henri Temianka used to put it, a quartet has all of the problems and responsibilities of a marriage with very few of the benefits.' But a year later, when asked to replace Gerald Tarack as first violinist of the Beaux Arts Quartet, he was ready to plunge back in. With Libove at the

helm, the quartet captured the Naumburg Foundation's first chamber music award. Among the group's numerous activities during his fourteen years of leadership (until its demise in 1975) were a residency at the State University of New York at Potsdam, three summers at Gian Carlo Menotti's Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy, an appearance at the Osaka Festival in Japan, and recordings of Barber and Diamond quartets for Epic Records. In addition, the Beaux Arts commissioned Leon Kirchner's Third Quartet and recorded it for Columbia Records. From 1962 to 1972, the Libove/Lugovoy team performed with cellist Alan Shulman (later Aldo Parisot) in the Philharmonia Trio. And in 1974, Libove replaced Tarack in another group, the Marlboro Trio, joining pianist Mitchell Andrews and cellist Charles McCracken. This ensemble was active until 1985, when Andrews left to take a position at Ball State University in Indiana.

Teaching is another important part of Libove's life in music. He has been on the faculty of the Peabody Conservatory since 1974, is affiliated with New York University, was on the adjunct artist faculty at the State University of New York at Purchase, and also teaches privately. He is, above all, a pragmatic teacher whose aim is to demystify the physics of violin playing for his students, to integrate where other teachers might dissect. When I remarked upon the apparent ease of his own playing, which seems as natural as breathing even in pyrotechnical passages, he replied, 'If it looks easy, then it is easy. If it looks hard, then I'm doing something wrong. This sounds like a study in semantics, but the fact is, if one is to enjoy this violinistic gambling for the rollicking aspect of the music itself, then it must of necessity be easy. The sweat-and-strain school won't work, because all listeners have antennae and they can feel if you're struggling or walking on egg shells. So, it's a contradiction: it has to be easy, or it won't sound.'

Libove's views on the support of the instrument are unequivocal. 'Paramount in playing the violin is the hold – or should I say *non-hold* of the instrument. It rests on the left side of the breast and is not held in a vice-like grip – it should be free and flexible. It should be close to the body, not separated by a device (like those various pads) that takes it away and fixes its position. The violin rests



Libove as soloist in The US Navy Band during World War II



also on the pad of the thumb – not the joint – and the chin is there during big sweeping down shifts in fortissimo passages to prevent a finger from pulling the instrument away. The thumb is a passive part of the left hand, and should not apply pressure. It should be rested in such a way that it does not pull the hand together: the hand has to feel open.’

I asked him about left hand articulation. ‘There in an active motion and a passive motion of the fingers, and the active motion is up, not down. For example, in understanding the secret of a really terrific trill, it helps to imagine how quickly one’s finger would recoil from a red-hot string. In ascending passages, the fingers should fall to the string, not be pounded down. They are simply *placed* there, and that causes articulation. But in descending passage work, the active part of finger motion becomes very important. The fingers snap back. The sensation of the finger – its structure, feeling of oneness – goes all the way back to the wrist. The motion *per se* – the lift – does come from the base knuckles, but if you think of the knuckles as being the end of the finger, you’re liable to restrict the natural movement of your hand.’

Our conversation turned next to the bow. ‘In playing the violin, the right side of the body predominates. The *clán* of a stroke, the development of dynamics, to dig in and come out, to sing – these are all in the bow. Leading with the bow makes it possible to develop a big left hand technique. For if the left hand is left alone, it is simply stopping strings, with the added element of vibrato and colouring of sound. Other than that, it should not be doing much work.’

