

Najpiękniejszy Wieniawski

By

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## I

My four stringed box sits in a graveyard. Covered with dust, it is slowly fading from my memory. It sits and rots, with a bridge too small for termites to bother with, mounted at the body of the luthier's creation. The bleached horse hair, stretched and bound, used to bring resonance and violent vibratos to concertos. Countless times my strings snapped. The bridge still bears the grooves of days spent solely on arpeggios. Slowly, the cracks grew and finger oils corroded the wood from the hours I spent solely on Wieniawski. Whose minor romances are for those virtuosos with nothing against raw fingers and lockjaw. But when it's your fingers locking and your raw jaw bones, you wonder what inspires this degree of blind dedication.

Now the sound has ceased, and the wood has grown dusty. The luthier's craft is no longer employed. It now shares space with knick knacks. I spent months with its wood against my cheek. I spent years wearing down the chin rest to fit my jaw. Yet the rare moments when neither of us existed individually made the loss of sixteen years seem unimportant. I spent sixteen years with this four-stringed box. We were trapped between four walls with only the lines of chords, bowings, and accents to muse upon. The death of this fine ebony, and the lack of variation, has left me between these four walls with nothing to muse upon.

It was quite fitting that my last performance of Poland's greatest violinist would happen in a secluded garden to an audience of one on the outskirts of Gliwice. Playing Wieniawski's concerto in D minor was sixteen years in the making. From "Twinkle Twinkle " at age four, to Bach at six, then my first concerto at nine, Bartok at thirteen, joining the symphony at fifteen, and then at eighteen, Dystonia. My sixteen years as a violinist ended so abruptly, so simply, and so quietly. It was as if the death of my four stringed box didn't come from cracks in the wood, old strings, or even a loss of passion. Rather it was this simple muscle disorder, this Dystonia that caused my left hand and no other part of my body to shake and writhe whenever I attempted to place my fingers on the strings. Although I'd lost control of four little appendages, I hadn't lost connection to his sound, his culture, and his alcoholism. Playing his greatest piece was not like playing the works of the Russians, Romanians, Hungarians, or anyone else. I had Wieniawski's spirit on my shoulder every time I picked up that four string box, while my mother's disciplinary practice habits hung on the other. Eventually she disappeared and Wieniawski stood on both, guiding me through his D minor masterpiece. He slowly guided me to a useless left hand and left me with me, my four stringed box, and my uncle's garden.

"Zagrai dla mnie ten concert Wieniawski," my uncle would say. Every time he asked I would play and play again. I'd play as he smoked Phillip Morris Specials in the pew of his childhood church now abandoned and in ruins. I'd play as he sipped his Zubrowka Vodka, as the music of Poland took his mind outside of his poverty. "Zagrai dla mnie Preludium Bach." Smiling. I'd whip through the arpeggios of the allegro as my uncle Marian conducted our invisible symphony. (The acoustics within an abandoned church are not nearly as magnificent as the beautiful realization that the tourists would never find our concert hall.)

We were free in this church that only God himself would notice. Free for now. Free from my trembling hand. Free from a reality without Wieniawski.

The doctors at St Francis Hospital in La Crosse asked me if I could play left-handed violin.

“Czy oni żartują?” My mother laughed in the scanning room, thinking to herself that they must be joking.

“Nie mama,” I had already known what they would say. Playing the violin left-handed is not like shaking someone's hand left-handed. It's something you just cannot do. Hendrix played guitar left-handed because he was left-handed. You cannot just learn the intricacies of the violin left handed. You cannot just politely ask the two sides of your mind to flip-flop. Again, Wieniawski haunted my mind and mocked the inadequacies of my physicality. I guess the expression of being born to do something is true. But the thing that they don't tell you is sixteen years later it can disappear. I can't just do something else. I can't just live the American dream of prosperity and relaxation. I need the violin. I need to torture my mind with ridiculously complex finger movements that really don't matter in the grand scheme of things. I can't just enjoy the luxuries of mediocrity in front of a television while all that I have rots until I wilt like the plants in my uncle's garden in winter. Playing Wieniawski in Poland will always suck me dry, it will always haunt me as I sit between these four walls with nothing to muse upon, watching my fingers twitch.

