



## Archives

**Note:** Searching is always free. There is a \$2.95 fee to view the full-text of any article.  
[Check out our Pricing Options.](#)

### San Jose Mercury News (CA)

September 23, 1994

**Section:** Peninsula Living

**Edition:** Peninsula/Am

**Page:** 3

### A MUSICAL JOURNEY RENOWNED CONDUCTOR BRINGS VERVE AND FUN TO YOUTH ORCHESTRA

*NORA ELIZABETH VILLAGRAN, Mercury News Staff Writer*

BEFORE the sound of music, there is a moment in the rehearsal room when everything is still.

Violins are tucked under chins. Reeds hover near parted lips. Bows pose in midair. All eyes are on the conductor.

On the podium with her baton in hand, Camilla **Kolchinsky** savors this moment. It's been a long journey, from a young Russian violinist with conducting in her heart -- in a land where only boys could hope to conduct -- to a world- renowned conductor.

**Kolchinsky**, 49, is the permanent guest conductor of Vienna's Austrian Chamber Orchestra. She has conducted throughout Europe, including the Philharmonic Orchestra in London, the Oslo Philharmonic, the Norddeutsche Rundfunk Orchestra in Hamburg, as well as the Israel Philharmonic and the Jerusalem Symphony.

**Kolchinsky** is also the new conductor and music director of the El Camino Youth Symphony in Palo Alto, a training and performing program that serves young musicians from San Francisco to Santa Cruz.

Her tributes are many. **Kolchinsky** was featured in the 1986 documentary "Women Conductors: Biography, Working Rehearsals and Concert," made in Sweden and broadcast on PBS.

The late Leonard Bernstein described her as having "great authority, real power of communication and true musicianship."

And soloist Mstislav Rostropovich wrote of her: "Camilla **Kolchinsky** not only possesses a remarkable technique as a conductor, she makes the very best use of her technique to reveal her interpretive intentions and great musical talent." But it's youth symphony musicians Mara Kronick, 16, and Ping Yeh, 18, who give her, respectively, the ultimate teen-age tribute: "She makes things fun" and "She's really funny."

During a recent Sunday rehearsal, **Kolchinsky** prepared the young musicians for the season's first concert in November. In their unisex garb of torn jeans, dangling earrings, shorts and bare feet, the students rehearsed the "Prince Igor" opera, the "Bozodin Polovstian Dances" and "The Merry Wives of Windsor." Tapping her baton on the music stand, **Kolchinsky** said in accented English, "OK, let's go." Her hands swept through the air and the room filled with music. Music has delighted **Kolchinsky** since her Moscow infancy.

"I sang at eight months, before I could speak," says **Kolchinsky**, who speaks six languages. "At

3, my family invited friends to hear me sing songs I learned from the streets and the radio. I sat at a table and my mother fixed my hair with bows. I felt much happiness that I could sing and people would listen to me. It was my first artist performance."

At 6, she began studying the violin at a private music school. "I had a typical Russian childhood. I was interested in mineralogy, geology and collected stones. I loved to read. I wrote little novels that were printed in a newspaper for young people. Later, I loved medicine and art. I also loved cats and dogs and birds. My father brought me and my sister a little chick that turned out to be a turkey. We used to walk with it (on a leash) on the streets of Moscow. It was very funny. "Music brought me happiness. I loved to perform and study. I was invited to a top level conservatory. There were many hours of studying music and school homework. For me, it was: 'I must do it. I will do it.' Because for kids who wish to become something, I saw it would take the maximum."

Inspired by wunderkind

It was assumed that **Kolchinsky** would be a violinist. But everything changed when, at 13, she saw a movie about an Italian boy who was a wunderkind conductor.

"From that moment my hope was to be a conductor. I knew I had something more in me to give than to be a small screw in a big machine. But in Russian life, it was impossible for a woman to become a conductor. I saw that film eight times and studied it. The wish to be a conductor became stronger each time. I told my violin teacher; he said I was crazy because women cannot be conductors. I decided: 'He say no, but I will be a conductor.' "

**Kolchinsky** went to an adult family friend, a musician, who said, "If you wish so strongly -- then you must do it. But first you must have a good music education."

Says **Kolchinsky**, "He understood a kid's hope. He was a good teacher of life. So I concentrated on learning symphony music. I began to educate myself about the ways of music."

Through the window

**Kolchinsky's** determination steeled her for the fight she knew was to come. "I realized I would have to be better than men conductors. My parents were upset. They knew it would be hard for me."

When she announced her decision at the music school, she says, the school administrators "called it nonsense. It was unusual for them to see a girl who wanted to be a conductor. It did not make me angry -- it made me strong. There is a Russian saying: If they turn you from the room through the door, you must go back in through the window."

**Kolchinsky** continued her studies and violin lessons. "But I did go into the class where the conductor was teaching the boy students. They told me to go away. 'It's not for you.' I was angry. I asked, 'Why can't a girl study conducting? Let me study, then see who is the best.' They said no orchestra would accept me. But this only made me fight stronger. I became like a stone. I decided I will die or I will do it."

**Kolchinsky** went on to earn a master of music degree with distinction from the State Music Conservatory of Moscow. Then she got lucky. Her schooling carried with it the obligation to do service work in her field, and she was sent to the Ukraine where she would play the violin in a symphony orchestra.

As a Jew, she says, "I could have been sent to Siberia to work. There was strong discrimination against Jewish students."

When she arrived in the Ukraine, it happened that the conductor for the student orchestra was ill. "I said, 'I will take it.' They said, 'Oh, no, it's impossible. You're a girl.' I said, 'I will try.' "

So the next morning, **Kolchinsky** played her violin in the orchestra, and in the afternoon, she showed up to conduct the student orchestra. She was 20 years old and the students, some of them older, towered over her.

