



Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017

Volume 12
Issue 4 *Winter 2003-2004*

Article 4

Winter 2003

Widening Perspectives

IWU Magazine
Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag>

Recommended Citation

Magazine, IWU (2003) "Widening Perspectives," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, 2002-2017: Vol. 12 : Iss. 4 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol12/iss4/4>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the University and/or the author of this document.

Widening Perspectives

Unlike some of her colleagues who found their love of music — unprompted — at an early age, Nina Gordon's childhood cello lessons were thrust upon her by a parent.

“(My mother) asked if I wanted to play an instrument and I said no,” Gordon says, thinking back to her youth in Russia.

Her mother had wanted to play cello herself as a child, but circumstances of World War II prevented it. Once her daughter began lessons, Yelena Lurie would not let mere lack of desire get in the way.

“I tried to quit a few times. She wouldn't let me.” Also urged along by her grandmother, Gordon kept on taking lessons and practicing.

“It was not really my choice, but it happened that I started to play cello — and then, when I was around 15, I saw that I didn't want to do anything else.”

Gordon studied at the Moscow Conservatory, then the University of Tel Aviv in Israel — still her favorite country for its culture, atmosphere, and people. While there, she met her future husband, American Steven Gordon, and eventually moved with him to the United States.

From Israel to Florida, Gordon continued to perform with orchestras. She settled for a time in Missouri, where she was principal cellist of the Kansas City Symphony and a part-time professor at the University of Missouri, Kansas City.

While she'd always enjoyed some teaching duties in addition to her rigorous schedule as a principal, after about 20 years as a professional cellist with different orchestras, Gordon realized she “wanted to do more and more teaching.”



Nina Gordon (right) rehearses with the Illinois Symphony Orchestra for an upcoming performance in its Masterworks Series. She tries to set limits on her performance schedule to devote more attention to her students. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

“You have so much to share with the students,” she says. “You know how to prepare students for their career (as a) professional musician, and you want to share it with them.”

Deciding to look for a full-time university position, she sought advice about pursuing doctoral studies from a cello professor at the University of Kansas. Because Gordon was already a principal cellist and adjunct faculty member, the professor at first thought she was asking on a student's behalf.

His response when he realized her intent is something she continues to quote to her students: “He said, ‘I understand: To get *into* the orchestra, you don't need any degree, but you need a doctorate if you want to get *out* of the orchestra.’”

Shortly after she began her doctoral coursework, Gordon was offered a position at Illinois Wesleyan.

She joined the University's faculty in 1999 — and within a year had taken up Mario Pelusi's suggestion that she bring to Bloomington the type of annual “cello celebrations” she had begun while teaching in Missouri. With

Gordon as music director, dedicated young musicians gather at Presser Hall in the summers for a cello camp, a chamber music camp, and the “Midwest Cello Celebration” — featuring combined performances by students, faculty, and guests.

Also soon after coming to Illinois Wesleyan, Gordon was asked if she’d like to audition for the principal position with the Illinois Symphony Orchestra, dually based in Springfield and Bloomington/Normal. She told them she wasn’t interested in the demands of being a principal cellist full-time, but would be willing to perform in limited engagements. The compromise: She performs for the orchestra’s Masterworks Series, which involves about five major programs a year — including her recent solo turn in Richard Strauss’s *Don Quixote*.

She’s found the Masterworks solution a great balance.

“I have time to work with my students and give them all the time they need — and maybe don’t need,” she says with a chuckle, explaining that her Russian education gave her an expectation that music students should get a lot of attention from their teachers.

Limiting her orchestra role also allows her to pursue her love of chamber music. She is happy to have found a kindred talent in pianist and colleague Lawrence Campbell. Campbell and Gordon have formed a trio with Eugene Pazin, violinist with the Lyric Opera of Chicago.

“(Chamber music) is the highest form of musical communication between musicians, and musicians and the audience,” Gordon says. At its best, this communication can resemble a psychic connection between musicians, who must first have a similar understanding of the technical demands that are music’s foundation.

“Because of my Russian background, I think that technique is one of the most important things. Without technical fluency there is no artistic freedom,” she says. “My students understand.”

She will always be grateful for a lesson gained from one of her own teachers, cellist George Ricci, who taught her that even the great musical style of her homeland could be “widened.”

“I thought there is one *proper* and *not proper* way to play. After studying with him, now I realize there are 15 proper ways to play. It has to come from your heart, from your soul, from your mind, from you,” says Gordon. “Then there is no *one* way to play.”

