

No Shadow Without Light: Remembering Claude Mottier

**Eric Seddon, Hartt, Class of 1994**



Excursion with other music students  
during Aspen Music Festival and School, Aspen, CO 1993

Who would not sing for Lycidas? He knew  
Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.  
He must not float upon his watery bier  
Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,  
Without the meed of some melodious tear.

John Milton

It is one of the peculiarities of life in an American conservatory that a young man of such noble musical lineage as Claude Mottier could labor away in relative anonymity for four years, while someone like myself could in retrospect be treated almost like a public figure. Those who have not participated in conservatory society can know little of how different it is from other college experiences, and how dominantly even the choice of a major instrument can effect one's life. The rigors are different than ordinary academia. The competition is both more personal and more obvious. The pressures, too, are heightened: the very public intensity of ensemble rehearsals coupled with the very private intensity of the hours upon hours of solitude in the honing of one's craft; the accountability of meeting with a master for an hour each week, to be instructed, evaluated, molded; the almost incessant pressure to succeed after graduation, and the stark reality that there will not be places for most of the class—even the best among you—in the performance world afterwards. All of these elements conspire to make the conservatory an even more turbulent experience at an already tumultuous age. In short, it is a microcosm of extremes, leaving an imprint, psychologically and socially, upon those who have been there.

A conservatory is also a study in contrast and paradox. The son of wealthy and influential parents will be playing second oboe behind the daughter of an electrician. A Turkish cellist from a Muslim family will be mirac-

ulously breathing life into the Lutheran meditations of Johann Sebastian Bach, transporting the audience in a way that the minister's son will never replicate, however hard he tries. The timpanist who was publicly humiliated every rehearsal will be the one who wins the professional audition just before graduation, securing a career his more admired classmates will only envy. It was in this jumbled world of ideals, fears, and only partially discerned realities that I first met Claude Mottier.

As I mentioned before, the choice of a major instrument has influence over one's life in a more than musical way. Mine was clarinet, which in a conservatory can be considered a public instrument. Any young wind player who succeeded in getting into the Orchestra at Hartt was almost immediately known to the rest of the student body, and I was no exception. In retrospect, I took this for granted. Everyone knew my name and more or less considered me a good musician from my freshman year until my graduation. I never had to worry about the social pressures of meeting people (three hour orchestra rehearsals are enough to galvanize most folks; for young people the process is almost instantaneous). Nor did I ever feel much pressure in proving myself to my peers. Rehearsals and concerts would shine blazingly upon our strengths and weaknesses soon enough. And if the wind section of an orchestra is no place for a person to hide, neither is it a place where one ever feels ignored.

By contrast, Claude Mottier was a pianist, and pianists are different creatures altogether from orchestral musicians. In conservatories, they are the students no one else really knows, who perpetually labor down in the dungeon of the school, hacking away at their unconquerable repertoire. Indeed, the instrument has so much literature, written by so many geniuses, that one must choose only a few areas to attack—not the whole of it, as a trumpeter or bassoonist will and must. We of the orchestral world sometimes wonder who these pianists are. As undergraduates, especially, they seem like shy members of a secret society. They never have to worry about their intonation, they speak of phrasing in almost religio-mystical language, and they seem to spend much more time outside of their practice rooms gossiping than the rest of us. Is it because they have fewer rehearsals, and therefore more practice time? Is it because they need more relief from the pressures of solitude? Or is it, as Claude once confided in me, simply the weight of knowing that so many of the very pieces a pianist studies were composed

by virtuosi, whose shadows can be so unbearable? We wind players don't know the answers to these questions, nor do we ever gain full access to that world. Where we meet, inevitably, is in chamber music, which is where I got to know Claude. But before delving into that, some background.

I had known Claude from the time of our placement exams at Hartt. At first meeting, two features dominated my impression. First, and most obvious, was his hair. We entered Hartt in fall of 1990, which could also be called, stylistically, the last gasp of the 1980s—back when hair length alone was an indication of artistic caste. There was what we called *conductor hair* ('Which do I follow, the baton or the bounce?'), *flute diva hair* ('The bigger the hair, the better the flute player!'), and even more impressive than the other two, *soloist hair*—a massive, flowing testimony to the *sturm und drang* beneath it. I was informed during freshman year that mine was, officially speaking, conductor's hair. Claude's was soloist hair. All joking and categorizations aside, though, of infinitely more importance was the second feature apparent to anyone who met Claude. It was the depth of intellect one immediately sensed in his eye—the type of intelligence that can't be hidden and which knows no age, caste, or profession.

