



**22.04.2025**

## **GUEST OF THE MONTH: OLLI VARONEN ON BUILDING CULTURAL BRIDGES THROUGH MUSIC**

Olli Varonen is a Finnish cellist with a long and varied career, who has performed as a solo and chamber musician in countless concerts on many stages around the world. After graduating as a professional musician in Finland, he continued his studies at the prestigious Frans Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest, where he completed his second degree. This year he will celebrate the 25th anniversary of his ensemble *Cello Duo Varonen* by returning to the stage of his former school, the charming Liszt Academy, on 24 April. Before arriving in Budapest, Olli had time to chat with us about everything from folk music to tennis.

**When and how did the cello come into your life?**



My father decided to get me a 1/4 cello the autumn I started school. He, like his father, was an amateur violinist.

### **What made you choose a career as a professional musician?**

I took playing seriously already at an early age. By the age of 13 I had ended up at the Sibelius Academy's youth section, and on my 18th birthday I took the playing exam of my cello diploma – the highest of the Academy's professional degrees at the time. I also got to join the Helsinki Strings (*Helsingin juniorijouset*), founded by Csaba and Géza Szilvay, which was an extremely transformative experience and paved the way to professionalism.

When playing is intense from a young age, you kind of don't think about other possibilities – at least not necessarily. But there's an exciting period here: when I was 16, I was on a language course in Sweden and decided to take a tennis course as a bonus. I had never touched a tennis racket before, but I knew how to practice, and so for three weeks I played constantly, practising my strokes against the garage door.

At the end of those weeks, a tournament was held that included people who had played tennis as their main hobby for many years. Still, I won the tournament, whereupon a Swedish professional coach – knowing how far I had come in playing the cello – told me to throw the cello in the corner and start building a career as a professional player. I was apparently extremely talented at tennis.

When I returned to Helsinki, I tried to find a way to get into the sport and even asked my then PE teacher Anssi Rauramo for help, but no such route was to be found. So, after high school I continued my professional studies of cello in Budapest.

### **You have played an enormous number of concerts both in Finland and abroad. What has been the most memorable performance so far?**

My most memorable performance was definitely in Senegal, where we visited with the cello duo and Jaakko Löytty in 2019. The concerts were held outside, and one of our stages was set up under the cover of a minibus parked in a large square. The concert had to start late enough so it wouldn't be too hot – it could be almost 40 degrees in the scorching sun. Everyone was packed into the shade of an adjacent wall, but there was still a big crowd. There we then were, just playing in the heat.



Our second performance was really late at night, in pitch black darkness, and joining us to play was a Senegalese drumming group. We played the Barrière Sonata, and they joined in. These two gigs are the most memorable or special ones.



*Playing a concert in Senegal. Photo: artist's own archive.*

**You have also written a book about the life's work of music teachers Géza and Csaba Szilvay. How did you come to be a biographer?**

Literature and history are my passions, and I've been reading an awful lot of fiction since I was young, also writing a lot. A matriculation essay I wrote in 1984 was titled Helsinki Strings as a Lifestyle, and it was around this time that I told Géza that I wanted to write a book about them. To this he simply replied that perhaps when they retire. Then finally, in January 2021, he phoned me to say that the time had come.

There's also another important element: when I as an 18-year-old arrived in Budapest to study, I was able to spend my first moments – and nights – at the home of the Szilvay brothers, Villa Szilvay. There I listened for a long time to their father, a professor, talking about building a cultural bridge between Finland and Hungary, until he finally said to me, an 18-year-old boy: “Now you will build this bridge too”. I think that one sentence contributed to my motivation for writing. The presentation of Csaba's and Géza's life's work is, in fact, part of building such a cultural bridge.



**Let's talk for a moment about your upcoming concert. The programme includes works ranging from international classics to Finnish folk songs. How did you choose the works, and do they create a kind of dramatic arc or thematic trajectory?**

As a kind of red thread, we have agreed that when we come to Budapest, we will bring Finnish music with us. But if we turn to these folk songs: already during my years of study in Budapest, I had the opportunity to study at the Kodály Institute and participate in Vikár László's folk music classes – that's when I realised that folk music and folk songs hold such remarkable treasures. After all, folk songs form the history of a people over a long period of time – a kind of archive that describes the character and living conditions of a people. It is an immensely interesting source of history.

