



The Cellist, The Luthier and The Creek

Renowned cellist Beth Root-Sandvoss plays with philharmonic orchestras around the world and is a faculty member at the Mount Royal University Conservatory, as well as the University of Calgary. Her husband Christopher Sandvoss is a world-class luthier who has also enjoyed a career as a soloist, chamber musician, and teacher of the viola and violin. They recently met with our publisher Dwayne Zaba for this interview.

Photography by Peter Gold, www.goldphotography.com



Chris, when did you first become interested in music?

C: Music had been with me from my earliest memories. At four, I remember singing folk songs with my parents, and at the age of seven we were singing four-part madrigals. I started playing violin at seven. I didn't want to play the violin at first because my mom played violin, so I thought that only girls played it. But after my parents took me to an all-male string quartet concert, I decided I had to learn to play violin the very next day. I lived on a farm, and the outdoors and music were both a big part of my life – the whole rural experience in the European tradition.

My parents were very cultural themselves. My mother played the violin; my father played the cello; my sister played piano and the flute; I played piano and the violin, and a little bit of guitar. To me, music was the intellectual and emotional side of life, while the farm side provided the 'bare earth' kind of essence.

When did your passion for music emerge, Beth?

B: I was introduced to music as a nine-year-old student in Wisconsin's public school system. The U.S. has a unique approach to music in the public schools: they introduce instruments to the children and you can choose to play one for only \$45 a year. I chose the cello.

Did you explore any other instruments?

B: I didn't have any other instruments at home. I begged for a piano and eventually got one in high-school, but cello was my focus from the beginning. I was fortunate enough to have a good orchestra teacher who suggested to my parents that they find me a private teacher when I was eleven.

When did you first get a sense that music was your calling?

C: When I was seven my mother asked me what I wanted to be, and I said I wanted to be a violinist or a farmer. There was always this dichotomy: the intellectual academic pursuits versus the hands-on earthy, getting back to



the basic instincts sort of things. Without agriculture, we wouldn't have a population; without the arts, we wouldn't be able to feed our spirit.

Where did you two meet?

B: We met at the Banff Centre for Performing Arts. We were both doing short-term winter residencies there and we met playing the Trout quintet by Schubert.

C: We hit it off right away. I think we laughed the whole time we were there. We sort of conspired: We met on the 23rd of September and we got married on December 9. That was 15 years ago.

So you just recognized each other as kindred spirits right out of the gate?

C: Right out of the gate. There were a lot of similarities between us, like loving the outdoors, sharing an agrarian type of background and, of course, the love of culture and music. We had the highest respect for each other musically, artistically and, of course, as individuals. Everything just clicked.

How is the passion that you had for each other when you first met similar to the passion you have for your music?

B: I think the passion for music is very similar to when you find your soulmate and the person you want to spend your life with. Both have that intensity and great draw – it's something you can't let go. It becomes so much a part of you that it starts to define you.

C: And it's a comfortable fit. There's a sense that it's the way it should be, and there's a sense of calmness to that. We all choose our pursuits – checking things out at various stages of our lives to see if there's something that arouses an interest. And when you don't feel the need to look further, you know you have found what you need.

Chris, you are a world-class musician who now spends most of his time making musical instruments. Can you explain what pulled you in that direction?

C: My earliest experiences growing up on a farm were watching my grandfather and uncle building houses, fences, sheds ... you name it. I was given a framing hammer when I was four years old, which I would take to bed with me at night. I loved that hammer and I loved building things. I always had to do something with my hands.

When I was grown up, the first and most obvious thing for me to build was a viola, because that was my instrument. So I made one, took it with me to play at festivals, and people offered to buy it. I think that made a big impression on me, so I decided to make another one.

So how old were you when you made your first instrument?

C: I was about 29 years old, working at a violin shop in Vancouver. When the people running the shop went away





on holidays, they would ask me to mind the place – requesting that I don't go in the back of the shop to bother the workers. Of course, that was the first place I went when the shop was empty. They were very nice people who noticed my keen interest and curiosity, so they were fine enough to show me a few things.

I took to it right away, but I also never wanted to give up playing the music. At some point though, I found myself struggling with a year's worth waiting list for the instruments, and the calls kept coming in. Talk about passion! I thought music was a passion, but this took it to a whole new level. I'd come home from a concert at about 11:00 p.m., full tails and bow-tie, head straight down to the workshop and work for 24 hours straight. I have sometimes worked for 36 hours straight without batting an eye. I used to be on a schedule once where I worked for 36 hours and slept for eight hours for about two or three weeks. I was not trying to work quicker; I just couldn't stop.