'We will start to work'

"I looked like a teen-ager. The students laughed at me. I saw I could run from the classroom or stay and see what will happen. I waited and then said, 'Now, we will start to work.' My simple words made them listen to me. I will never forget that moment."

Though **Kolchinsky** had never been allowed to study conducting, her previous concentration on learning "the ways" of music and of all the instruments helped her. "I was prepared. I had a good

basis. By conducting the students, I taught myself to be a conductor. It was a difficult time; I had no experience; there was nobody I could speak to or consult. But life had sent me to the correct place."

After a year, she competed against 87 experienced men for one position in Leningrad to study conducting. She was not accepted but she tried again the next year, when she competed against 100 applicants. "I had already decided I would be conductor, so if I didn't make it this time I would try a third time."

**Kolchinsky** did make it -- technically. The final part of the exam, in which the competition had been whittled down to five applicants, was to conduct a rehearsal with an orchestra. "And they decided I was the best." But **Kolchinsky's** exaltation turned to shock when the administrators refused to accept her because they believed she would never find a job as a conductor.

"It was a tragic moment. But this is where my history could be a movie: The orchestra I rehearsed with told the director and the dean that they must accept me or else they would not play. The school decided to take me not as a full student but for half a year."

The right place

Again, life had sent **Kolchinsky** to the right place. There was a precedent there: a female conductor who was "a wonderful teacher. She was big and strong. I looked like a bird. They joked that a trombone could make me fly away. I felt happy. I decided I would show them and I became very good. They let me be a regular student.

"But my parents by now were upset. Other girls my age (23) were married and had good jobs. But still they believed in me. My father became sick and my mother's salary as a nurse was low. I taught violin lessons in the evening to make rubles to eat and help my family. I traveled by bus in the cold winter with snow and winds. I was often sick. But my professor, Ilia Musin, and his wife often gave me dinner and money and took care of me."

**Kolchinsky** completed the doctoral level program in conducting at the State Music Conservatory in Leningrad. But her fight to conduct continued. Spotting a newspaper ad to conduct for the Bolshoi Theater, she went to apply. "The secretary would not take my application. I said, 'I will sit down in the chair and I will not go away.' She saw I had a strong character. They then tell me through their teeth that they do not wish to do it but they will let me compete."

Five minutes grew to 45

The competition among the 32 applicants involved conducting an opera rehearsal with the prestigious Bolshoi orchestra. Each applicant was given 15 minutes. **Kolchinsky**, the last on the list, was to be given five.

"When I walked up to the orchestra, I saw they were full of pride; they were best in Russia. At that moment, I looked into myself. And from the first chord, I showed them. Instead of five minutes, I took 45 minutes and nobody stopped me. It took all my energy. I forgot everything and focused on what I had to do. When I was finished, the orchestra tapped their bows on the music stand. They stood up and applauded. It was forbidden to make applause, but even the jury clapped."

**Kolchinsky** was now one of two women conductors in the land. The Moscow newspapers wrote about it. "I did it. I made my dream come true."

**Kolchinsky** later emigrated to Israel, after the then-Soviet government refused to let her tour as a conductor. She went on to conduct for Zubin Mehta, the music director of the Israel Philharmonic, as well as guest conducting in other countries. Then after several years in Norway, **Kolchinsky** emigrated in 1990 to the United States.

Since then, she has taught conducting at the University of California, Santa Barbara, the Music and Arts Conservatory of Santa Barbara and the School of Music at Indiana University.

Fresh feeling

**Kolchinsky** lives in Mountain View with her husband and says, "I am very happy to work with these young students. Young musicians have a fresh feeling for music."

"She teaches you so much," says Ping Yeh, a University of California, San Diego freshman, who played the French horn under **Kolchinsky** this summer in the El Camino Youth Symphony. "She understands the music so well, not just the strings or the brass or the woodwinds. We played everything from the 'Jurassic Park' soundtrack to waltzes and polkas.

"She teaches you the emotions of music," says Yeh. "Tricks on how to play the music. She even played her violin. And she tells stories to describe the music, like the statue of Strauss and how you can almost see the wind blowing into his cape. 'Feel the lightness of that wind in the cape and convey that in the music.' She inspires you to play music -- not just the notes on your sheet." And Mara Kronick, a Palo Alto High junior who plays the cello, says, "She makes things fun and challenging. Sometimes kids are afraid, but she has such a warm style that it's easy to ask for help. Not everyone can get on the same wavelength with kids, but she can." Looking back on her struggle to conduct, she says, "To make your dream come true, you must stay with your vision. Many people stop at the first trouble. Don't be afraid of problems or unhappiness in your fight. Luck will come to you. So you must be ready."

**Illustration:**Photos (4)

PHOTO:

**Kolchinsky**, in concert in the former Soviet Union in 1976, is pictured with cello soloist Karine Georgijan.

940923 PL 5

PHOTO: LUCI S. WILLIAMS -- MERCURY NEWS

Camilla **Kolchinsky**, who sang before she could speak, began formal music studies at age 6 with violin lessons in Moscow.

940923 PL 4

PHOTO: LUCI S. WILLIAMS -- MERCURY NEWS

Camilla **Kolchinsky** is the new conductor and music director of the El Camino Youth Symphony in Palo Alto.

940923 PL 3 1;color

PHOTO: LUCI S. WILLIAMS -- MERCURY NEWS

Below, she leads the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra.

940923 PL 3 2

---

Copyright (c) 1994 San Jose Mercury News