SPEAK, MEMORY

Conversations have formed the backbone of The Strad since its inception. DAVID KETTLE combs the archives to learn how the style, tone and spirit of communication have changed through the decades

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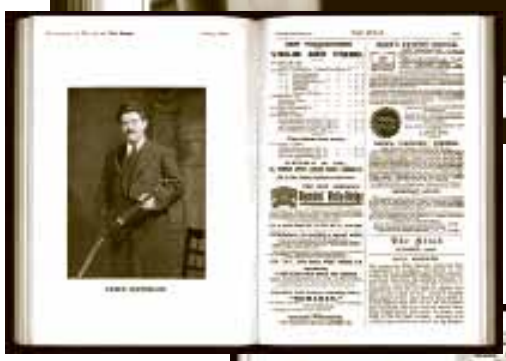


Isaac Stern aired his views about pushy parents in November 1985

Fritz Kreisler was considered an 'idealist' in a 1908 issue

'The development of the forehead is striking': a 1907 author's opinion of Leopold Auer

THROUGHOUT ITS 122-YEAR HISTORY, *The Strad* has talked to renowned figures from the string world. The process of tracking the evolution of conversations in the magazine throws up some charming period details, not to mention what we might now consider to be questionable attitudes (if not downright hilarious ones). There's also the more serious issue of how the magazine has moved from being a sometimes harsh judge to a facilitator of communication.

But let's start at the beginning. Direct conversations were entirely lacking from some early issues of *The Strad* – or, more correctly, it's often clear that a conversation has taken place, but we don't get to hear directly from the person involved. Take this report on Scottish maker William Nisbet from October 1897: ▷

A question at the door elicited the fact that the luthier was in his workshop. He soon appeared, and hearing that I was interested in fiddles, conducted me within his house and unfastening a glass cabinet produced a couple of violins for me to see. There was at first sight nothing very remarkable about them. They appeared to be good, well built fiddles; but Mr Nisbet drew my attention to the fact that, while adhering in general to the Nicholas Amati model, he had made one notable divergence. Believing that… the tone will depend very largely on the construction and form of the upper table, he was led to try the effect of increasing the area of this important constituent.

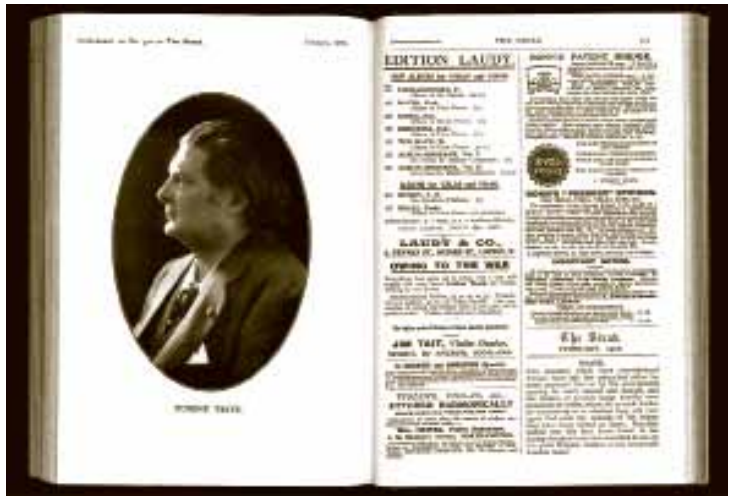
Why don't we hear from the man himself? It's a general trend in these early issues to filter interviewees' words through the voice of the magazine, almost as if afraid to report them directly. In a profile of Leopold Auer from July 1907, this brief description of the musician is the only indication that the writer even met him:

At a first glance one might easily conceive the great violinist to be a successful business man. In person he is of medium height, somewhat stout, and totally bereft of any of the outward signs of a musician as far as long hair or peculiarities of dress are concerned. The development of the forehead is striking, indicating not only his musical gifts, but also great powers of sympathy and observation. Under a somewhat brusque exterior reigns the greatest kindness of heart, and he also possesses a strong sense of humour – gift from the gods!

Much of the remainder is taken up with the author's own reminiscences of Auer's career, and opinions on his playing style. The general format even gives the journalist freedom to comment on their subject's own words, as in this interview with Fritz Kreisler from October 1908:

Mr. Kreisler's views on art are those of an idealist, and he believes that an artist should not be compelled to play when he feels that he cannot do himself justice, and that he is not in a position to give of his best when he is continually strung up by travelling, rehearsing, and playing (as it were) to order.