My uncle and I left Gliwice in a cab with Zubrowka Vodka, Warka beer, and enough Phillip Morris Specials to last until the morning. This was my uncle's life in the summer, when he had time off from teaching Polish History and Literature. We walked the three kilometers to his garden plot and sat outside of the shack he slept in after his divorce, his place of solitude. Kilometers of different garden plots surrounded the city, filled with every vegetable, flower, and fruit imaginable. The chairs were nothing more than piles of compost with tattered blankets strewn across. The radio's speaker resembled a slightly larger version of a headphone. We had six eggs, an onion, and half a loaf of rye for breakfast. We were happy. Who wouldn't be with Zubrowka? If you weren't, you would be; unless your fingers happen to not listen to your brain anymore. Unless all you really have left is a beautiful memory of a garden that now seems overgrown with decrepit weeds.

From St Francis in La Crosse, they sent me to Mayo Healthcare in Rochester, saying doctors at Mayo have dealt with this sort of "disorder" before. I had the pleasure of an hour drive, followed by an hour wait, and the joy of feeling pathetic in front of a room full of doctors. Doctors with sensors all over my arms who I knew were silently mocking my attempt to play the opening theme of Wieniawski. Doctors who told me what I already knew. Young doctors, fresh out of medical school, using the terminology they had probably just memorized for their last exams to explain why the fuck my fingers wouldn't stop having spasms.

"Well, it appears the muscles in your left hand have developed a secondary involuntary function, which is causing the Dystonia." It wasn't a mystery. I could care less what they called it. I just didn't want to look at my hand, and watch it move as my brain screamed at it to stop. It was simple, yet all that these doctors could offer me was Botox injections in my fingers.

"Temporary but effective," they said to me.

"Come back every six months and we'll replenish the Botox if you want to go that route, but it might produce complications, you could lose all muscle movement in your hand." That route? It never really worked for Joan Rivers.

We drove back to La Crosse. The hope that this was temporary had worn off. I stared at the bluffs and then the river, contemplating if it would be easier to drown in the Mississippi, or jump off any of the sandstone cliffs. I didn't, but in retrospect, it might have been easier than going back to Oshkosh and sitting second chair in the first violin section. Next to Angelica who was our concertmaster, whose fingers didn't suffer from secondary involuntary functions. Meanwhile, I sat and twitched my way through Beethoven's fourth symphony and hoped these spasms would just disappear (actually, I was just pretending to play because if I actually applied enough pressure to the neck the violin would have

bounced out of my hand). This was pathetic. I could have played this in two days if it wasn't for these spasms. I felt like a drunk at a bar at eleven in the morning, telling stories of how they used to be, how they used to have it all, and now they have nothing. You shouldn't feel like this when you are too young to spend all of your social security on cheap pints and cigarettes. Yet like these fakes and liars, I responded no differently and let my mind enjoy Wieniawski in the garden.

My uncle laughed as the sun went down. He threw the first empty bottle of Zubrowka into the puny fire as he added another log.

"No to zagraj ten Wieniawski znowu. So I played again. He orchestrated as he had in the empty church, but now he was filled with a head full of vodka, and a body that conducted with the subtleties of slow motion. He sang along to the notes of the sublime theme. As the technical sections approached, his voice simply quivered in the depths of his throat as he attempted to keep up with the trills and runs of sixteenth notes. He did not hear the soft sounds of his garden; rather he heard the Warsaw Philharmonic in the background. He felt the struggle of Wieniawski as my four stringed box controlled his motions like the devil had done to Paganini's fingers. He felt the Romantic concertos struggle and imagined the orchestra that accompanied the sad, drunk, virtuoso. I saw this in my uncle. I understood that when he heard the three octave jump into the climactic resolution, where orchestra and violinist finally meet, he was no longer in his garden. He was somewhere in his mind that for once put a genuine smile upon his face, regardless of how much Zubrowka he had drunk.

I finished the allegro and he asked for the second movement; Wieniawski's famous "Romance." Halfway through his Warka, it was as if the slow sweeping vibratos inspired him to land up on a tree stump for the movement, and his writhing arms forced him to pull a stick from the dirt to conduct his invisible orchestra. I could tell that in his mind the audience was waiting to see what liberties he would take with his unseen symphony. He had them captivated. All eyes were on him as he writhed around blindly, standing on that stump. He had nothing to prove. Unlike the interpretational podium dancers who orchestrated symphonies made of more than vegetation. I will always prefer this orchestra of plants and this wild eyed conductor to the reality mind had temporarily allowed me to escape.

I asked to be moved to the back of the second violin section, but the conductor refused. She said it would be good for me to stay up front to face this problem. Thanks for the understanding I thought. You wave a baton around. Nobody watches the conductor anyway, especially when they have the emotions of a cold doctor. I stayed. I had no choice. I couldn't quit, I came here for the sole purpose of being able to study with Klara and all of her Hungarian forcefulness. This is what I was here for, if not this, I had nothing. I had to stay.