Other than these, the overwhelming sensation I associate with Claude was that of a young man who had so much to say, such simmering potential ready to come to a boil, but who was still struggling to learn how to express himself—a young man determined to untie whatever knots impeded him, internal or external. He was quiet more often than not, yet with a presence impossible to ignore. Typically it appeared that he was weighing things mentally, sometimes even seeming to silently converse with himself. I think many classmates misread this as a type of arrogance in his demeanor. The manuscripts and sketches available to the public of his later writings, however, suggest that his was a young mind often heatedly at work; that his stifled laugh, brief shake of the head, and loss of eye contact—all of which were so common when talking with him, and all of which were easily misinterpreted—were instead a reflexive doubling back upon himself if the perfect utterance couldn't be found. It is also obvious, in retrospect, that he was in many ways far more advanced than the rest of us, perhaps not so much technically, but musically—especially in terms of having a valid emotional concept for performance. This advantage often isolated him from the rest of us, I think, and I can only now begin to see more clearly how diffi-

cult it must have been for him to remain as admirably humble as he really was. Later in life he wrote of a sight reading class, wherein he had insisted on “his own” fingering for the chromatic scale, rather than adopting his teacher’s. It was a fingering taught him by his grandfather, whose authority would certainly have surpassed any of our professors. But Claude did not bring this up; it was antithetical to his personality to name-drop family members. So, instead of humiliating his professor, he simply said that he preferred his own fingering. This, in turn, made him look stubborn, even arrogant perhaps, but who, knowing all of the facts, would deny that by allowing himself to look this way he was actually sparing the pride of his teacher? What a lesson it has been for me to know Claude through some of his later writings! It strikes me that what we see of a person’s actions, and how we interpret them, are almost entirely superficial. A complete context can change our fundamental perception: what looks contemptible is revealed as a true act of charity. True humility, that humility which is the noblest expression of human spirit—sacrifice for another, in whatever form that manifests itself, be it small or large—is almost always mistaken for its opposite. May all of us who knew Claude back then learn this lesson and engrave it on our own hearts.

These meditations aside, a humorous, self-deprecating aspect of Claude was also very characteristic and prominent at the time I knew him. I’m sure it is beyond my powers to describe, but when Claude would shake his head and laugh to himself in the middle of a conversation, I never felt that he was laughing at me, though a comment of mine might have spurred it, and might even have warranted it. Yet instead he always seemed to be laughing at someone or something else—most often himself, or something he’d thought of in response, but chose to remain silent about. If asked why he was laughing, he would rarely explain, but I never got the impression Claude Mottier condescended to me. Clear, he most certainly was. Plain and to the purpose, without flattery, yes. But never condescending. When he had opportunity to be, he wouldn’t take it. For example, he found me once in Millard lobby looking over Satie’s *Chorales* for piano and asked me why I had them. I told him they were for piano class (four semesters were required of all performance majors). When asked why I’d chosen them as repertoire pieces, I half jokingly replied “Because they’re easy.” Claude sat down, took the score, and pondered them in silence for several long minutes. At length, he handed them back, shook his head, and firmly

declared “Whatever else they might be, they aren’t easy.” I was duly chastised, yet there was nothing condescending in his attitude: he engaged the topic with clarity of thought, not ego. Moreover, this incident is a testimony to his humility in the face of music of depth and meaning: Claude never judged the difficulty of a piece by its technical aspects, but by the demands it placed on the soul. This is rare in professionals, let alone in students only slightly older than teenagers.

For our first two years at Hartt, I knew little of Claude other than that he was the intelligent pianist with the “soloist hair” in my ear training and theory classes (we seemed to have a lot of them together). The one oddity beyond this was the treatment he received from professors. I wouldn’t call it preferential, but from our very first classes together, it seemed that they’d known Claude before the rest of us. When he was addressed, it was with a type of admiration or warmth beyond the norm. Claude did not seem altogether comfortable with this treatment (who would be?), and it wasn’t until years later that I discovered the reason.

These might have remained my only memories of Claude, were it not for one day in early fall of 1992. We had all just returned for our junior year and Humbert Lucarelli was in charge of the Chamber Music Program. Lucarelli was extremely encouraging to those of us who wanted to form our own groups. If we could assemble them ourselves, so much the better—even to the point of choosing our own coach. I had it in mind to put together a group that would study the Brahms ‘Clarinet’ Trio. For the cellist, I asked another classmate of ours, Sylvan Lumsden, whose rich Brahmsian sound I’d always admired. We were down in the practice cells near Berkman Auditorium at the time, and when I mentioned that I’d not yet secured a pianist, Claude (who somehow happened to hear us) rather forcefully offered his services! And here is an irony of history: I was reticent. I really had no idea who he was, or whether he could play or not. I tried to veil my enthusiasm, steer Claude away from the project, and give Sylvan and myself time to consider other players. All of this was to no avail: Claude was adamant, and the strength of his personality was not to be denied. Now, of course, I feel privileged to have been one, if not the only, clarinetist to have played this masterwork with Claude Mottier. But back then I was mortified at the prospect of working for a semester with an unknown and untried pianist! Never during our many rehearsals did Claude even mention the name

“Schnabel,” though once he told me there were *many* great professional pianists in his family, and he felt the pressure of living up to his ancestors keenly. I didn’t ask their names and he didn’t offer them. As so often in the time we knew each other, conversations were only half spoken—the other half inevitably came through whatever music was at hand.

