

## Cellist Joel Krosnick: a life-changing love affair with Servais' music

*Peter François*

*On 14 June 2021 the Servais Society received an order for sheet music from a certain Joel Krosnick from New York. Would it be THE Joel Krosnick, the world-renowned cellist who thought at the Juilliard School and toured for decades with the Quartet bearing that same name? That same cellist who made a recording in 1972 already of three Servais compositions? This was soon confirmed, and an interesting conversation ensued.*



### Young cello talent

Joel Krosnick was born in 1941 to a family of enthusiastic amateur musicians – his mother was a pianist, his father a violinist/doctor. There was so much recorded and live chamber music in his home that by the time Joel was twelve years old, he had played most of the Classical and

Romantic piano trio literature with his mother and violinist brother, Aaron. By the age of seventeen, he had read much of the standard quartet repertory with his family and friends.

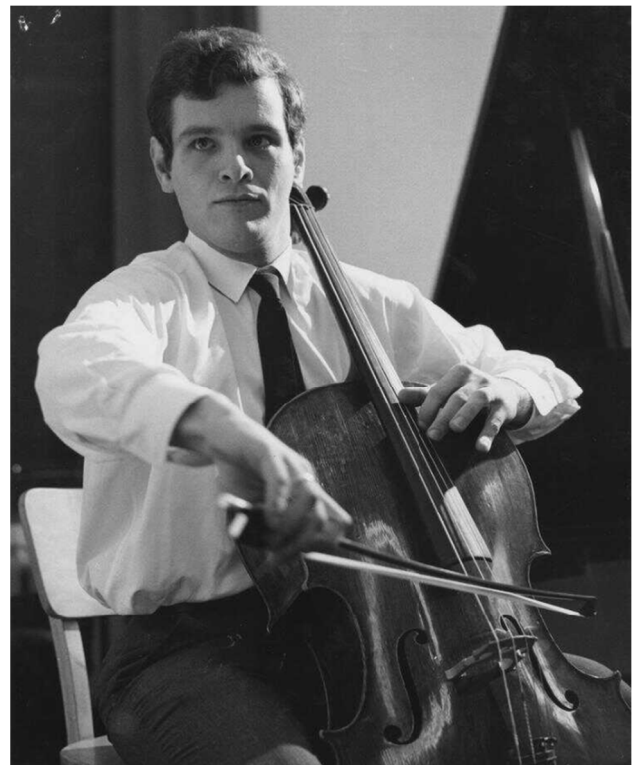
Attending Columbia University, Joel became involved with composers and new music, eventually becoming a founding member of The Group for Contemporary Music. The connection with the music of his time has become a lifelong passion, and has led to premieres and performances of the works by such composers as Roger Sessions, Elliott Carter, Charles Wuorinen, Ralph Shapey, Richard Wernick, Stefan Wolpe, Perry Goldstein, Milton Babbitt, Paul Zonn, Donald Martino, Stanley Walden, and Morton Subotnick.

### Life-changing love affair

And yet it would be a nineteenth-century cellist-composer that fueled Krosnick's career:

"In 1970, about to turn 30, and having completed several European solo tours, and several chamber tours also, I accepted my third teaching position at the California Institute of the Arts, but wondered indeed, much as my Juilliard students do now, what on earth I was going to do to be a performing musician in a relevant way. In fact I stopped playing the cello in public for more than a year.