Two men with strong opinions to discuss: Mstislav Rostropovich meets Isaac Stern



In February 1916 Eugène Ysaÿe gave a poignant account of his flight from Belgium

Instead of hearing what Kreisler said, we get the judgement of the writer. Sometimes there's criticism in these judgements; at other times, the writer is clearly in awe. Would readers today really stomach a description such as this one of the eminent violinist and teacher Adolph Brodsky from January 1913?

I will not attempt to describe my feelings as for the first time I grasped the warm hand of him whom I have so long worshipped at a distance. I could honestly rhapsodize, but I will restrain myself, convinced that there is no man living who would appreciate it less than the subject of this essay. Dr. Brodsky is a fit subject for rhapsody… Suffice it to say that I should not have considered it a greater honour to shake hands with any European monarch.

It must sometimes have been frustrating, though, for writers in *The Strad*'s early years when having conversations with their subjects. Many admit that their interviewees were reluctant to divulge anything (surely a far cry from today's media-savvy string stars). And even when they did enter into a conversation, many interviewees were far too modest for their own good. Violinist Albert Spalding in January 1907 is just one example of many:

"Tell me a little about yourself," I say as we settle down for a chat. "Well, I don't know what to tell you that is of any interest to the public."

Fortunately, Spalding does go on to speak about his achievements. Other soloists from the period appear more communicative – a profile of violinist Irma Saenger-Sethe from May 1901 gives a rare early instance of a writer allowing an interviewee to speak for herself (even if he seems rather overly aware of his interviewee's female sensitivities by today's standards):

Over a cup of tea dear to the feminine soul I reminded my victim that this was merely a renewal of acquaintanceship, as I remembered her as a mere child carrying off honours at the Brussels Conservatoire.

"You need not mind telling me your age," I remarked, enquiring whether Brussels was her native town, and receiving an answer in the affirmative.

"No, I do not mind," replied Frau Saenger Sethe. "I was born in 1867 on April 28th."

Yet although the magazine was prone to offering judgements, there are still times when conversations yielded revealing insights or personal revelations. Eugène Ysaÿe gave a poignant account of his flight from First World War Belgium in a conversation in February 1916:

"When war was declared I was making my customary stay at some German Baths not far from Aix-la-Chapelle. Though it seemed incredible, I thought it best to return. My wife was at Knocke, superintending the arrangements of a villa we had bought there, but of course we had no idea then of the German invasion. Slowly, but surely, it came to us that Belgium must be overrun. The enemy was at the gates. We packed up some of our most needed possessions and left Brussels for Ostend. When we arrived there the place was in a state of chaos, there were no boats and no food was obtainable. At last I managed to get the owner of a fishing boat to convey us to Dunquerque for the sum of 150 frcs (£6), but we had to leave all our luggage behind us."

Ysaÿe's tale continues for several more paragraphs, describing a frantic crossing to England and the kindness he found when he arrived. Clearly the conversation was open and frank – something quite unusual in early issues. Similarly, violinist Marie Hall is surprisingly forthcoming in an interview from May 1910, revealing more than many of today's players would about what she gets paid:

"Is it indiscreet to ask if the rumours of the enormous fees guaranteed you have any foundation?"

"I believe the fact that I am to receive a large sum is no secret, so I can do no more than state that it is so."

The jobbing hack doing the interview has to be applauded for even asking the question. Later in the same conversation, Hall offers practical advice on playing and performance:

"A tired brain never produces any good results, and I am no believer in over work, but whatever hours of practice are fixed upon as suitable to the age and strength of the pupil, they should be carried out each day with great regularity. It is fatal to practise several hours one day and then not touch the violin for two or three days."

There's a sudden change from 'Tell me about yourself,' to 'What do you think about this?'

