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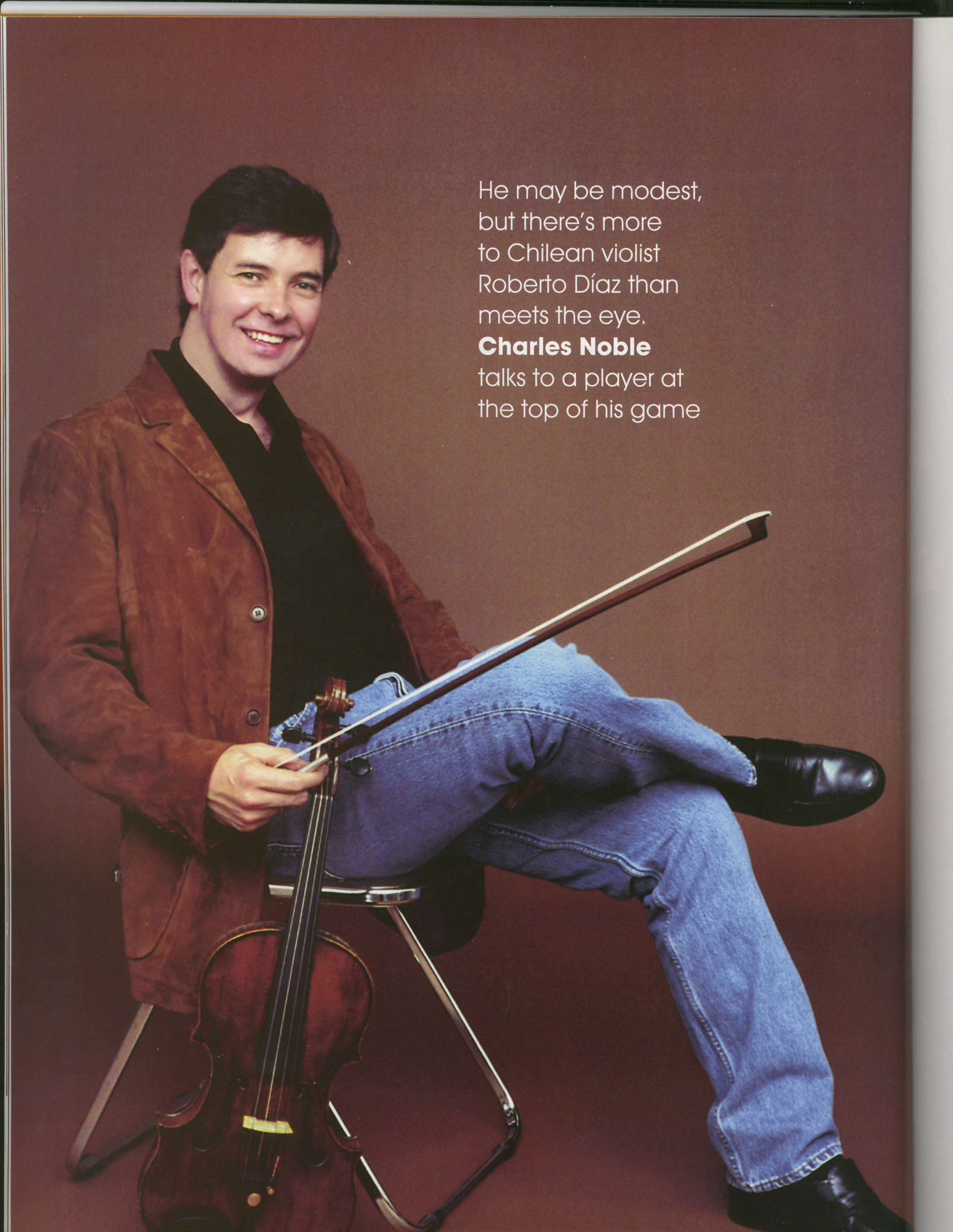
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He may be modest,
but there's more
to Chilean violist
Roberto Díaz than
meets the eye.

Charles Noble
talks to a player at
the top of his game

Dark horse

Roberto Díaz has a surprisingly low profile. Despite being the principal violist of one of the great orchestras of the world, a concert soloist and a highly respected teacher and chamber musician, his name is not often mentioned among the greats of the viola world. On meeting him, the immediate impression is of a reserved, polite person, but conversations with him reveal an inner warmth and passion for life. His playing, similarly, can be spare and austere, but is just as often rich, dark-hued and charged with a unique intensity.

As a child growing up in Chile, Roberto and his three siblings were required to have at least a basic musical education. His father was a distinguished violist who had studied with Primrose, and gave the Chilean premieres of the Bartók and Walton concertos and Hindemith's *Der Schwanendreher*. In the early days of being taught by his father, however, Díaz acknowledges that he was a less than an ideal pupil. 'Soccer was my predominant occupation,' he says. 'The violin was not a great interest of mine.' In the early 70s, though, when his family moved from Chile to Atlanta, Georgia, Díaz began to make real progress after switching from the violin to the viola on the advice of his father.