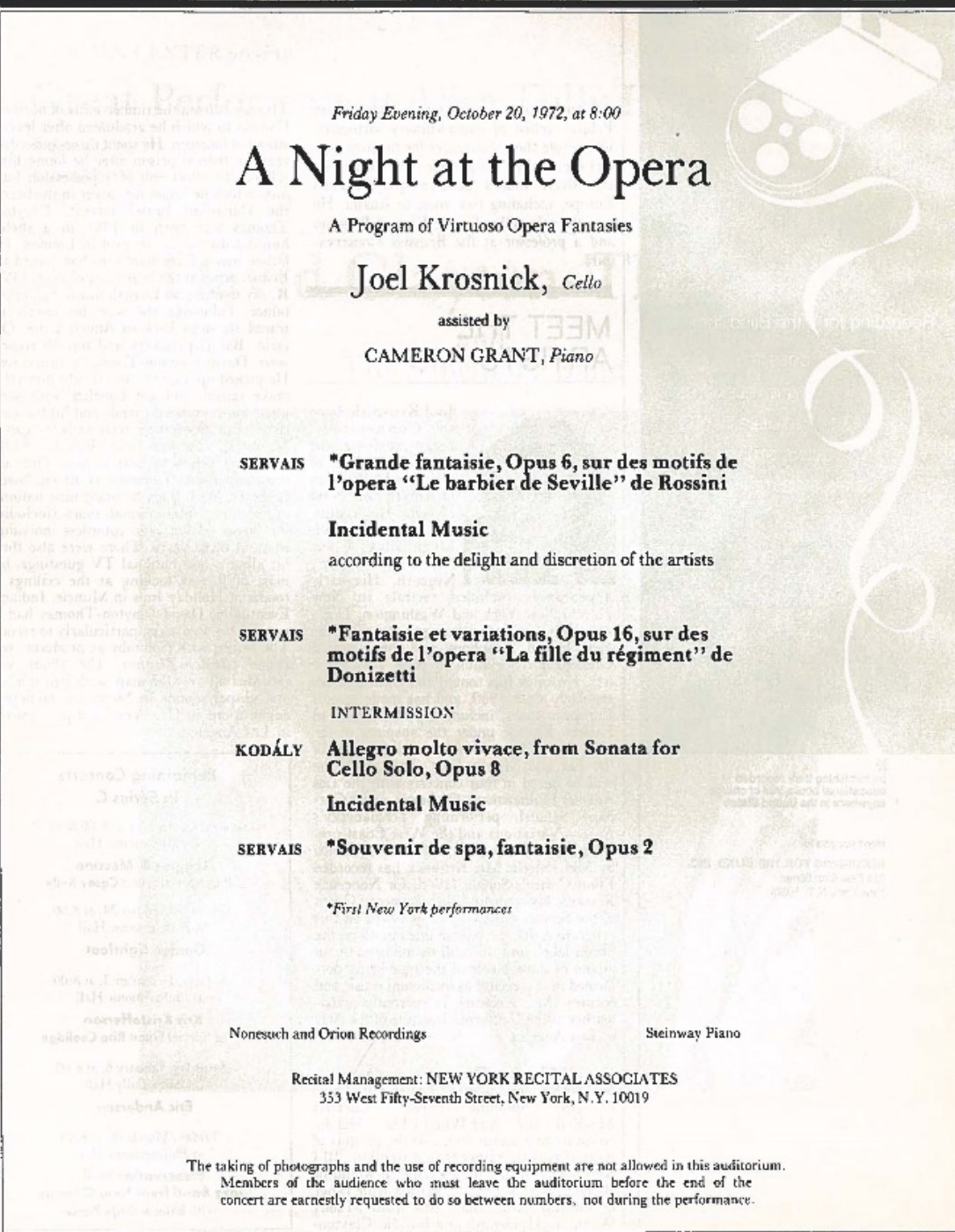
A long time before, a friend of mine had sent me a large collection gleaned from various antiquarian bookshops in Europe of virtuoso cello music by many of the great 18th and 19th century virtuoso cellists, Servais of course among them. I was not very attracted to difficult knucklebusters by various cellist-composers, but something about



Joel Krosnick, ca. 1967. University Photograph Collection (RG 120\_2). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

the elegant operatic use of the cello as Baritone, Tenor, and Mezzo Soprano of François Servais, who wrote as though he were reliving the operas he loved, with his cello singing all the parts; something about that 'cello' fascinated me. I could absolutely not play the elegant coloratura gestures, runs, staccati, trills, and flutterings he had played so brilliantly, but suddenly I thought that I'd really better learn how to do it.

My old sheet music, published by Schott in Mainz, edited by Hugo Becker, seemed to have the original Servais fingerings, which described well what he loved about playing the cello. So I worked for three years-or-so, struggling in my practicing, try-out performances, with one opportunity after another appearing magically as a result, I was hypnotized by the cello as an opera voice, and M. Servais changed the way I sang and danced on the cello. At the



*Alice Tully Hall*  
LINCOLN CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Friday Evening, October 20, 1972, at 8:00

# A Night at the Opera

A Program of Virtuoso Opera Fantasies

**Joel Krosnick, Cello**  
assisted by  
**CAMERON GRANT, Piano**

**SERVAIS \*Grande fantaisie, Opus 6, sur des motifs de l'opera "Le barbier de Seville" de Rossini**

**Incidental Music**  
according to the delight and discretion of the artists

**SERVAIS \*Fantaisie et variations, Opus 16, sur des motifs de l'opera "La fille du régiment" de Donizetti**

INTERMISSION

**KODÁLY Allegro molto vivace, from Sonata for Cello Solo, Opus 8**

**Incidental Music**

**SERVAIS \*Souvenir de spa, fantaisie, Opus 2**

*\*First New York performances*

Nonesuch and Orion Recordings Steinway Piano

Recital Management: NEW YORK RECITAL ASSOCIATES  
353 West Fifty-Seventh Street, New York, N.Y. 10019

The taking of photographs and the use of recording equipment are not allowed in this auditorium. Members of the audience who must leave the auditorium before the end of the concert are earnestly requested to do so between numbers, not during the performance.