When others retreated to practice rooms to work on their concertos, I went to the most distant room and tried to play a note without a quiver. At first I spent more time outside smoking

cigarettes than actually trying to fix the problem. I was at a loss. I would watch my hand shake in the practice room's mirror while my reflection screamed in frustration. The young doctor said

play left handed (here's an idea, conduct surgery left-handed, let's see how that goes). It had to get better. I wanted to play fast again instantly. I wanted the presto now, I couldn't take going through years of patient practice again as I had for sixteen years. But I had no choice, disgusted by my own hand and depressed like my uncle, facing reality the way he did, a reality of memories with no hope of creating new ones.

My uncle stood motionless after the "Romance" and craved more.

"Szypszie Aleksandre, Szypszie!" So I played the presto faster. "Wiensai Stakaty!" so I cut the notes shorter and bounced my bow across the strings like a ball right before it rolls. His wiry hair was standing straight up. He had periodically been pulling on it like a madman underneath a light bulb. He sweated profusely and smoked, drank, and danced like a wild shaman awakening Wieniawski's spirit. I hit the three concluding three string chords as his arms shook with the feeling of the climax he had been anticipating. He applauded and yelled "pienkny! Naipienknieszy granie!" As if Carnegie hall was on their feet. But the plants just stood motionless, minus the slight breeze.

My uncle Marian raved on; "Zagrai Paganini, Zagrai preludium Bach, zagrai najpiękniejszy muzyk." I did. I played him whatever I could of the pieces I knew. I had not seen my uncle since I was 11. He had only read in my mother's letters about how my playing had been coming. He had always been a lover of classical literature and music, especially music. It's as if he was supposed to have been a violinist, but he could never afford a violin to learn. He had always waited and wanted to finally hear me play, and drank away the mistake of never learning Poland's greatest violinist's music for himself. I couldn't stop. I had to allow him to have his debut as a conductor. I had spent sixteen years getting to the point of playing pieces that reflected the equivalent of a breath of time in the musical world's existence. One piece of sand in an hourglass of my life of practice, practice, practice; while he spent every grain regretting, regretting, regretting. But although the hourglass had unexpectedly flipped due to this dystonia, this new burden, this new news at the doctor's office, I had at least made progress. I could not yet play Wieniawski again, but I was making progress.

## II

Three months later I played my first note. Sixteen years of violin, and all I had to show for it was the ability to play one note without my fingers practically knocking the violin from my

hands. I realized "Twinkle Twinkle " was my next step, but this was an even more saddening realization than being told to learn left handed. "Twinkle Twinkle," I remember learning this seven or eight note piece in twenty minutes before I could even reach the top of the counter. Now, I knew it would take more five AM S, more late nights, and more humiliation, knowing I was the only violinist in the orchestra who was forced to put on the tuxedo, stand and bow at the end of the piece, knowing I had not contributed whatsoever to the sound the first violins had emitted.

A few months later I had mastered "Twinkle Twinkle. I realized that achieving this same feat at age four had not meant nearly as much as it did now. In my mind, I was halfway there. If I could play "Twinkle Twinkle," I could surely play Wieniawski again. Not today, but eventually. First I would have to get higher than the first position on the violins neck. Soon, but not soon enough, I would reclaim the double stops of Wieniawski's daunting technical sections as I had in Poland years earlier, when I actually had something to be proud of. But as I progressed at home, the memory of Poland faded, but I could still hear my uncle's voice. "Ty grasz Wieniawski jak on sam by gral." I play how he played he says. But the image was fading.

Scales eventually came easily. Progress became more rapid than it had been in the first days against the spasm. Soon I ventured into second, third, and even fourth position. Fifth was tricky. Something about the strain of the wrist made my hand convulse like it had months ago, a sensation I was almost rid of, except for in fifth position. I moved my practice room back to the corner of the basement where all the violinists were. I finally changed the notch on my metronome from its lowest speed, to the second lowest speed. It was time to relearn the motions of my fingers, and forget about this supposedly incurable Dystonia. But for now, fifth position could wait. How easy it had once been to juxtapose my hand like a miniature gymnast for my uncle and his invisible symphony.