When he was old enough, he moved from Atlanta to attend the

New England Conservatory (NEC) in Boston, and then to Philadelphia and the Curtis Institute. His conservatory studies were to be dominated by two teachers, each with a very different teaching style and temperament. At the NEC, he was taught by Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO) principal violist Burton Fine, and at Curtis by Joseph de Pasquale of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Fine was meticulous, acerbic and demanding, while de Pasquale was more flamboyant, placing an emphasis on virtuosity and showmanship. Díaz credits these differing teaching and playing styles with helping him to grow as a player. 'Having worked with both Joe and Burton was great – the combination of their respective approaches really worked in developing my playing. Burton made me a more organised, meticulous and critical thinker. Joe gave me a big stage presence, an 'attitude' about how to present myself.'

During his second year at Curtis, Díaz won a position in the viola section of the Minnesota Orchestra. After barely a season in Minnesota, though, he returned to Boston to join the BSO. His time spent here would be critical to his future success. Not only did he found the Díaz Trio, with whom he still plays, but it was during this time that he became involved with one of the

principal figures of his musical life: the great violinist Louis Krasner, for whom the Berg and Schoenberg violin concertos were written. 'Krasner was an amazing influence, an amazing person,' he says. During the course of his five years with the BSO Roberto studied with Krasner on average once a month. The lessons were nothing short of revelatory for the young professional violist. 'They were unlike anything I'd had before,' Díaz explains. 'Some of the hardest facts to face were the questions that Krasner would raise in those lessons. He would say "Why are you doing it this way?" or "You play the viola as well as people are able to play the viola, but after five minutes I know what you're going to do, and frankly I'd rather go home and watch television." What do you do when you are faced with that?'

Lessons with Krasner gradually raised his musical perception to the level of his technical accomplishment, elements that Krasner saw as going hand-in-hand. It is a philosophy that Díaz uses in his teaching and performing today: 'If you understand how a piece is written, the implications of how it is put together, why things happen, it makes a huge difference in how you approach it technically. The impact of a phrase, knowing when you can take time and when you ▶



ABOVE on stage with his wife, violinist Elissa Lee Koljonen

BELOW with Isaac Stern in New York. Díaz describes playing with Stern at the Mostly Mozart Festival in 1991 as one of the highlights of his career

BOTTOM with the Díaz Trio – 'There's a certain *tres amigos* factor to it,' he says. 'We have way too much fun.'

cannot – it affects what fingerings and bowings you can use.'

As his work with Krasner progressed, Díaz began to enter a number of international competitions, winning prizes at the Naumberg, Munich and Washington international competitions. 'I didn't come out with the top prize every time, but there was much to learn from the experience.' He entered the 1991 Naumberg competition shortly after beginning his work with Krasner. Even with a strong third place finish there



was still much work to be done. 'I remember after the Naumberg finals, Bobby Mann came up to me and asked "Hasn't anyone said anything to you about *music*?" It was hard to hear, but it certainly made my work with Krasner more urgent.' Another third prize at the Munich competition brought a new point home: the need for a better instrument. 'I talked with Kim Kashkashian after the final round, and she said that my instrument just killed me.' After his experience in Munich, he began his quest to acquire a fine instrument, which culminated in his purchase of a 1743 Carlo Antonio Landolfi in 1989. 'Going from a \$2,500 factory instrument to the Landolfi opened new possibilities in every area,' says Díaz. 'Sound, projection, colours – it was a totally new world for me.'

After five years with the BSO, Díaz won the job of principal viola of the National Symphony in Washington DC. The music director there was Mstislav Rostropovich, who Díaz describes as being 'like a tornado, a force of nature. We played some concerts where it was like he was possessed. It was never refined, but it was making music in some of the most primitive ways, so brutal, complete devastation. Shostakovich symphonies, Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* – some of those performances, they still raise goose bumps on me to this day. It was power, a natural force that I'd never felt from a conductor before.'

Teaching has always been a major part of Díaz's career. He has served on the faculties of the Boston Conservatory, University of Maryland, Peabody Conservatory and Rice University. Since joining the Philadelphia Orchestra he has joined the faculty at the Curtis Institute. He places great importance on the relevance of teaching for a performing musician. 'I think that there's a responsibility to teach, to keep the art form alive. Somebody has to take over where you leave off. It's a big challenge, a big responsibility and at the same time it's fantastic. It takes a certain commitment, but it's also very exciting.'

