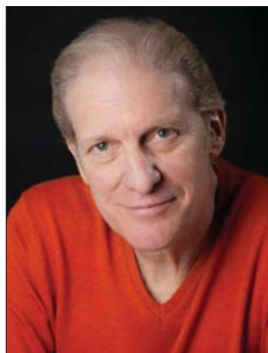


# Concerto for Two Violas

## on Themes from Smetana's "From My Life" Quartet

composed 2014-15



BY

**Richard  
SORTOMME**

BORN

June 6, 1948  
Los Angeles

LIVES IN

Mt. Vernon, New York

### *At a Glance*

Sortomme created this concerto for two violas as a commission from The Cleveland Orchestra to honor Robert Vernon's upcoming retirement as the ensemble's principal viola. He composed the work starting in 2014, and completed it in the summer of 2015.

This work runs about 25 minutes in performance. Sortomme scored it for an orchestra of 2 flutes (second doubling piccolo), piccolo (doubling alto flute), 2 oboes, english horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 4 trumpets,

3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (cymbals, triangle, timbales, tambourine, castanets, woodblock, claves, snare drum, piccolo snare drum, bass drum, field drum, bongos, xylophone, vibraphone, marimba, crotales, glockenspiel), harp, piano, accordion, and strings, plus the two viola soloists.

The Cleveland Orchestra is presenting the world premiere performances of this concerto with this weekend's concerts at Severance Hall, November 19-21, 2015.

### *About the Music*

To Robert Vernon:

This has been an incredibly gratifying composing process for me. By writing this concerto based on Smetana's "From My Life," I have relived part of my youth, revisited my early performing history, and recalled unforgettable musical and personal experiences. Bob, when you and Lynne give birth to this work November 19-21, 2015, know that it is offered up only with great respect, dedication, and love — to you and our very long relationship, as you are about to close out your illustrious career as principal viola of The Cleveland Orchestra.

*Richy Sortomme*

*The composer has written the following commentary relating the background, origins, and creation of this new work:*

**ALTHOUGH I DIDN'T KNOW IT** at the time, the seeds for this double viola concerto were sown back in the late 1960s. Based on themes from Smetana's String Quartet No. 1, those seeds connect, in no small way, to The Cleveland Orchestra.

Back then, Bob Vernon and I, still in our teens, were studying violin at Juilliard with the renowned pedagogue Ivan Galamian. During the summers, we attended the Meadowmount School of

Music, Mr. Galamian's intense eight-week summer school for violinists and cellists nestled in the beautiful Adirondack Mountains. Leonard Rose taught cello at Meadowmount and Mr. Galamian had invited Joseph Gingold, one of Cleveland's revered and beloved concertmasters, to teach string quartets to all of us.

Because there were very few violists at Meadowmount, some of us had to learn to play the viola for the quartets. After the assignments had been made, Mr. Gingold would take all of us who pulled viola duty and go through his "shorthand" method of learning how to read the alto clef. (It was not actually a method to read the notes, but instead a trick to get us through — and, in fact, most of us didn't quite know what notes we were actually playing for a couple of years!)

In those days, there were just over a hundred of us at Meadowmount, coming from not only America but almost every country in Europe and Asia. Each summer in mid-August, there would be a scholarship concert to raise money and Mr. Galamian would assign the best of the best to participate, including Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zukerman, Jamie Buswell, Young Uck Kim, and other wonderful fiddlers whose names may be less familiar today, but whose artistry was just as genuine and real. The first half would be concertos, or unaccompanied Bach, or some short pieces. And then after intermission, there would be a quartet, quintet, sextet, or piano quintet.

One summer when I was 16 or 17, Mr. Gingold decided that Smetana's String Quartet No. 1, well-known by the nickname "From My Life," would be the post-intermission offering. This quartet has one of the most virtuosic viola parts in the entire string quartet repertoire. The opening is legendary and instantly recognizable, the type of part to which only a Giant could do fitting justice. The viola part was assigned to none other than Pinky Zukerman. We all had heard him play viola before, wonderfully, but this performance was shocking. Here, clearly, was a Giant in our midst. Almost from the first notes of the opening



*Joseph Gingold, former concertmaster of The Cleveland Orchestra, coaching at Meadowmount School in the late 1960s. In the circle, from left: Gingold, Dong Suk Kang, Daniel Phillips, Myung Wha Chung, and Robert Vernon (back to the camera). Painted portraits on the wall are of cellist Leonard Rose and Joseph Gingold.*

solo, accompanied by murmuring eighth notes in the two violins and cello, it was quite clear that a Star Was Born that night. The audience erupted into a mad frenzy of clapping, screaming bravos, everyone on their feet. But for me, there were two stars. Pinky and . . . this Smetana String Quartet, "From My Life."

