

Double Acts

Inside views on relationships in the string world

The Vertavo Quartet cellist and her pianist husband reveal how they juggle international performing careers and family life

BJØRG LEWIS

THE FIRST TIME I SAW PAUL was in Trondheim back in 2003. Ralph Kirshbaum was there and wanted to introduce me to this pianist called Paul Lewis. He looked so serious and mysterious – he's got this messy hair and thick eyebrows and he was sitting in a dark corner. He's still quite serious now, but he's got a really good sense of humour. We met there, and then met again later on in the autumn, and then I moved to the UK at Christmas time.

WHEN WE ARE BOTH AT HOME we really make the most of it. It's something we can never take for granted. We have to make the most of every opportunity, so we might go out more than most couples do. We like talking to each other, and Paul is particularly good at knowing when something needs to be talked about.

I don't know if Paul knows it, but people will tell him things in confidence – he's that kind of person. He's a good listener, and he makes people open up. He's very supportive.

I ENJOY SEEING PAUL PERFORMING, but I also worry for him. When he comes on stage, I know whether he's stressed or happy. If I sense that he's not happy, I can feel myself getting stressed. Paul expects the worst at every single concert – he thinks it's going to be an absolute nightmare. He'll say, 'I'm in terrible shape – it's horrible.' I get really worried before the concert, but when he starts playing I can see he's in his element.

HE'S VERY SUPPORTIVE about my performances. Every time I've played at the Wigmore Hall, for example, Paul has been there. He knows how much it means for me to be able to work, because he feels the same way about his work, and he probably knows that it's not only that I want to be a musician, but that like many musicians I need to play to feel sane.

THERE'S NOTHING PAUL WON'T DO around the house. He's much tidier than me. I try to keep things tidy, and I think, oh, that looks good, but then Paul starts cleaning and it's another dimension!

AFTER WE HAD OUR THIRD CHILD, we said that was probably as much as we could cope with, and the year after I joked that we should make something musical instead! That's how our festival came about. It's fun planning the repertoire – we discuss it together and we toss it back and forth a bit. It's a little dream we can have together.

PAUL LEWIS

BJØRG AND I FIRST MET at the Trondheim chamber music festival, where we were both on the jury for the piano trio competition. I felt attracted to her straight away, and she seemed like a very intelligent, perceptive musician from the discussions we had. Of course, once I heard her play I knew she was a great cellist. After that, we spoke a lot on the phone, and we decided we should meet up – and that was that!

THERE ARE PERIODS WHEN we don't see much of each other. I like to take a big chunk of time off over December and January, but for most of January Bjørg was travelling, and when she began spending more time at home this year, that's when I started travelling. As long as you keep thinking of ways to make the most of the time

you do have together, though, it works out fine.

WE ALWAYS DISCUSS OUR PERFORMANCES. I've never felt I've had to be careful about what I say to Bjørg – I think we both feel able to be quite honest. But I've never felt critical towards anything she's done – the thing is, I'm a failed cellist! That was actually my first instrument, but I was terrible at it. So from my perspective it's just great to hear her play.

WE HAVEN'T PLAYED TOGETHER A LOT, but when we do it goes very smoothly. In October last year, we

played Schubert's Arpeggione Sonata in a fundraising concert for the local school. I knew Bjørg hadn't played the piece for years, and because it's notoriously difficult for the cello, she was very worried about it. But I just knew it would be great. I think for her it was quite a lot of stress, but for me it was just pure enjoyment.

OUR TWO GIRLS, who are five and six, have recently started learning violin and cello, and we try to stay involved with their music education. We never push them to do it – it's their choice. But we both practise with them. Of course, they know what we do and they're curious about it, and they've been to concerts by both of us already. It's great fun to have them there. They get very excited, but in a sense that's just what we do, so there's nothing unusual about it as far as they're concerned.

INTERVIEWS BY DAVID KETTLE

Bjørg and Paul Lewis are artistic directors of the Midsummer Music Festival in Latimer, Buckinghamshire, UK, which takes place 10–12 June



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PAUL LEWIS