There are few things in this world so silly as a bunch of twenty-year-olds attempting to play late Brahms. I think it safe to say that none of us knew what we were getting ourselves into. Technical issues aside, such music is challenging on an emotional and spiritual level. Young people simply do not have the backlog of experiences to draw upon, essential for a truly satisfying performance. But like romance, drinking, and a thousand other things, inexperience and immaturity never seem to stop young people from trying. The three of us were no exceptions. We had our share of arguments and tension—most of which were immediate results of being spiritually in over our heads and trying to gasp some air at the surface when possible. There is an old joke among clarinetists that if you make a mistake, you should first blame the reed, then the mouthpiece, then the instrument. If all of this fails, as a last resort you should blame the conductor. Never, ever blame yourself. And like most jokes, this one contains a bit of practical truth. An orchestral wind player has to have a thick skin, and enough confidence to play solo parts convincingly, every time, regardless of what goes wrong or who criticizes him. A decent sized ego can be part of that equation. But in chamber music such an attitude can backfire. Because there is no central authority (like a conductor), chamber music is very much a study in relationships. How the four members of a string quartet can compromise and cooperate as human beings will as much determine the quality of the music as their technical abilities. Personalities cannot be rigid in chamber music, and egos cannot be inflated. Many students are unpleasantly surprised when they first encounter these difficulties. They think that they will finally be free to express their own ideas, unhindered by a domineering conductor: finally their own musical thoughts, suppressed for so long, will be unleashed! Almost immediately this illusion will evaporate in the scorching heat of actual rehearsals with others who also have ideas, and whose ideas must blend with theirs in order to make music effectively. With all of this in mind, I’m glad to say that by the end, Sylvan, Claude and I could give a decent rendering of Brahms and we all did keep on speaking terms! I’m also happy to say that the good memories far outweigh the inevi-



table difficulties we ran into along the way. Those good memories are also the strongest I have of Claude, some of which I record here.

Once, when we were taking a break, the three of us were discussing a potential recital for the group. We were specifically weighing repertoire, and giving particular attention to a balanced program—some light pieces, perhaps, as a counterweight to the depth of the Brahms. I suggested the Poulenc Clarinet Sonata, which has always been my favorite in the repertoire.

“No depth there,” Claude had bluntly remarked. I disagreed vehemently, and Claude immediately pressed me as to why.

“You have to remember that the piece is dedicated to the memory of Arthur Honegger, his old friend. And it’s not just a dedication in word; you have to keep it in mind for the whole sonata. The second movement isn’t just a chanson. It’s like a Saturday morning, and it’s raining. You turn on the radio and hear a song that reminds you of a friend who has just died. That’s what that movement is: the rain, the song, your dead friend...”

When I stopped talking, there was a stillness in the room. Claude was visibly moved.

“Are you sure you aren’t really a poet?” he asked, laughing softly, shaking his head to himself, and looking out the window. Almost immediately, we returned to rehearsing Brahms. This, to me, is the enduring image of Claude: quick to debate or disagree, equally as quick to be convinced of something new if only one could produce an insight of any merit. He was razor sharp, but open-minded and open-hearted: a rare combination.

There were many other moments, perhaps of lesser value in conveying a sense of who Claude was, but equally enjoyable to remember. I believe it was Claude who made me the first espresso I ever tasted, in the kitchen of his parents’ West Hartford home where we would sometimes rehearse. At the time I was appalled! This was just before espresso bars broke out like acne all across the face of an unsuspecting America, and for someone with my background (I grew up in a small apple farming town in the Hudson Valley), entirely new. I sipped the powerful brew slowly, eyes watering, and trying to look cultured enough to appear nonchalant. Claude was kind enough to suppress almost all of his undoubted amusement at this spectacle, just as he had been similarly kind when I rather judiciously informed him of his parents’ remarkable taste in art, after looking around their living room for the first time. I remember Claude’s almost giddy repression

of a laugh at this assessment—though he was very quick to assure me he wasn't laughing at me. I'm almost sure that he was just happy to be talking to someone with absolutely no preconceptions about him or his family. Likewise, over the same aforementioned espresso, I remember Claude telling me of how eager he was to write and to investigate philosophy. He was committed to music, but he had many ideas beyond art. Even at age twenty he had a great deal on his mind, and seemed to know that he was just beginning to scratch the surface of the language needed to express it.