It wasn't until a number of years later that I got to perform this quartet myself, on a concert at Meadowmount, playing second violin, with the brilliant violinist Bob Vernon assuming the viola duties. (Yes, Bob, like many other violists, started off studying the violin.) We had a wonderful time rehearsing under Mr. Gingold's watchful eyes and ears, and an even better time performing it. Many of Mr. Gingold's suggestions came from his own firsthand experience as a member of the remarkable Primrose Quartet, a group unusually, but fittingly named for its violist.

Mr. Gingold was a beautiful violinist and musician, great concertmaster, and a wonderfully nurturing man. During the summer that he announced his retirement from The Cleveland Orchestra, I remember asking him one day what he would miss most. He sort of smiled and then answered quickly: "Playing the Eroica Symphony!" It was impossible for me to imagine then, that my musical journey would intersect with The Cleveland Orchestra in the way it has, so many decades later.

### **MUSICAL LIVING**

Our own lives moved onward. I was still in the upper school at Juilliard in the very early 1970s, but Bob had taken his first job as violist in the New College string quartet in Sarasota, Florida. Friends of mine suggested that "From My Life" be included at a Friday night concert at Alice Tully Hall, because hardly anyone at Juilliard knew the piece. Emboldened by the idea, I called Bob and asked him if he would come up from Florida to play it. He said he would if I could somehow pull it off. I had studied chamber music with Felix Galimir for a number of years and was close enough to him to ask if he could "make it happen." He said he could, and that spring Bob came up, we rehearsed like mad for three days in my West End Avenue bedroom, and closed that Friday night concert with "From My Life."

Life continued forward. My wife, Carol Webb — a wonderful violinist who is a member of the New York Philharmonic

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— and I together created a chamber music series in 1979, called *For The Love Of Music*. In 1980, our second season, we moved to Merkin Concert Hall near Lincoln Center for what was to be the first of nine seasons there. I invited Bob Vernon to be an Artist Member. And I then asked him if, for the very first concert at Merkin, he wanted to play “From My Life” to close the program. He enthusiastically said “yes,” and all of our paths crossed yet again with this magnificent quartet. (Some things had changed from the earlier New York performance. Bob stayed with us in a beautiful guest room in our first home in New Jersey, not buddied up with me in my student apartment on West End Avenue, and rehearsals were more comfortable and organized.)

### **BECOMING A COMPOSER**

Then life really moved us all forward! Over the next 15 years, my career was extremely busy with chamber music performances and free-lancing in New York.

While I had composed a few pieces in high school, somewhere in the early 1990s the desire to write music surfaced again. My first concert piece from this came in 1997: *Culmination* for viola, orchestra, and synthesizers. As the years tumbled by, a number of my string-playing colleagues began asking me to write them chamber works and, over the ensuing years, I became busier and busier . . . as a composer. A New York Philharmonic commission came in 2004, then my first Cleveland Orchestra commission in 2005. A new destiny was clearly presenting itself.

I had been toying with the concept of composing a work based on themes from “From My Life” since late in 2005, when my first commission with The Cleveland Orchestra was begun. That commission was for just one viola (it started out as a concerto but ended up as a one-movement Rhapsody). During the early stages, Bob Vernon and I talked at length about what that piece could be — and I even wrote some sketches based on two themes from the quartet. Eventually, however, I abandoned any concepts coming out of those sketches and created the *Rhapsody* that was premiered in Cleveland in April 2007.

### **A NEW COMMISSION**

A year and a half ago, when Bob called and told me I was about to receive my second commission from The Cleveland Orchestra, my joy-filled mind secretly began to entertain “From My Life” again. Bob and I again started talking about concepts and direction, but I



*Richard Sortomme and his wife, Carol Webb, from their time studying at Meadowmount.*

*Was this not the time, more than 40 years after we had heard Smetana's quartet first performed, to tell a new story "from our lives," created from out of our years of knowing one another and working together? And to use the themes of Smetana's wonderful quartet as the basis for a new work of celebration.*

kept the notion of returning to "From My Life" to myself.

