



*the PBI profile*

# PLAY IT AGAIN, ELMAR

*Violinist Elmar Oliveira has transformed a successful solo career into a living legacy*

BY MARY MURRAY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY VANESSA ROGERS



**OLIVEIRA, PICTURED HERE IN HIS SEWALL'S POINT HOME, PLAYS A STRADIVARIUS IN CONCERT, BUT WILL OFTEN PRACTICE ON VIOLINS BY CONTEMPORARY MAKERS.**

The auditorium is quiet save for the rustling of sheet music. Members of the Lynn Philharmonia have just lowered their instruments, having played the final notes of Haydn's *Symphony No. 88 in G Major*. Soon, they'll be joined by one of the greatest violinists—American or otherwise—of the past 50 years.

Anticipation mounts as Elmar Oliveira enters stage right. He looks like a modern-day musical Jedi, clad in a collarless black outfit and donning a serene, almost affectless expression. A proponent of new works by contemporary composers, Oliveira will solo on Richard Sortomme's *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra*. Conductor Guillermo Figueroa raises his baton. Oliveira locks eyes with him before attacking the composition with the veracity of a virtuoso and the ferocity of a legend.

"The one thing you get with Elmar is absolute fearlessness," Figueroa says of his colleague and friend. "We all get nervous. But with him, it's the impression that nothing is going to stand in his way."

Oliveira's connection to the violin was formed before he was born. His parents immigrated to the United States from Portugal, and although his father was a mandolin player, he adored the violin. "He heard it in church when he was 9 years old and never forgot it," recalls Oliveira.

Both of his older brothers played, with his eldest brother, John, pursuing it professionally. Young Elmar first took to the violin at age 9, which he describes as a late start.

"I started very late but I heard violin music every day, even in the womb," he says. "By the time I actually got to the violin and studied it



seriously, it took me very little time because my ear was so developed. I used to sing all these different violin concertos and short pieces—everything my brother was practicing and playing.”

After just a year of study, Oliveira had his first recital. The program included a Mozart concerto, one of Brahms’ Hungarian Dances, and Charles de Bériot’s *Scene de Ballet*. Oliveira remembers it as a resounding success, the first of many for the budding musician. At 14, he played with the Hartford Symphony Orchestra in his home state of Connecticut. At 16, he soloed with the New York Philharmonic as part of Leonard Bernstein’s Young People’s Concert series. Afterward, Bernstein said to Oliveira, “My, aren’t you a virtuoso?”

Bernstein blessings aside, Oliveira’s star began to soar in the 1970s when, as a twentysomething, he accumulated impressive win after impressive win. There was the G.B. Dealey Competition, followed by a victory at the Naumburg International Competition. His biggest breakthrough came in 1978 when, at the age of 28, he became the first and only American to ever win gold at the International Tchaikovsky Competition.

Oliveira believes this achievement shaped his entire career. To be sure, his success in Moscow put him in high demand, and he spent subsequent decades traveling approximately 300 days each year, delighting audiences around the world with his talent. But regardless of where he was or what language the program was in, Oliveira found a home on the stage. “It always felt natural for me to go out and perform,” he says. “It was like I was doing it in my living room.”

Beyond being a soloist, Oliveira has also dedicated himself to teaching. In 2006, he accepted a position as a distinguished artist-in-residence at the Lynn University Conservatory of Music in Boca Raton, a role that allows him to work one-on-one with students and also lead master classes.

“To see him put into practice what he teaches is very, very important,” says Figueroa, a fellow violinist who, in 1978, met Oliveira en route to the Tchaikovsky Competition.

“To see how he works, his demeanor, how he transmits the music—all of that is incredibly important for the kids to witness because teaching is not just theoretical. He’s able to put into practice everything he says in the classroom, and it’s all there for the kids to see.”

Now, at the age of 67, Oliveira has greatly reduced his concert commitments to focus on teaching. “Now is the end of my career, not the beginning,” he says. “I’ve been given the opportunity to have an extremely prominent career all of my life; I need to give back to young people.”

With that goal in mind, he founded the Elmar Oliveira International Violin Competition. Held every three years, it provides aspiring violinists with the resources to succeed. In early 2017, 22-year-old Sirena Huang won the inaugural competition and took home a cash prize of \$30,000, a new violin and bow, and three years of artist management and PR support, including concert bookings. On February 14-16, she’ll perform with the Atlantic Classical Orchestra in Palm Beach Gardens, Vero Beach, and Stuart.

“There are many aspects of being a violinist that these young people need to learn,” says Jill Arbetter, the competition’s executive director. “We’re here to help hone them and give them the tools necessary to go out into the world and be soloists.”

Oliveira conceived of this competition as a way to pass the metaphoric bow onto the next generation of violin superstars—and he was tremendously pleased with the level of talent in terms of technical ability and personal style. “We don’t want people to sound like computers,” he explains. “We want people to have an enormous amount of their own personality that projects in the music.”

For his own part, Oliveira approaches music with the soul of an artist. He relies on a collection of about 30 violins to help him decode the languages of individual composers and unleash the nuances of his own talent.

“He’s like the Picasso of the violin,” says Arbetter. “Musically, he has so many colors. He’s a master. He can play anything.”

Oliveira has played on many violins



OLIVEIRA OWNS AROUND 30 VIOLINS AND NUMEROUS BOWS.

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throughout his career. There was a great Guadagnini that’s now in the New York Philharmonic, a 1697 Stradivarius called the Molitor that once belonged to Napoleon Bonaparte, and a Guarneri del Gesù called the Stretton he used at the height of his career and recently retired. Since 2017, he’s been playing on a Stradivarius made in the 1680s.

“This Strad has the most unbelievable quality you can imagine,” he says of his prized violin. “I don’t see any reason not to play it for the rest of my life.”

All of his instruments reside in their own corner of Oliveira’s Sewall’s Point home, sharing space with his bows and those belonging to his violist wife, Sandra. He occasionally

lends them out or sells them to students, but each receives frequent exercise during his daily practice sessions.

“If I’m not teaching, I’m practicing,” he says. “If someone stops learning, that’s the worst thing they can do as a musician. I’m learning things every day.”

After plucking a violin from its cubby, Oliveira strides over to the octagonal window overlooking his backyard. A dock extends into the water, where he’s spotted manatees at play and birds congregating on a nearby island. This tranquil scene abounds with natural distractions, but Oliveira is immersed in the music, thinking only of the composer’s intent and following his fingers to the next note. ◀◀