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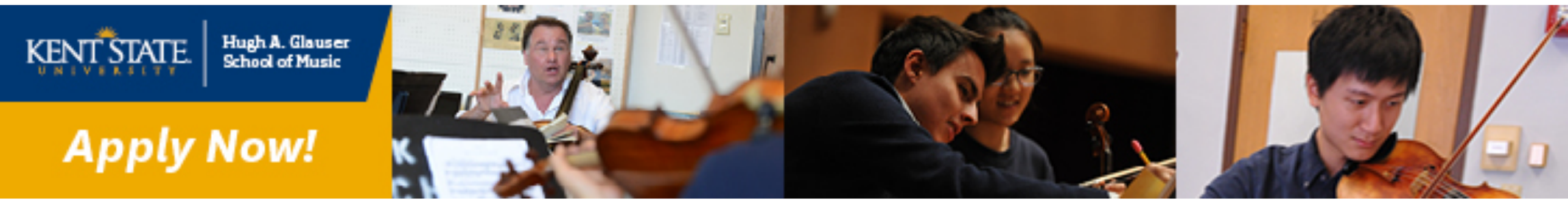

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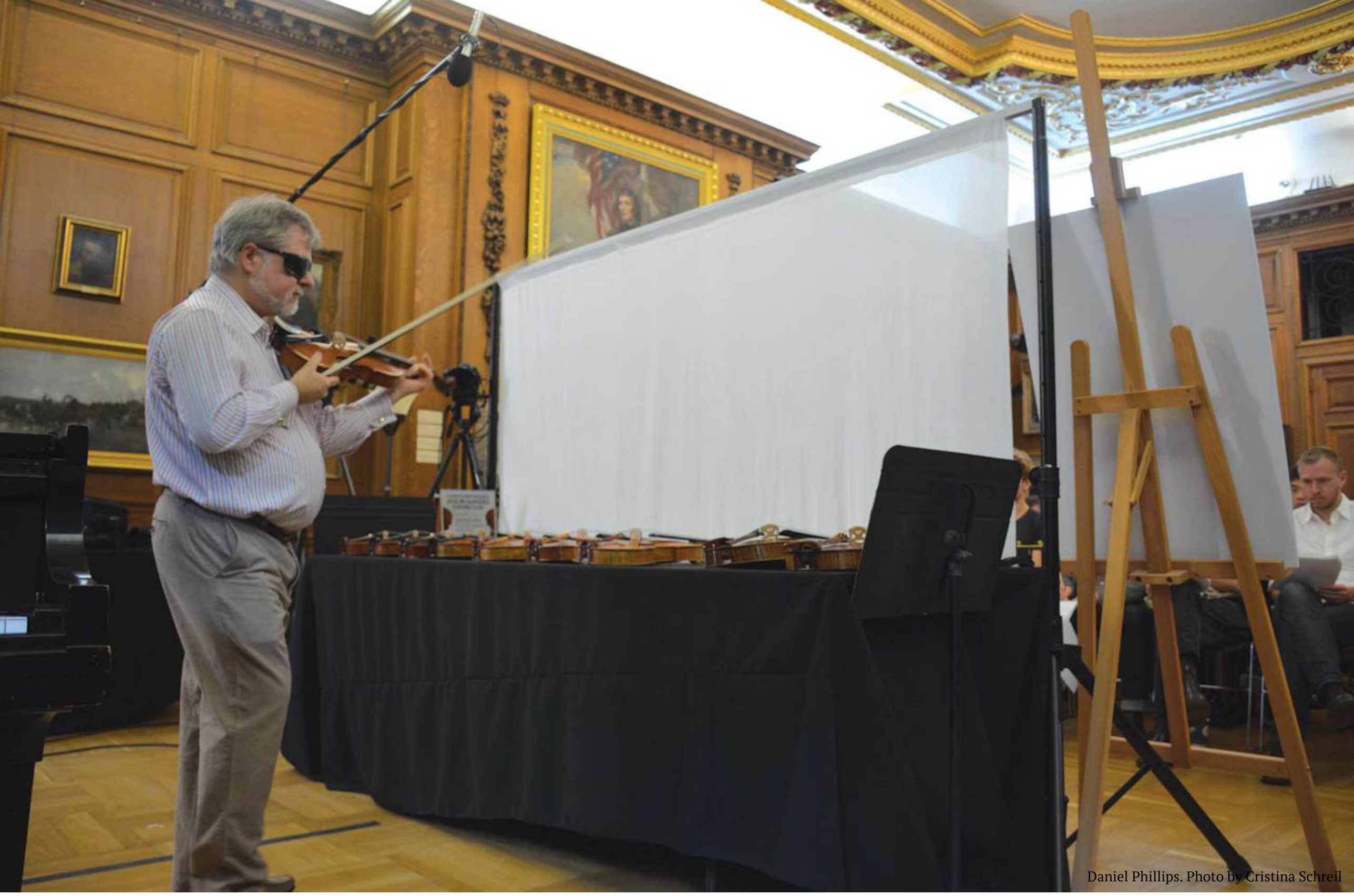