When asked about his career highlights so far, Díaz cites performing the Krzysztof Penderecki Concerto with Penderecki himself conducting, playing chamber music with Isaac Stern at the Mostly Mozart Festival in New York, performing with the Díaz Trio at the invitation of Stern at the 100th anniversary celebration of Carnegie Hall, and a 'terrifying' recital of Primrose transcriptions for the opening of the new Primrose Viola Archive at Brigham Young University in 2002, when he was faced with performing a whole set of virtuoso showpieces that were completely new to him. His recitals and concerto appearances continue to take him in new directions. He performs a major concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra each season, and has already performed all the standard works for viola and orchestra: the concertos by Bartók and Walton, Hindemith's *Der Schwanendreher*, and Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*.

His Philadelphia premieres have included the concertos of Miklós Rosza and Jacob Druckman as well as the Penderecki Concerto, and there are more planned for future seasons. He hopes to perform the concertos of Rodion Shchedrin and Edison Denisov. He is to premiere the Double Concerto for violin and viola by Roberto Sierra ▶

with violinist Andrés Cardenes, the concertmaster of the Pittsburgh Symphony, with both the Pittsburgh Symphony and the Philadelphia Orchestra. One of the most interesting works in rehearsal is the Double Concerto for viola and cello by David Teie – a cellist with the National Symphony – which Díaz describes as ‘very accessible; it’s high energy, very lyrical and Romantic.’ In addition, plans are underway for extensive concertising in Europe, where he hopes to find a wider audience for these lesser-known works.

Díaz’s solo commitments with the Philadelphia Orchestra take up only a week of his year, however: the majority of his time is spent within the orchestra’s viola section. He has high praise for his fellow players. ‘I think that the Philly viola section might just be the single best orches-

do it for the fun of it’ says Díaz, ‘and at the same time we get to play literature that people don’t get to hear all that much. The Beethoven trios are incredible, the Hindemith trios are fantastic; and of course, there are the great trios of Schnittke and Schoenberg. Audiences hear the quartets by these composers many times over, but not the trios.’ They are in the final stages of producing a recording that will include both traditional repertoire and some lesser-known works: the Irving Fine Trio, the Dohnanyi Serenade, the Beethoven Trio in G major op.9 no.1 and the Penderecki Trio. Plans are also underway to record the two trios of Paul Hindemith, coupled with the Hindemith Duo for viola and cello. The 2003–4 season will also see them perform the world premiere of a new trio by Gunther Schuller in Boston.

WE PLAY JUST AT THE EDGE OF ‘TOO MUCH’ – IT’S WHAT HOLDS THE ORCHESTRA TOGETHER

tral section in the world,’ he says. ‘Violists from this orchestra are going all over the world playing and touring. The depth of talent in the section is phenomenal.’ He says that the Philadelphia violas contribute much to the orchestra’s fabled string sound. ‘[We don’t] hide in the background. We play just at the edge of ‘too much’ – it’s what holds the orchestra together. With the great string quartets – with Larry Dutton or Michael Tree – you hear the viola all the time. You have to, or there’s something missing.’

In addition to his orchestral and solo work, he takes great pleasure in his work with the Díaz Trio. The trio’s current roster includes Roberto’s cellist brother Andrés and violinist Andrés Cardenes. ‘There’s a certain *tres amigos* factor to it – we have way too much fun!’ says Díaz. The trio spends about two months together each year, mostly during the summer owing to the three very busy schedules of its members. ‘We

Díaz’s two principal instruments are both exceptional. His 1739 viola by the Mantuan maker Camillo Camilli (profiled on p.36) is a remarkable instrument with a rich sound and laser-like projection that is ideal for concerto work. This viola can be heard on his recording of the Jacob Druckman Viola Concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Wolfgang Sawallisch on New World Records, and in a CD of works by Henri Vieuxtemps with pianist Robert Koenig on Naxos. Díaz also regularly plays on a very fine copy of his Camilli viola, commissioned from luthier Gabriella Kundert of Olney, Maryland. His second principal instrument, acquired in early 2002, is equally extraordinary – the 1595 brothers Amati viola, formerly owned by William Primrose. After several months of extensive restoration work, the instrument has been reborn in stunning condition. In spite of



LEFT AND ABOVE
Díaz performs a major concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra each season

its size (15 5/8") it has an enormously rich C string and incredible projection – it seems to defy logic that such a small instrument can sound so strong. Having played it myself and listened to it being played by Díaz at Verizon Hall, I can say unequivocally that this is one of the great instruments in existence today.

With such a busy schedule, Díaz looks on his family life as a stabilising influence. He was married in 1997 to the concert violinist Elissa Lee Koljonen, and in spring 2002 the couple had a daughter, Sofia. Rather than making his life more complicated, Díaz finds that his family helps him to put his career into perspective. ‘When you’re nervous about something coming up, you think to yourself – in the larger scheme of things, how important is this in relation to Elissa and Sofia. You know you can go home and someone is waiting for you with a huge smile.’ ■