

ChamberFest: A conversation with Raman Ramakrishnan

by Mike Telin



With a Bachelor's degree in physics from Harvard University and a Masters in music from The Juilliard School, Raman Ramakrishnan's career path could have gone in numerous directions. "For me, it's always been about the cello," Ramakrishnan said during a recent interview. "And from the beginning chamber music is what I loved."

Next week the Athens, Ohio-born cellist will make his ChamberFest Cleveland debut in three programs. But I began our Zoom conversation by asking him if he has spent any time in Cleveland.

Raman Ramakrishnan: Actually, my mother was born in Cleveland and grew up in Cleveland along with her three sisters. And my grandparents are buried in Cleveland on the West Side.

Mike Telin: You were born in Athens.

RR: I was. But to be honest, I only spent two months of my life there before my parents moved.

MT: Before I forget, let's talk about Chamberfest. What pieces will you be part of?

RR: Strauss' *Piano Quartet* (Wednesday, June 18 at 7:30 pm in Mixon) is a beautiful early work — I think he was 20 years old when he wrote it. But you sense that he was looking back, especially to Beethoven. It's even in c minor, like the fifth symphony.

I'm also playing Bright Sheng's *Four Movements for Piano Trio* (Friday June 20 at 7:30 pm in Mixon). I've done it a few times before. It's a beautiful, atmospheric piece. There're some energetic and exciting movements too. It's fun because we also get to sound like traditional Chinese instruments. Although Sheng — I did play it with him once — says that his mother tongue is not that music, it's Bartók. So he comes from that genetic tradition, his training is in Western classical music. The piece is kind of a marriage of those two traditions.

MT: On the same program is Franz Schubert's Cello Quintet.

RR: The piece needs no introduction from me except to say that I'm excited to get to play the second cello part, which is my favorite.

MT: And then there's the Saturday, June 21 program at Federated Church.

RR: I'm in two great pieces, Beethoven's "Ghost" trio and Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*.

MT: The "Ghost" trio is programmed a lot.

RR: It is, and for that reason, sometimes we take it for granted. But there is nothing like that second movement. The glacial way that it starts is so haunting. And I believe he was thinking about a scene from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

MT: You have a lot of great music lined up. If you don't mind, I'd like to ask about your interesting family.

RR: My dad is a scientist, a molecular biologist — he studies the ribosome. He was one of three people to be awarded a Nobel Prize in chemistry for their research on the structure and function of ribosomes.

MT: And your mother is a children's book author.

RR: That's right although she's more of a painter, a watercolor artist. But for several decades she wrote and illustrated her own picture books. She hasn't had one come out recently. She's been focusing exclusively on her own watercolor paintings, which are mostly landscapes.

MT: On to you. I understand that you were taken with the cello from the first time you ever laid hands on one. Do you recall what it was that attracted you to the instrument?

RR: It's hard to describe. If you ask most musicians, they'll say it just had to be that instrument. It's like falling in love, you can't say what it is about the person that you love.

Of course I could list things: I love the sound of the cello. I love how the C string feels. I love how it sings and mimics the human voice. But you could say that about other instruments, too, and I wouldn't want to insult the other instruments. But there was just something about it.

I have an older sister who played the violin. My parents wanted to make sure that she was exposed to professional musicians when she was studying. I still hadn't started to play anything, but the result was that I was dragged along to those concerts.

But I always just focused on the cello. There was something about it that just drew me in, and I kept asking my parents if I could start to play the instrument. And then when I was seven years old, it was a Christmas morning. Actually, we celebrated Christmas in a kind of pagan way with a tree and presents and things. But it was Christmas morning, I came downstairs and there was a rented cello for me to try. And that was a wonderful moment.

MT: Congratulations on carving out a great career in chamber music. How did you become involved with the Boston Chamber Music Society?

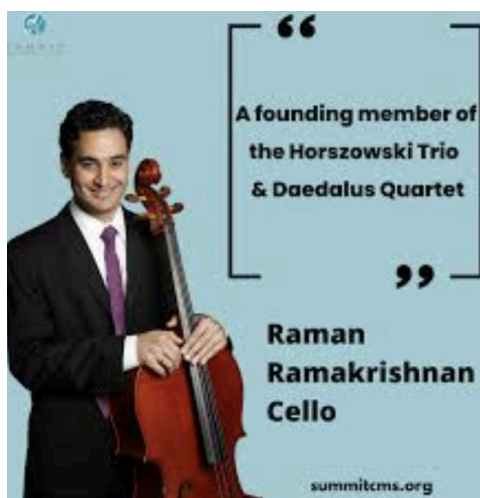
RR: It was a personal connection. I knew some of the players, and they suggested that I play in a concert where they needed a cellist. And when there was an opening for a cellist to join the roster, they asked me to do it. It was as simple as that. But I had played a few concerts with them before that.

We just played a concert last night, actually. Our oboist, Peggy Pearson, is a legend, and it was her final concert with BCMS. She's retiring from the oboe. So it was a bittersweet moment for us all.

MT: She's hanging up the oboe?

RR: It's surprising to me too, because she still sounds fantastic. It's always a joy to play with her. She's always so incredibly prepared, and knows exactly what to say to bring the group to the next level. She has a sense of humor about everything. And also a sense of purpose. So I'll really miss her.

MT: Chamber music ensembles really are a family.



RR: They are. I've been in two chamber groups as well — the Daedalus Quartet and the Horszowski Trio. And there is a family element to both of those groups, because in the quartet, the two violinists were siblings and we actually grew up in the same town. And in the trio, the violinist and the pianist were married. I felt like I was in their family too.

MT: I want to ask you about your your teaching. Specifically how you prepare your students for life after conservatory.

RR: That's difficult, and I guess that's why I'm happy to be teaching here at Bard where they're all required to do a double degree. So they have a bachelor's degree in something that is not music. And if music doesn't work out for them for whatever reason, they have something else that they can do.

A lot of the students are more interested in their other degree. But I would say a little more than half try the music route to varying degrees of success.

As I work with them I get a sense as to whether they have that fire or whether they don't. And I try to encourage them in the appropriate direction based on that. Of course I would never tell them that they shouldn't pursue music if that's what they love. No matter if they are a little behind when they arrive here.

I was behind myself, and still consider myself a late bloomer at music, in part because I didn't go to conservatory for undergrad. I was not on the fast track in middle school or high school, in terms of preparation, especially technically. So even if a student is a little behind, but they have a spark, then I would never be the one to tell them they shouldn't do it.

I try to give them encouragement and tools, and guide them to summer festivals where they can play and make connections. So much of it is about connections — finding the people that you connect with and who like you. People you can form a group with and will hire you for something, like Diana Cohen has been nice enough to hire me for ChamberFest. It's important to realize that the people you connect with are going to be with you for the rest of your life.

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