Daniel Phillips. Photo by Cristina Schreil

Letter From the Scene at the 2016 Contemporary Violin Makers Exhibition

APRIL 2, 2017

By Cristina Schreil

Dozens of people sat in a room in New York City. This room was among the more breathtaking I'd seen—a rich scene defined by oil paintings, warm wood paneling, ornate window treatments, and crown molding—but everyone sat and stared straight ahead at a blank white screen, occupied with other concerns.

Soon, the purpose of the gathering revealed itself. The solo violin entrance of the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto rang out from an unseen source. Shadows danced behind the screen, projecting the same allure as a magician's act, indicating the music's player lurked behind. But before too long, the violinist stopped. After a pause, the player began again—this time, the instrument speaking with a slightly different, deeper tone. After a few measures, the music stopped. Then it started from the top again, once more sounding slightly recalibrated.

This repeated over and over. The listeners remained silent. Some closed their eyes or scribbled notes.

I was at the headquarters of the Kosciuszko Foundation (https://www.thekf.org/kf/?), an organization promoting Polish culture and history on Manhattan's Upper East Side. The 1917 mansion is footsteps from Central Park. For one weekend last October, people gathered there for the sixth annual Contemporary Violin Makers Exhibition (http://www.reedyeboahviolins.com/), presented by Reed Yeboah Fine Violins. It included the work of 57 luthiers from around the world, and the event's second day featured a blind-listening test, the first ever at the exhibition.

Minutes before the sounds of Tchaikovsky filled the room, Fan-Chia Tao, director of research and development at D'Addario, explained the format: Four violinists would play different excerpts on ten contemporary violins in two rounds. The first would contain shorter excerpts lasting around 30 seconds; the second round would include longer excerpts, three with piano accompaniment. In each turn, the player would go down the line twice, so listeners would have more than one chance to discern differences in sound quality, projection, tone, and response. At the end, listeners were to review their notes and select three favorites. Behind Tao, violinists Adelya Nartadjieva (http://www.adelyanartadjieva.com/), Daniel Phillips (https://www.juilliard.edu/faculty/daniel-phillips), Rachell Wong (http://www.heifetzinstitute.org/about-us/our-alumni-artists/rachell-wong/), and Giora Schmidt (http://www.gioraschmidt.com/) stood at the ready.

Adelya Nartadjieva. Photo by Cristina Schreil

There's a certain draw to the challenge of listening in this deeper way. Especially with some tests in recent years juxtaposing old Italian instruments with contemporary ones—in which listeners and even players often could not distinguish one from another—more people outside the violin world seem interested in what comprises the enigmatic special sauce of a violin's sound.

It appeared I was not the only one intrigued.

The room bustled. Participants who didn't snag a seat perched by the staircase or stood along the walls. Not all were makers and players; a woman confessed to me she never played violin, but came because she's always found the concept of a blind test fascinating.

Tao asserted that this was not a controlled scientific experiment. Rather, it opened ears to a deeper learning experience. As the first leg of round one began with the Tchaikovsky, Tao and an assistant placed signs indicating which violin, one through ten, was featured at any given time. We followed along on ballots.

After hearing the Tchaikovsky passage 20 times, I had had enough mystery. Feeling like Dorothy Gale ignoring commands to "pay no attention," I snaked my way to the front. With permission, I peeked backstage. Despite Tao's assertions that this was not a strict experiment, the site appeared meticulously organized. Chosen from 39 the day before, the ten violins sat in a neat line on a rectangular table. The sight of each popping with arborescent hues and textures was as satisfying as viewing chocolates perfectly aligned behind glass. In between players, organizers swapped shoulder rests with the agility of restaurant cooks on the plating line.