The memories of those rehearsals are among the most vivid of my college years. I am convinced there is a spiritual aspect to great music making, and the effect of even trying very hard to do justice to such a masterpiece brings people closer—a bond is created that is never really broken, though the players themselves might lose touch over the years. That semester we played a master class for the rest of the chamber music department; then, of course, for our faculty jury. Claude had wanted to continue beyond this and perform a recital, but for some reason, despite the marks we'd received from the faculty (which were excellent), I had disagreed. I felt we just weren't ready. It stung and disappointed Claude then, though perhaps not so much as the memory stings and disappoints me now. In a typical delusion of youth, I had thought we would have forever to improve. But of course we didn't. Nobody does. In the end, perhaps the only thing sillier than twenty-year-olds performing late Brahms is, paradoxically, to not perform it.

No portrait of Claude Mottier, however limited, could be complete without some attempt to describe his piano playing. As of this writing, I do not know how many recordings were made of him in his prime. I assume Hartt must have a recording of his senior recital at the very least. What I certainly can say is that as a young man his playing burst with passionate intensity. In the fall semester of our senior year, he performed Chopin (which piece I can't remember) for the student body, at one of our weekly "Musicianship" classes. Musicianship was unique in that the entire student body attended once a week, usually to hear other students perform, but oftentimes faculty or even guest artists. When Claude played, three or four other students, each among the best in the school, performed solos as well, but there was no question that Claude had stunned the audience more than anyone else that morning. To most in the room, his brilliance was a complete surprise.

Remember that in a conservatory, the piano student is virtually anonymous. Or better yet, he is virtually anonymous until he appears on stage. Then four years of a solitary apprenticeship will be tested—not incrementally, as a wind player might slowly blossom through a succession of concerts and seasons—but all at once.

Despite whatever pressures he might have felt, Claude was electrifying that morning. I was standing in the back of Millard Auditorium, next to a rather accomplished graduate student violinist—one who had played professionally, and who had known Claude before Hartt. As the entire student body rose in a roar of approval, this violinist turned to me and said “Not bad for the great-grandson of Artur Schnabel, eh?” Now as I said, Claude and I were seniors, I had rehearsed intensely with him for an entire semester, had numerous conversations with him on many subjects, and yet this was the first I’d known of his very well kept secret. It would be years before I could more fully understand the pressures Claude had performed under. Who would want such a remark made after every performance? Once again, I am stunned as I read his later writings, and of the efforts he made on behalf of the legacy of his family after tendonitis denied him of a performance career. That he came to terms not only with the monumental shadows cast over his own abilities, but learned to celebrate those who cast them, with love and modesty, is truly a thing of beauty worthy of admiration and imitation.

I could attempt to detail the ways in which his playing was Schnabellian, of how one could tell that he had drunk from the source of his family tradition; how it literally coursed through his veins. But there are others better qualified, and anyhow, on that crisp autumn morning, when we were all so young and full of potential that seemed assured of fruition, when Claude performed Chopin with such lightening and such depth, and the students burst forth in a roar of spontaneous approval, they weren’t cheering for the great-grandson of Artur Schnabel. They didn’t know the secret. Instead, that audience cheered for the brilliance immediately in front of them: for the passion and the soul of Claude Mottier. He will never be remembered outside of the context of his family, nor do I think he would want it in any other way. But there is a time and place, perhaps, to remember that Claude himself was a tremendous burst of light, and that if his death has left us with the shadows of tragic impossibilities (those terrible nightmares of “what might have been”), it is only because of that splendor of having

seen him shine in those moments he was with us, however brief. In other words, it wasn't a tradition that died with Claude, but a man: a good man, who could be relied upon to speak with depth and honesty. May his soul rest in peace, and may his family be blessed and comforted.

My final impression of Claude will remain as he was after the Chopin performance on that cool, clear, New England morning. I went backstage, immediately, and after the throngs of others had given him a strong dose of well deserved congratulations; after the crowd had dissipated and only the two of us remained, I looked at him thoughtfully and said, "Claude, you were the best one out there today."

This time, he didn't laugh, didn't shake his head. None of the trademark self-deprecation. Instead, just that once, Claude Mottier looked me back squarely in the eye and, with a sigh of something like relief, he smiled and very simply replied,  
"I know."



Touring Arizona, Summer 1996



Claude with his wife  
Erika Zoe Schutzman, 1999