

Interview with Asier Polo (I): 'Our society is not particularly supportive'

JILL ARCARO GORDON

As a boy during an amazingly fertile 5 years Asier Polo metamorphosed from an eager learner of the cello to the teenage recipient of Spain's most sought after prize for promising young musicians (Concurso Nacional de Juventudes Musicales 1987). Today twenty years down the road he is probably among the top 10 players worldwide and fast on his way to becoming, by the time his is forty, among the top three, a star in the micro-universe of classical cellists.

In this series of two interviews he proved to be an avid conversationalist and an intriguing source of information and entertainment. In 'Part I' he discusses the challenge of acquiring a valuable string instrument like his Cremona-built cello in Spain, his ideas on teaching methodologies, his personal experience as a student of cello and marketing in the music world. In 'Part II' our conversation covered subjects such as the dichotomy between soloist and orchestral musician, talent and finally his recipe for becoming a good cellist with a secret ingredient!



Asier Polo

Jill Arcaro. We would like to talk about the cello you play. Is its pedigree printed in your programs?

Asier Polo. Yes. It states: "Asier Polo plays a violoncello by Francesco Ruggieri (Cremona 1689) acquired with the collaboration of Banesto".

String instruments are historically expensive, like works of art, and in the most developed countries there are foundations that recognize their value and automatically lend these instruments for certain periods of time or for an artist's entire life. In these cases it always

appears in the programs that the instrument came from a person or entity. So, my colleagues in other countries have their instruments provided by banks, foundations or the like. In Spain, unfortunately, there is no tradition like this. There is not even one foundation. Therefore, the problem that I had to obtain my cello came after speaking with various banks that did not know about the music world. I finally spoke with Banesto, through Patricia Botín, the president, and she has tried to help me by buying the cello so that I could buy it from them little by little on credit. In addition, the credit was arranged on my terms, since it wasn't exactly a personal loan or mortgage. I pay a certain amount monthly and, at the end of every year, one large payment. In this way at the end of 15 years the instrument will be mine.

J. A. Does this worry you?

A. P. Well, on one hand it's exciting because, after a long time, the cello will be mine and that would be great. But, on the other hand, it is also a huge financial burden. While I can do it, that's fine, but an interesting thing for the future would be if Spanish foundations existed that bought instruments and lent them to talented musicians. However, I am very grateful to Banesto because if it wasn't for them, it would have been impossible for me to have been playing a cello with this pedigree, as you call it.

I began doing concerts abroad years ago in Berlin, Switzerland, Germany and, as artists need to really relate with the instruments they play, I needed an instrument as a letter of presentation. Now I have mine. My instrument is a Francesco Ruggieri from Cremona 1669. It is a first class violoncello of a contemporary of Stradivarius. The Cremona sound is one of its characteristics.

J. A. Is it a special loan from the bank for your personal circumstances?

A. P. Yes, through Banesto has been the only way to obtain it. They are pioneers in Spain in this respect, but it's not the ideal situation. If they had the cello in their foundation like they have a painting and at the end of my career I returned it to Banesto, with their committee of specialists, they would be able to lend it again to another performer and, surely, its value would increase. This way the foundations could have a collection of instruments for Spaniards that go to competitions for international awards and they could have quality instruments at their disposal.

J. A. The Casa Real has a collection of important antique instruments.

A. P. Yes, but they are locked away for almost the entire year. I think they take them out once a year for famous quartets. I think they are allowed to practice with them for an hour. One cannot get to know an instrument in one hour. This is only symbolic because it takes years to know an instrument. It's taken me a year to try and get to know mine. These are instruments with a lot of personality and you need to learn how to adapt to them. I understand that it is a difficult situation, being they are a national trust and because of the bureaucracy, but they could at least lend them out for important national events. The fibers of the wood need to be in vibration or the instrument will lose its musicality, its sound.

J. A. Do you think about living and working in another country?

A. P. In all honesty, it would be difficult for me. I haven't lived in very many places, except when I was studying in Germany, but I have travelled a lot. When I came back from Germany, I felt that it was so easy to live here (in Spain). It also isn't that complicated compared to other places and that pleases me. I need to be close to my people, but it wouldn't matter if I live abroad for awhile. One never knows what's going to happen in life and, if I had to live abroad, I would. I don't totally rule out anything.

J. A. Do you live and work in San Sebastian?

A. P. I live, yes, and I work in the Superior Centre of Music of the Basque Country, but it's an activity that occupies little time. I work four days a month giving classes. However, I have an assistant and my professional concert commitments are increasing. I will more than likely need to give it up.

J. A. Is it important to prepare the next generation?

A. P. Yes, it is important and I enjoy teaching in a certain way, when it is not from Monday to Friday and always with the students that I pick. In this way I can demand a minimum quality of performance with students that I consider important to work with. I have always wanted to do this, but I feel that perhaps it isn't the right time for me. In addition, teaching helps me put my own information in order. Sometimes you tell things to other people that you yourself don't do. So, teaching helps you organize your own information. To be able to explain to another person also helps. However, at the moment, I should invest all my energy into the life of a soloist. I know there are many people who want to study with me and, because of this, I do master classes and workshops. I like to be in contact with young people and will continue to do these classes and workshops because I can always find a space in my agenda for a short term course. I need to keep free time for myself to study and rest.