Describe your overall philosophy as a luthier.

C: It all starts with the natural materials – picking the right wood. The tree that I recently purchased, for example, was selected after I went through 80 trees to pick out the best one, and these were 80 trees of world-class tone-wood that are shipped to places like Steinway or Marten guitars. Once you have the piece of wood in your hand and it's dried correctly, it becomes about 'feeling' the wood. I don't use power tools because the power tools don't give me any information, but I can 'feel' with the hand tool. I can feel what type of wood it is, and how it feels underneath the plane. You can tell the grain growth, the crispness of it and the life within the wood.

You stroke it, you listen to the sound that your hand makes against the wood, and you get a feeling of what that wood is telling you as you're working with the gouge and the chisels. Then I make my arching selections, my arching heights, the widths and the lengths ... essentially modeling

or engineering the instrument. If you use a router or some sort of a CNC tool, you're giving up a great opportunity to garner all the information this wood is trying to tell you.

By the time I'm finished with my handwork and roughing it out, I already know the arching heights, the type of resistance this wood can withstand, and the type of tone it will probably impart.

Some physicists and engineers have made it their life's work to try to define what makes a good instrument. They have written books and equations and it's all pretty amazing stuff, but they can't define or recreate it – there is no formula.

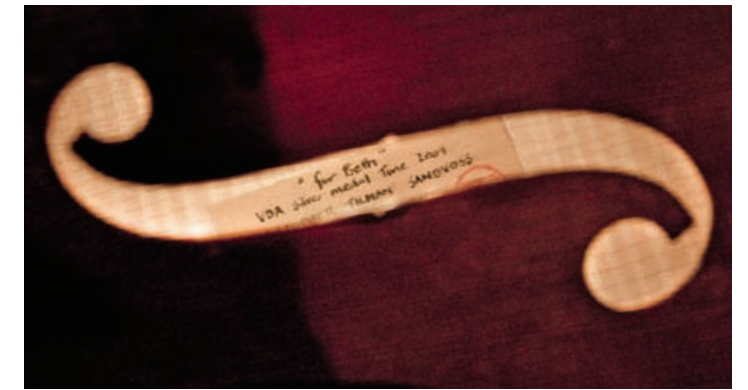

Are there similarities in creating beautiful music and creating beautiful instruments?

C: I think there is a fine balance. As with anything, you can always overcompose or overanalyze, but there is a point where you say it's done, it's complete. There is humanity in flaws: the little chisel marks here and there where the varnish can pool, which gives it a life. Just as humans are asymmetrical by nature, it is the same for music. If it's overproduced and made too perfect, it loses its essence.

But I must say that there's nothing more difficult than performing music, and Beth is one of the finest cellists on the planet. I've played with great musicians my whole life and it is an incredible feeling to play at that level, when it's in-the-moment, and it's error-free. It's not like you can glue a piece back on, or redo something from bar five one more time. From applause to applause, you have to be perfect, and you also have to impart real emotion. Beth plays with passion and intensity, and she has an incredible colour palette. What she does with her bow is remarkable: it's never strictly aggressive or strictly tender, but rather a whole range of all the human emotions that you could possibly paint with sound. Most people spend their lives just trying to get the physical aspect down, just coordinating the left hand and the right hand, and then adhering to the music. When Beth plays, you just watch and you go, 'Yeah, this musician is really involved.'

B: What I've observed from first knowing Chris as a highly skilled and beautiful violist, and working with him in that capacity professionally for a number of years, then watching the transition take over as an artist with a powerful need to create, is that there is a similar ultimate challenge in both playing and building. When you perform, you can always do something differently, and you can change your mind about an infinite number of things because you're juggling so many parameters.


I find that very similar to violin-making, especially in the fact that no two instruments are the same. There is nothing that is really consistent because there are so many variables – just like in executing a live performance. There's this naturalness and passion in the making of the instrument, and at the same time there is this really high level of skill required to make it. So you're always honing your skills, trying to do it better the next time.

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Beth, how does it feel to play an instrument that Chris made for you?