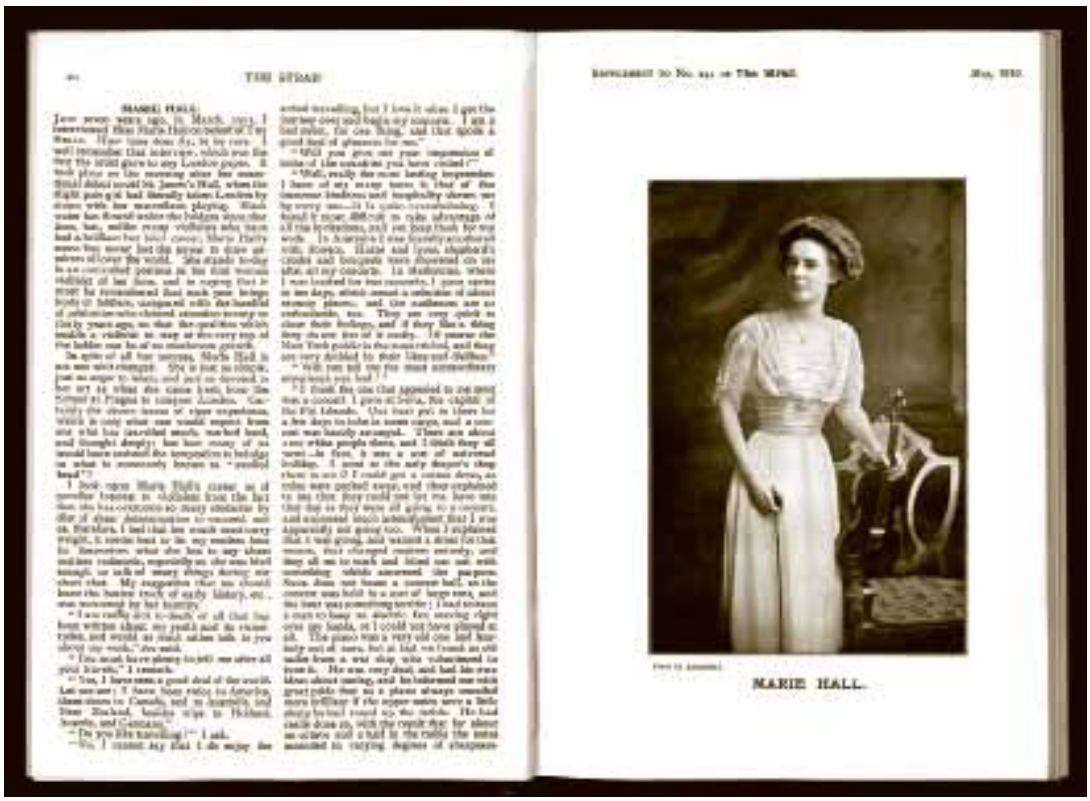
It's not the first example, but it's indicative of a trend for important voices in the string world offering readers practical advice, and that has continued right up until the present day.

Later issues are marked out by far more probing, revealing conversations. Suddenly there's a change from 'Tell me about yourself,' to 'What do you think about this?' Take this example from an interview with Henri Temianka in April 1935:

"You treat the moderns, for a violinist, very generously. You have the temerity to introduce their works to concertgoers, many of whom… fail to understand or in any way enjoy the modern idiom in music. Is this all for the sake of novelty?"

"It is an insult to the intelligent concertgoer, making him swallow these selfsame things a hundred times in the course of a season. That the pieces mentioned are among the greatest ▹

Marie Hall candidly answered questions about her fees in May 1910



LAFAYETTE


Interview with Temianka.

In an April 1935 interview Henri Temianka championed modern music

compositions ever written, is silently agreed. But there are thousands of modern works which must be performed at least once in order to be judged."

Moving forward to May 1959, Mstislav Rostropovich reveals some strong opinions in his conversation:

> When asked what in his estimation are the most important factors for a young cellist to cultivate he promptly answered "Talent". He went on to amplify this, speaking very thoughtfully. "This talent must always be backed by good taste. I always tell my pupils that fine taste is essential in order to achieve the best possible results with the talent… No-one who has not enough talent should lower the standard of cello playing by giving concerts because they enjoy performing to an audience and can afford to hire a hall. Only those worthy of being true artists should play music in public".