J. A. How do you see Spain in relation to Europe in regards to teaching?

A. P. I think it is difficult to explain. We have advanced tremendously and we are improving. Many things have changed. There are better qualified and more professors from a generation that has mostly gone abroad to study.

Now, I see with my own students that it is difficult with just one hour a week of class. Our society is not particularly supportive. In Germany, the entire social environment helps culturally. In Spain, we have not had the tradition, not even the romantic composers who are so motivating. In Europe, there are more musicians and more fans, people who simply play in their homes, for pleasure. This is what we lack. Sometimes, when a student comes to my class, he has all the advantages from his surroundings that he later loses when he returns home. You have to fight to find a favourable environment for music and be serious about your profession. Here, what's missing is a school. In other words, people are turning

out because they have so much talent that they have to surface, but there isn't the necessary infrastructure. It is important that we prepare soloists, but more importantly that we prepare fantastic orchestral musicians. This would be, truly, the most important thing to do.

J. A. Do you have some proposal that you think can equal Spain with Europe?

A. P. Well, I'm not exactly an expert, but something of a bureaucratic nature could be done. There are many contradictory voices in regards to the reforms and it is important that we adapt more to the age that we are living in -to be more realistic and less theoretical. The current structure is not practical because the kids have too much to study all at the same time. We would need to find a way for them to make their studies more compatible with each other.

J. A. How did you make it compatible in your own experience?

A. P. I did it by going to night school. My personal experience is that, I began very late playing the cello. I was 11. But, I knew what I wanted from the beginning! In my house, there was no musical tradition. I discovered what I wanted by myself when a friend of mine signed up for music and I signed up with him. I always liked to sing and dance, but never thought to pursue it on a professional level. Later, this changed because at 15 I won the Juventudes Musicales de España competition. I had made so much progress that in four or five years, I won this national competition. This opened doors for me and gave me opportunities to be on stage. At 16, it was crystal clear to me that what I wanted to do was give concerts, play music and travel.

J. A. Do you have siblings?

A. P. Yes, we are five and I am the youngest and the only musician. My father was a commercial agent for a bank and my mother was a housewife. They have always cared for us and supported us with everything. It was very clear to me, perhaps at too young of an age, what I wanted to do and it caused problems for me with my studies. They didn't make it easy for me in school because they didn't understand. They would tell me to study at normal school and later, after finishing, I could do what I wanted with music. But I already knew what I wanted! Now, it seems like that there some integrated centres in Spain. It would be interesting to promote these more to soften confrontations.

J. A. Do you think that Spanish cellists have some special characteristic? There has always been talk about the Spanish talent or temperament. What is your opinion?

A. P. That is a lie (he laughs). I think, perhaps, the Latin character is more open. It helps because, well, in some countries they teach children at a very early age not to make noise. You don't hear children in the street, at work, on the train. There are no shouts, no running, no... everything is so extreme. The value of silence doesn't exist here. It's completely the contrary! I think that in a way we stand out as extroverted and it may appear that others stifle personality and spontaneity. But, I don't believe very much in the concept of a "Spanish temperament." Yea, the climate helps, but also it makes us lazier, for example,

because it motivates us to go out, have a good time, and spend time with friends. And that's not very favorable for your studies. However, I don't necessarily think that Asians are colder, that Germans are stricter, or that Italians are more artistic.

J. A. And Americans?

A. P. Sorry, I always forget about the Americans (he laughs). Yes, it's true. The Americans have several good things and they know how to sell. It's very difficult. If there is a tradition, for example, I find it horrible to play Beethoven rock style. That isn't Beethoven.

J. A. Also, you have to distinguish between music and marketing.

A. P. Yes. In the United States, they sell the product brilliantly well. What happens is that, at times, with that capability of selling things easily, they sell the good and the bad. But it's important, always with a maximum level of quality, to do great marketing. There are many good musicians in Spain, with character, but they don't have a representative, and they don't know how to sell themselves.

For me, and now more than ever, classical music is a long-term career. I think you need to make judgement when the musician is seventy years old and look at his overall performance. There exists a brutal tendency to make us seem like pop. So, they do record launches with what I call "the evils of marketing." All of a sudden, here comes this handsome guy, blond, with a cello, or whatever, with an incredible haircut, super sexy, and two, three years later, *ciao*. Later, some other guy appears that looks exactly the same but brunette. It's exactly the same as pop and they are creating fictitious careers, stagings. It's much better to go little by little. There are the people that are very good that we know like Misha Maisky, Yo Yo Ma and Rostropovich that are very visible and perform everywhere. But there are also a lot of other talents, less well known, that perform at an incredibly professional level and don't have the social support of the media phenomenon like television, magazines and such.

But, to go back to the topic of temperament, temperament can help, but art isn't only about temperament. It's intelligence, work and sensitivity. So, I don't care very much about character or temperament. If you are disorganized, it's no use for anything.