B: It is really very special. The birth of my cello is an interesting story. I was once preparing to play a Haydn D major concerto with an orchestra in Ontario and I had given him a deadline, saying I wanted to have the cello for a little while before the concert. He didn't actually make the deadline: he was a little bit late. But it didn't matter. When the cello was done, he brought it home and I left with it so I could be by myself to try it out. I loved it from the very moment that I put the bow on the string: it was everything I wanted! It had all the range of sounds and colours that you could want, no matter what kinds of things you're playing. If I'm playing something that's aggressive and really intense, it has that; if it's something that's very sweet and intimate, it has that; and everything in between. I was well into my career when he made the cello, so I knew what I was looking for. It was an intense situation, to have this instrument and to try it out as my voice, but it was somehow just right.

C: We were living on an island in Ontario, having taken a one-year sabbatical, when I thought it was the right time to make her a new cello. I had made eight or nine cellos prior to that, with good success, but I thought that Beth had to have something extraordinary. So I worked 84-hour weeks for her deadline. It was very intense work, but it made for a great cello. It was meant for her; I built it for her. I didn't build it any differently than I would build any other instrument, but everything just came together perfectly, just one of those magical things. The cello's premiere was timed to coincide with the concert, and five days later we arrived at our new home in Bragg Creek. About a month after that, the cello won the highest award possible for tone at an international violin-making competition. The best of the world were competing with their instruments, and it was her cello that won it!

What inspired you to come to Bragg Creek?

B: Since we got married, we would often drive out here from Calgary a few times a year. It's year-round evergreen, which is not very common in this particular region. It's a visual pleasure.

C: It's paradise. I moved to Calgary in 1990, five years before Beth, and I remember coming out here back then. There was such an intensity the first time coming out that I can remember thinking, 'Yeah, they can bury me up here somewhere.' You drive from the city, you see the mountains, and you just leave the city behind. Life is busy enough as it is, with so many stresses and the whole electronic age imposing its immediacy on us all the time. And here's a place where

you can leave all that behind. There is definitely a sense of a retreat to Bragg Creek: We have deer, moose, coyotes, wolves, cougars, owls ... you name it, it's all here.

B: From my perspective, I need to be close to the universities and the airport, and Bragg Creek is very close to both. It's a nice combination because it is so wild and so beautiful, but at the same time I can run to my urban existence. And culture is also important to us – not just what we do, but also the art galleries, plays, theatre, opera, and things on the fringe like indie film festivals. For us, it's really important to be able to partake in that, and also to have it for our children.

C: We can go to the Glenbow Museum or the Telus Science Centre and be back home in our beautiful setting in 35 minutes. I grew up in Vancouver, but when I first moved to Calgary and discovered the Bragg Creek area, I fell in love with the fact that there's a big city nearby, with all that we need, but there is also a sense of calm to it, the proximity of Banff and Lake Louise, the ski hills ... you can't really get that in Vancouver: You can look at the mountains, but getting there is troublesome.

How does Bragg Creek inspire what you do?

C: I feel a sense of calm. I have deadlines, but there isn't the overwhelming sense of urgency in the whole life experience. Truthfully, I could work in any environment with violin-making because it is my passion. I could work with the subway train roaring by, but would I be happy? No. Here I have happiness, peace and calm. I look out my window and see wildlife and Moose Mountain. I can hike, visit my friends, or just hop over to the hamlet if I need a break. I'm not constantly surrounded by noise, traffic lights, light pollution and all those other things that can cause anxiety in one's life. Here I have balance.

Beth, at times you lead a fairly hectic existence. Does Bragg Creek provide you with the same sort of balance that Chris is talking about?

B: Absolutely. I do lead a very urban and contemporary lifestyle, whereby I often find myself in the city or going off to a concert. Coming home to Bragg Creek daily, or coming back from a tour, is very serene and calm. I cherish the beauty of the place and being able to experience it by walking in it, smelling it, and touching it.

Also, it's very important for our two children and how we want them to see and experience life. It was a major factor in our decision to move out here. We both grew up in the country and, in a way, I think it creates a kind of ruggedness, beauty and heartiness. And there's plenty of creativity in that. Our kids have forts, and all sorts of nooks



and crannies under the trees. They sled, they build, and they have a great respect for wild animals because they're so fortunate to see them up close. We have moose that traipse through the yard, so we see the babies, twins sometimes, when they still have that beautiful, fuzzy red fur.

C: They birth right across the street, and come up around the back of the house every summer, like clockwork, a few days after their birth.

B: We love it too, of course. When I drive back from the city, I'm facing west and looking at the mountains, and as I get closer to Bragg Creek, it's just so beautiful. You leave the other things behind and you're able to start fresh with your creativity and music-making: onto the next project, the concert's over, the next one's on the horizon, there's other music to learn. And it just feels good.

Watch the video interview at www.braggcreek.tv

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