As the sun rose that morning, my uncle wanted the Romance movement again. I stared as I played this melancholy movement slower than last time. I had finished the fifth position climax, up to the point where the piece lays dormant, still, and calm for ten minutes, until an octave jump which took your fingers to astronomical heights on the neck. This was always difficult for me to do with hands slightly smaller than Rachmaninoff. yet larger than most. He didn't applaud this time, he just sat in reverie. From his fisherman's jacket, my uncle pulled a fresh bottle of

Zubrowka. The sun was now almost completely in the sky but it had felt as if we had just arrived. He poured me a polish shot; the equivalent of an American pint glass. "Nasdrowie," we said as we clinked our glasses together. We just sat and let the Zubrowka fade our bodies deeper into our compost chairs. I awoke on the linoleum of a practice room.

Approaching the allegro mark on the metronome, 65, I began relearning Bach's preludes. Anger flooded my memory when I realized that I wasn't really moving forwards. I was still a setback, I already knew these pieces in my mind, but the muscles in my fingers didn't remember. I should be happy, I'm in a much better place than I was a year ago. But it still wasn't good enough. It wasn't Wieniawski. I grew hungry with anticipation, the hunger to be who I had been. A hunger for perfection that had left me with the arrival of the Dystonia yet was now beginning to reappear. I was waking up from the haze of frustration it had created.

I awoke in my compost chair from the haze of the Zubrowka. We cooked the eggs and onion in a baking dish we had set on the coals of the dwindling fire. We now sat in silence and ate in the morning's sun. My uncle looked content. He looked as if something had changed within him. He had been part of the music he loved, he had become more than a listener of his passion. He had been right in the middle. I could give him this, and I was glad. I couldn't fix his divorce, I couldn't give him enough money to pay the ridiculous alimony my pathetic Aunt was asking for, I couldn't get him a passport to leave Poland to find work in the states, but I could give him Wieniawski. We would both always remember this night with the invisible symphony. Yet now Wieniawski, my uncle, and I were the same. The music was only a memory, but unlike the dead virtuoso, and my dreaming drunk of an uncle, I was close.

With the notch on my metronome almost at the presto mark, 102, I could once again play scales and arpeggios as if I had never fallen into this predicament. The problems of fifth position were long behind me. I didn't feel so worthless at orchestra rehearsals, and finally my teacher asked me what I wanted to play rather than pretending that learning "Twinkle Twinkle" had been

a valid endeavor for a violinist. "Wieniawski, Concerto in D minor," I told her without hesitation. She smiled and handed me the music, knowing I would ask for this piece. Soon I would be free from this, soon I would again, at full tempo, play the final chords of Wieniawski's concerto. Soon I would be back to the end where I had left off, and memories would no longer be all that my playing has become.

We started walking back towards the street, past the other garden plots. My uncle had lost his shirt somewhere in the madness of the night before. "I am free man, he proclaimed in his broken version of English as he danced to the sounds within his head. I couldn't help but laugh at the sight. He looked ridiculous to me. "Dobrze Wujek, Dobrze," Good, uncle, good, I said congratulating him on

his simple epiphany.

I became obsessed with relearning the Wieniawski concerto. I began skipping classes and practically living in the practice room with the exception of the few hours of sleep I got a night. I changed and re-changed the bowing and fingerings, trying to dissect the piece to the point where I could figure out exactly the way Wieniawski himself had played his own masterpiece

As my uncle accompanied me on the train to the Krakow Airport, we hardly spoke because I didn't want to leave, he didn't want me to leave, and we had been simultaneously wondering what it would be like if we just stayed in the garden, forgetting about the worries of home and the city altogether. "Ja bendem na La Crosse jak ja bendem mial pinionze." I knew he would try to visit La Crosse, but leaving Poland for the average guy is quite difficult. For most Poles you only earn enough money for food, and a little Vodka. For a Pole, you are happy with what you have, and if you get behind, you get it back.

The first time I finally played the first movement, after all the doctors, dystonia, and countless hours of these two lost years. I thought of my uncle, I knew he would like to

hear me play this piece again. But I knew I wouldn't. The semester was ending, and I realized I had been so obsessed with re-becoming who I was, that I had failed to realize that I didn't want to do this anymore. I had relearned Wieniawski, this was enough. I had lost the drive to play anything else, anything new. It was so sudden, but I could see clearly, and realized I didn't want to be a classical violinist anymore. I had missed this entire year. I had spent every moment in the basement practicing, or wandering the streets thinking about practicing. I had practically failed every class because all I cared about was getting back to where I once had been on the violin. I needed to leave Oshkosh for a while. I had to figure out what the fuck it was I wanted to do with myself. I booked a one way flight to San Diego that left the week after semester's end. As I packed, I looked at my violin, and all the music strewn across the floor. I left it behind. I had to. After carrying that piece of wood around for my entire conscious life, I had to see what it was like to be a stranger in a new place without Wieniawski.