A profile of David McCallum, then concertmaster of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, provides another example of the magazine's fledgling conversational style in March 1961, although how today's readers might react to local accents being transcribed is another question:

> He does not teach, nor does he practise much ("Ah'll ad-meet Ah never was a gr-reat practicer but Ah play a lot").
>
> One of his first loyalties is to Paul Beard, whose successor he became. "Ah was," he confessed, "embarrassed by his effeeciency."
>
> McCallum's attitude to the question of women in orchestras, deserves to go on record. "Ah've thocht about it a lot. Ah've nothing against them personally but I put this same question to Sir Thomas, and he said, 'They're more of a liabeelity than an as-set.'"

More recently, though, personality has become everything. Conversations are honest, open and direct, and the interviewees' characters shine through. An interview with Kronos Quartet leader David Harrington in March 1988 vividly captures the energy in his voice as he describes how second violinist John Sherba joined the group:

> 'I'll never forget the absolute moment it happened. My wife had just given birth to our son. She was taking a bath – this was about ten o'clock at night. I was on the phone talking to this cellist from Milwaukee. My wife – she's this real intuitive type of person – she's Irish. She yelled out from the bathtub: "Ask this guy if he knows a violinist." I would never have thought of doing that. He said: "Oh yeah, I know this great guy who loves playing quartets." I said, "Have him give me a call." So ten minutes later John calls up, and we get into a talk. It was clear over the phone that he was a real interesting person.'

Interviewees also seem more relaxed about expressing their opinions. We're a long way from the earliest issues' rather facile questions when a figure like Isaac Stern gives vent to his feelings in a tirade like this from November 1985:

> 'I have a feeling that many parents look upon stage renown as a meal ticket. One really needs a school for parents and teachers – the kids are marvellous, full of possibilities, eager to learn and want to have a chance; but the parents and teachers always weigh them down with their own baggage of broken hopes and starry visions that have nothing to do with reality.'

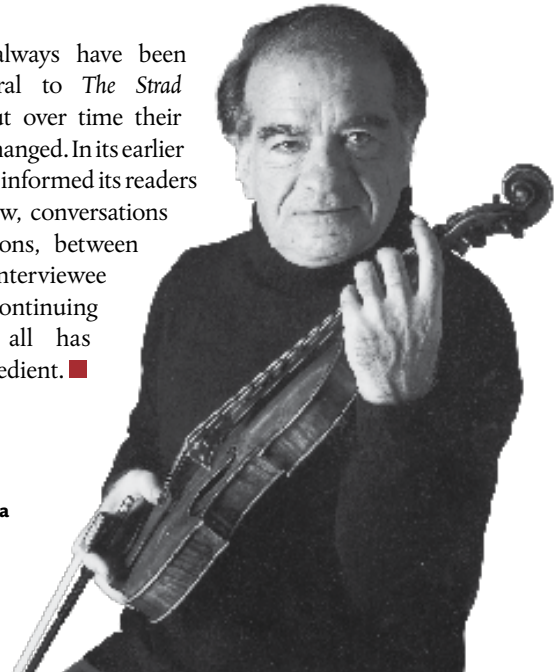
There's a challenging frankness to the conversation here: it's not Stern talking to readers as such, but using the magazine as a platform to speak his mind. And it's just one of many similar examples.

It's not just the content of conversations that suddenly changes, but also the way they're presented. Interviews are often left in a bald question-and-answer format, so that the interviewee is unburdened by comment from the writer. In recent times, regular articles such as Double Acts and My Favourite Things have dispensed with the questions entirely, lending an immediacy that suggests the conversation is happening between the subject and the reader.

And the furthest point in the evolution of the magazine's conversational style is surely when readers get the chance to interact with the interviewees themselves. This happened with Ruggiero Ricci in December 2008, when readers were invited to send in questions for the 90-year-old musician to answer, giving rise to such poignant revelations as this:

> How do you stay motivated to play the violin after nearly 90 years of playing?
>
> *Sarah W., from Illinois, US*
>
> I had a hard childhood and the violin was my salvation. I was always motivated to play until it became painful to play. I'm 90 years old now, and I'm not motivated to play the violin. My body hates the violin, although my interest in it hasn't waned. I still love to teach.

Conversations always have been and remain central to *The Strad* and its readers, but over time their perspectives have changed. In its earlier years, the magazine informed its readers of its opinions. Now, conversations flow in all directions, between magazine, writer, interviewee and reader, and continuing discussion from all has become a vital ingredient. ■



Ruggiero Ricci faced a grilling from readers in December 2008