Over the next two months, however, I couldn't shake this fascination, maybe even an obsession, for wanting to compose on themes from "From My Life." Then a bright light went off and I understood — Bob and I, and Carol, had performed this piece so many times, as youths and young adults, it meant so much to us. It was so much a part of our musical and personal history. And few violists on the planet could play it as wonderfully as Bob.

I also knew that 2015-16 would be Bob Vernon's last season with The Cleveland Orchestra. He would be officially retiring. Was this not the time to come around full circle, more than 40 years after we had heard it and first performed it, to tell a new story "from our lives," created from out of our years of knowing one another and working together? And to use the themes of Smetana's wonderful quartet — which tells the story of that composer's life — as the basis of a new work of celebration, this new concerto for two violas that I was about to create for Bob and his stand partner, Lynne Ramsey?

That was all I needed. I summoned up the courage, called Bob, and advanced my concept. He was polite and interested, but not totally "sold" on the idea. Not for any particularly negative reason, however. I just think it caught him off guard and he needed to process the concept I was proposing. It was maybe three weeks later before he embraced the idea. And then he was onboard, fully engaged.

#### **CREATING THIS MUSIC**

I had never before written a work based on another composer's themes, so the process literally presented itself to me as I began and progressed.

I love this string quartet, know it intimately, and decided that I should start by going through each movement and basically writing down all the thematic material and numbering each of them. That turned out to be a bigger job than I thought it would be because of the great wealth of melodic and rhythmic material in the quartet.

It immediately became apparent to me that I would never be able to include all the material in the quartet and that I would have to include themes based on two criteria: 1.) themes that I thought were greatly important, and 2.) themes that I greatly loved.

"From My Life" begins with the most iconic and virtuosic viola solo in all of the string quartet repertoire, instantly rec-

## “From My Life” and The Cleveland Orchestra

**Bedřich Smetana** composed his String Quartet No. 1 in 1876, just a couple years after he had lost all his hearing. His sudden deafness had made continuing work conducting at the Czech National Theater impossible. Hoping that his hearing might somehow return, and keeping in mind Beethoven’s continuing to compose despite hearing loss, Smetana forged onward as a composer. He imbued his quartet with the title “From My Life,” and in its four movements tried to summarize his life’s arc — from musical ideals, happy memories of youth, and romantic love, to

his strong belief in a national style of art and music for his Czech homeland.

In addition to this week’s new concerto, there is yet another connection between the quartet and Cleveland. George Szell, prior to becoming music director of The Cleveland Orchestra, transcribed Smetana’s quartet for orchestra, and included it in his version on a number of concerts here in Cleveland (and on tour) — including his very first set of concerts at Severance Hall in 1944, as well as recording it in April 1949 . . . with Joseph Gingold as concertmaster.

ognizable. Obviously it had to be included. I made a decision to move along with themes from the quartet in chronological order, and instead of four movements, my work would be in two — my first movement would incorporate material from movements 1 & 2 of the quartet, and my second movement would incorporate material from movements 3 & 4. In addition, I decided to liberally “sprinkle” quotes from the iconic opening viola solo, in various forms, throughout my entire piece.

Whereas the opening viola solo in the quartet is fast, brash, and impassioned, I chose to open with a very soft and reflective treatment of the melody. In fact, I intentionally withheld the playing by our soloists of the opening solo material in all its glory, *fortissimo* and *Allegro Appassionato*, until more than halfway through my second movement.

The overall job that was presenting itself to me turned out to be more difficult than anticipated — how to do justice to Smetana with nods to his melodies and rhythms, while still doing justice to myself, to compose a work true to my musical style, heart, and intents. At certain points I thought I might be too close to the actual music of Smetana, while at other times I thought I might have drifted too far away, maybe composing too abstruse a treatment. How well I have achieved that balance can now be judged in performance at Severance Hall, with Bob and Lynne and their wonderful colleagues of The Cleveland Orchestra, led by maestro Christoph von Dohnányi.

—Richard Sortomme  
October 2015

A walk-thru of the concerto’s movements can be found on pages 46-47.