As the test's name demands, players donned sight-inhibiting goggles. But some elements were indeed not controlled. Each player used his or her own bow. Between turns, players sat on the side to watch, appearing in full view of the instruments. The pre-selection process, wherein Wong and Nartadjieva played and rated violins, did not have audience listeners, even though Tao admitted that a violin's sound under the ear can differ greatly from how it resonates to the audience. Despite tall ceilings and the same august atmosphere found in many grand performance venues, it was not a perfect concert space; a window cracked open to relieve the warm room invited the sounds of horns and screeches from 65th Street below.

Still, as the event unfolded, the players delivered vibrant mini performances. I often wished they'd continue through the rest of each piece. However, the first round of shorter passages challenged my listening stamina. Concentrating on subtle gradations between instruments' sounds, paying attention to how certain phrases resonated differently on each instrument, required a hyperbeam of focus. As gorgeous as the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto is, once I heard the entrance repeated over and over, the test took on the voyeuristic feeling of eavesdropping on a practice session.

This especially struck during one round that featured a G major scale. Tao mentioned people often asked for scales in past tests. Hearing 20 in a row did help highlight and clarify certain characteristics between instruments, but not without feeling pangs of empathy for my parents—who endured me practicing such scales, of lesser quality, for years. Even while these players had distinct articulation and handsome phrasing, it all started to feel like a classier version of *Groundhog Day*.

The second round was a welcome change. The longer passages were from beautiful, familiar repertoire, which I didn't mind hearing over and over: Phillips performed Massenet's *Meditation de Thais*; Wong delivered Wieniawski's *Souvenir de Moscou*; Schmidt played Bartok's Violin Concerto No. 2; and Nartadjieva punched through the last movement of Brahms' Violin Sonata No. 3 in D minor. The selections brought out lively, communicative playing from the four. Maintaining my fly-on-the-wall position "backstage," I witnessed the incisive attention each player brought to the experiment. Phillips seemed to take extra care to keep the vibrato consistent on that instantly recognizable, tender F-sharp opening note in the *Meditation de Thais*. In performing the lush, transporting entrance to the (venue-appropriate) Wieniawski, Wong also delivered uniform phrasing. Her segment highlighted each violin's acoustic range and responsiveness to brisker, scrubby bow pressure.

It became a Zen-like experience in honing my listening comprehension. Knowing the repertoire, I zeroed in on the minute details of each instrument. And, as the round pressed on I almost wanted to push away the screen to reveal the show that listeners were missing. Schmidt presented the stirring opening to Bartok's Violin Concerto No. 2 with an engrossing energy. His body language was easy and flexible, and he hugged the violins to his ear more than others did. Lest we forget this was a blind test, at one point Schmidt accidentally knocked his bow against the table, dropping it to the ground. He retrieved it in time for his piano cue. Although it was all unseen, audience members understood what happened, cracking smiles.

A personal favorite was Nartadjieva's performance of the Brahms. Launching out of the gate again and again, she tore into those sawing double-stops with great aplomb. When returning her bow to her case, she told me she'd never worn a blindfold or done anything like this test before, except for when closing her eyes.

At the end, players offered reactions. Wong said that within the two rounds, she could start to recognize the feel of certain instruments. Like Nartadjieva, she was new to this. Phillips remarked he felt some instruments had higher string tension than others. Schmidt explained that if one spends more time with an instrument, there's a deeper understanding of how to calibrate it, "how much of your foot to put on the gas pedal or the brakes," he said, "to feel those curves in a way, rather than driving straight."

The chat also proved helpful for anyone shopping for a violin. Schmidt noted there's a huge difference in performing a violin solo and matching it against a piano or an orchestra. A similar test he participated in led him to a violin that he loved in the hall, under the ear, with piano and with orchestra. "Probably the quality that that violin had was the balance of warmth and power at the same time," he said.

The ten makers, in order, were Ulrike Dederer, Joseph Curtin, Paul Crowley, Felix Krafft, Marilyn Wallin, Giancarlo Arcieri, Alvaro Corrochano, George Yu, David Gusset, and Stephen Quinney. Organizers reported afterward that they received 66 ballots, and tallied five violins with the highest votes. In alphabetical order, their makers were Corrochano, Crowley, Curtin, Wallin, and Yu.

After the blind test, organizers transformed the room for the exhibition. Tables displayed rows of violins and violas, with maker information close by. Rows of gleaming cellos were arranged in two areas, and a table presenting 21 bows by seven makers drew many onlookers. Instruments were quickly scooped up and played. After such an intense morning, it was time for listeners to make music themselves.

Viola Table. Photo by Cristina Schreil

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