This is how I became interested in folk songs, and after realising their importance, I began to have a different attitude towards Finnish folk songs. Géza and Csaba talk a lot about the fact that the identity of each nation is preserved in folk songs. When you start looking for Finnish identity, you will find it in them.

**Do you have a particular favourite among these works?**

For a musician who performs a wide range of music, whatever is in focus at any given moment is usually the most interesting – your attention naturally gravitates toward the piece you're currently working on. In that sense, it's quite illogical to try to name a favourite, because there are simply so many.

**You'll be performing as a duo in the concert. How does that differ from playing solo or as part of an orchestra?**

Solo playing is a solitary endeavour where you're entirely responsible for everything – it's just you and the composer. A duo, however, is just as much an ensemble as, say, a string quartet, which means stepping into the dynamics of ensemble playing: it's about making music together, and one of the rewards is the ability to create something that couldn't be achieved alone.

Also, the more you play with the same ensemble or partner, the more familiar you become with the other person's musical thinking and impulses, and that allows for a fruitful collaboration. Of course, there are many excellent concerts where musicians who don't often play together perform beautifully. But in established ensembles, there's a deeper mutual understanding where things don't need to



be discussed – it's almost telepathic – and that makes the music sound quite different.

### **Do you have any pre-concert preparation routines?**

My body has learned to prepare for a concert by going into energy-saving mode beforehand, whether I want it to or not. This usually happens a day or two before the performance, depending on how demanding the program is. It's a bit like what happens when someone fasts – the body starts conserving energy.

When the concert moment arrives, I have all that stored energy ready to be released. My body has learned to do this, and I don't fight it. I might take it very easy and sleep more than usual, and sometimes I'm simply not able to focus on any other work.

That said, I'm immensely grateful for this ability. It's a kind of blessing, since there are people who throw a javelin 90 meters in training but only manage 78 in the actual competition. For me, it's the other way around: I usually throw my longest javelin during the concert.

### **Is there anything else you'd like to add as a closing thought?**

I'm approaching 60, and I've seen how the world has changed over the decades. There are two particularly worrying trends that trouble me: in Finland, there's been a lot of talk about the decline of literacy, as well as increasing distress and shortening attention spans among schoolchildren. These issues are extremely unhealthy and deeply concerning.

But what troubles me most is that society seems to be giving in to these phenomena. By this, I mean that in music education – and in other fields as well – there's a growing tendency to hold back from demanding as much from young people as we once did. Instead, the aim often seems to be to entertain, for example in schools, and this is both tragic and a form of underestimating children.

We've worked extensively with schools – performing in them and serving as arts mentors, for example. In my experience, when children are offered content that is meaningful and engaging, even those who struggle to concentrate become interested, if there's something truly worth engaging with. The culture of constant entertainment can be harmful if it's the sole offering.



There is now a growing awareness that literacy and even cursive writing skills are disappearing. These are signs of a kind of atrophy, which means the degradation of the human inner world as a societal phenomenon, and this is a catastrophe. At the heart of it all is a fear of asking too much. To borrow Géza's words: the act of demanding – of searching for the very best in a young person and nurturing it into a lifelong inner resource – is an act of love.

**Who:** Olli Varonen

**Place of residence:** Salo, Finland

**Occupation:** Cellist

**Education:** Bachelor of Music (Sibelius Academy / Liszt Academy Budapest)

**Hobbies:** Literature and shot put

**A piece of music everyone should experience:** P. Tchaikovsky's Piano Trio *In Memory of a Great Artist*

Join the celebration of the *Cello Duo Varonen's* anniversary event, featuring a seminar session, book presentation, and concert! The event is free of charge.

**Time:** Thursday, 24 April 2025, 16:30–21:00

**Venue:** Liszt Academy, Chamber Music Hall X, Liszt Ferenc Square 8, 1061 Budapest

**Register for the event via this link.**

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