I liken drawing a bow stroke to working on a surface with a brush or a dust cloth. When you work on a surface, you work on it from above. To work on it from below causes some interesting problems. For example, if you are underneath the instrument with your right arm, when you lift the bow from the string, you’re not really lifting it, but pushing it up. The feeling should be one of *allowing* the bow to descend, (downbow) and drawing (upbow). An analogy would be the bucket on a rope that is lowered into a well and then lifted out – from above. This is what allows you a feeling of control, and it’s what you do in everyday life, whether brushing something off your clothes, or writing. There should be a feeling of suspension in the right arm that runs all the way up to the connection at the shoulder. There must be a chain of command that prevents the



Charles Libove and Nina Lugovoy

isolation of the various parts of either arm.’

Libove often finds himself caught in a double-bind in his relationship to his young students. While he feels that they should be aware of the hard fiscal and political realities of a solo or chamber music career, he decries the cosmetic packaging of success which often seems to take priority over music-making itself. ‘I’m the type of teacher who will say to a student, after praising an accurate but anxious, pushy account of the Glazunov Concerto, “This performance is not telling me about the Glazunov Concerto; it doesn’t envelop and move me – it sounds as though you’re trying to win a contest.” Bartók once refused an invitation to judge a contest, protesting that competitions are for horses. You cannot duel with music. Unfortunately, the importance of “success” today often supercedes the importance of music; the significance of the statement of a composer becomes secondary to being somebody, getting up on stage, exhibiting yourself. This attitude redounds to the detriment of the artist’s responsibility to elevate the public – to hone the perception and

evaluation of the listeners so that they become the final arbiters.’

He goes on to describe the elusive symbiosis between performer and composition that makes for artistry. ‘The very sound that one makes on the instrument is, in a basic sense, the person – it’s a very penetrating analysis of the human being. I know that sounds terrible, even frightening,’ he apologizes with a chuckle, ‘but that’s my belief. The great artists can always be recognized. You *cannot* mistake Heifetz when you hear that sound. The ability to recognize who is playing is a very telling aspect of violin artistry; it is harder to distinguish between performers today. There must also be an enormous welding of the quality, the texture of sound with the spirit of the music itself. This is another important aspect of playing that has been a bit neglected since the great era of Kreisler and Heifetz.’

‘My parents and others of their immigrant generation went to concerts to hear great violin playing, and afterwards, they would stand outside the hall – comparing, debating and arguing about the way Elman would do some passage as opposed to Heifetz.’ He relates a very different, recent concert experience when he went to hear a fine violinist who was suffering through an off-night. ‘There was a huge, enthusiastic audience. I was sitting in the balcony, behind two elderly ladies who began applauding vociferously when he finished playing a Beethoven sonata. One turned to the other, and said in a loud voice, while still clapping, “I suppose that was very good, wasn’t it?” This is what I would like to see changed. I feel that audiences today have been left to some degree in the lurch. It is very important that the emphasis be on how they are touched, moved – elevated by great music supported by great playing. The aesthetics of violin playing . . . the beauty of a sound.’

Stradivari 1737, the “Lord Norton”

The violin is named after Lord Norton, who purchased it from George Hart shortly after the sale of the Gillot collection at Christies in 1872. It was one of no fewer than ten Stradivaris owned by Gillot, and fetched £180 at the sale. Lord Norton sold it in 1901 to Charles Fletcher of Bournemouth, a well known violinist and teacher, and the violin then passed in 1908 to Mr W. A. Darbishire, who presented it to Miss Marie Molto, a young and talented violinist. In 1929 it was acquired by the New York dealer Nathan Posner, and after ownership or use by Alfred Corbin, Samuel Fels and Daniel Karpilovsky it joined the other fine violins of the Henry

Holtinger Collection in 1957.

Following the purchase of Holtinger’s instruments by Rembert Wurlitzer Inc. in 1965, it was acquired by its present owner, the distinguished American violinist Charles Libove.

The “Lord Norton” and the so-called “Chant du Cygne” are regarded as the last instruments made by Antonio Stradivari without assistance, and their quality is remarkable when one considers his age of ninety-three years. Although certain details of the workmanship naturally reflect the great Master’s old age, the tone of this violin is of the finest. *Charles Beare*