## Concerto for Two Violas on Themes from Smetana's “From My Life” Quartet

*The composer has written the following walk-thru description of creating the concerto's two movements based on the four movements of Smetana's original quartet:*

The quartet starts with a *fortissimo secco* (“short”) chord followed with eighth notes murmuring in an accompaniment for the imminently entering raucous viola solo. I start with a dramatic *fortissimo* chord in the brass with piano and double bass, but it is long, not *secco*, and makes a *diminuendo*. Then the quartet's fast eighth notes are represented by slow quarter note murmurings, with hugely different harmonies, that create the “bed” upon which the two soloists enter in a staggered format. They quote the notes of the quartet melody but in a much slower and gentler fashion, summoning up melancholy rather than fury.

The second theme of the first movement offered me a wonderful opportunity: quote it in a recognizable way, with different harmonic directions and a memorable orchestration. This is where I introduce the vibraphone with its haunting vibrato, along with muted strings and a few winds, creating a very gentle propulsion and caressing mood underneath the two soloists.

The second movement of Smetana's quartet, which is a fun-loving and romping polka, is introduced in episodic utterances by horn, trombone, and xylophone. The two solo violas quote this polka, accompanied by pizzicato and snap-pizzicato strings, occasional arco (bowed) cellos and violas, *secco* winds, castanets, and tambourine. The trio section of Smetana's polka, as explained by Mr. Gingold to us while at Meadowmount so many decades before, portrays drunken soldiers wandering the streets late at night while on a leave. I had a lot of fun composing this section. There are no direct quotes from the quartet. Instead I use very obvious, slow *portamenti* (“sliding”) in all three trombones and in the solo violas, accompanied by rhythmically halting percussion portraying street bands and high, sliding violin harmonics to complete the late-night mood. The movement's coda section romps, in fact runs wildly to its conclusion to end my first movement.

The third movement of Smetana's quartet begins with a beautiful and famous unaccompanied cello solo. My most exact quotes come from this movement. It contains some of the most gorgeous melodies in the entire quartet and I felt that I had to include them. This, however, led to a serious dilemma for me — at one point while quoting one of the themes, I felt I was too close to the original; not in terms of harmony or orchestra-





tion, but in the manner in which I was employing the Smetana melody. I was so concerned that I called a close friend, Robert Levin, the brilliant pianist, theoretician, and Mozart scholar. Bob helped me through my hesitation by telling me, simply, to be myself. *"I know your music well and if you compose this section honestly, being true to yourself and from your heart, this will all be just fine. The truly great composers borrowed from each other all the time."* I continued on my journey, my own way.

The fourth movement of the original quartet is a bubbling and dancing *Vivace*, and I introduced all of its melodies and rhythms right at the onset, liberally jumping from claves, woodblock, and marimba to various wind instruments. My work here employs recurring quotes of the quartet's first movement opening viola solo more than in any other part of the piece, sitting alongside all of the various, quoted fourth-movement themes. It is quite free-form writing. The solo violas quote the *Vivace* opening three times, twice in C major and finally in E major, the original key of Smetana's fourth movement. In this *Vivace*, I wanted to capture as much Eastern European flavor as I could, of a real folk character, so I included an accordion in my orchestration. Alongside it are *portamento* and *pizzicato* cellos, as well as *pizzicato* and *staccato* violins, tambourine, and bongos.

This brings me to something I said much earlier: that I saved, withheld, the solo violas from playing the very opening of the quartet, the incredibly virtuosic and recognizable theme, until halfway through my second movement. When it finally does make its appearance, it follows a rather gentle reworking of this movement's second theme with both soloists, accompanied only by harp arpeggios and vibraphone. It winds down, and winds down, and then WHAM! A shock, a jolt, that very first chord from the quartet with a slight rhythmic variation that interrupts the calm and serene mood we are in. The orchestration and harmonies are only nods to the original quartet's, actually being very different, but the melody, here played in octaves between the two soloists, is unmistakable. FINALLY! The two soloists get to play this theme in all its glory, wailing away with all the emotion, passion, and abandon they can muster. At one point, I even marked the section "*Allegro Vivo Tempestoso*." This new concerto then continues with that opening theme being tossed between the soloists and very large *tutti* ("all together") exclamations of it, each utterance becoming shorter and more intense, until there is a coda that runs, precipitously, to the end.

—Richard Sortomme  
October 2015