A



end of added months and months of work, I actually presented a recital in Alice Tully Hall in New York, on October 20, 1972, which I called “A Night At the Opera”, in which I played basically an expanded version of the Marquis cd. And, by the end of that evening, I was singing and flying around the cello in a manner previously completely unknown to me. The New York critics declared that the Servais music was not very good, and since they had always known me as a ‘virtuoso with a flashing bow’ (which I absolutely had not been), they were not sure what I was trying to do. I remember being angry and insulted for Servais, whose music by then I had truly grown to love, and still do!”

In the documentary “Joel Krosnick: What to Play Next?”, Krosnick expresses his intense experience with Servais’ compositions as follows:

“I played a whole program with opera fantasies of Servais – every virtuoso thing you can imagine. I hadn’t done any such thing in my life. I was terrified and that was pretty good. It had nothing to do with quartet playing. It had to do with trying to play the instrument the way I would love to be able to play the instrument. To make the singing sounds, the gestures. And it was pretty good. And the last two pieces on the program were more than pretty good. They were a dream coming true. I remember

watching my hands doing staccato and various things on the cello. What the hell is this! I can’t do this stuff, are you kidding me? It was the first time I really found my own voice. I still remember being with a friend who said: “well, now, right presumably, you know you will play the cello.””

The “A Night at the Opera’ concert led to 2 recordings of the music performed there, released in 1972 by Orion Records. The record “Joel Krosnick plays A.F. Servais” contains the recording of Servais’ *Fantaisie sur Le Barbier de Séville*, the *Fantaisie sur la Fille du Régiment* and the *Souvenir de Spa*. The accompanying pianist was Cameron Grant. This was a pioneering effort by Krosnick; only one Servais composition was available as a recording by then (*Souvenir de Spa* by Anner Bijlsma ca. 1971). The record got a new lease of life thanks to a remastering by Marquis Records for a CD that was published in 2006.

‘Joel Krosnick plays A. F. Servais’, Orion Master Recordings, California, ORS 7290 (1972).

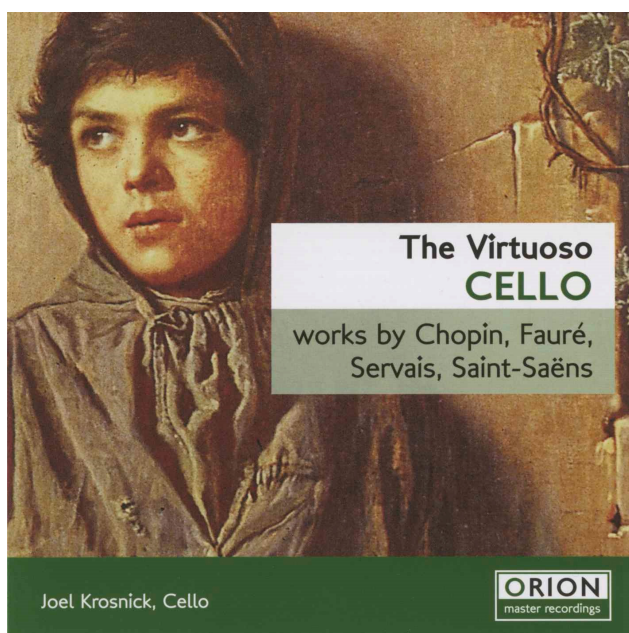


‘The Virtuoso Cello’ (CD), Marquis, Marquis 83117 (2006)

### Servais’ music will never grow old

“The three Fantaisies that I recorded and played that evening in 1972 total basically the Servais I performed publicly and repeatedly, though I did give individual performances at different times of the Servais’ Duos that he wrote with Léonard and Vieuxtemps. I practiced over the years, and continue practicing now in my retirement from public playing, the Caprices and a number of the other Servais Fantasies.

The relevance to cello playing and cello teaching of Servais is quite clear and obvious to me. The technical excellence, fleetness, and virtuosity represented by Servais in everything he wrote, whether Etude or Virtuoso work intended for public performance – this demanding knowledge of and comfort with the complete geography of the cello will never grow old. The Servais style of Cello





Virtuosity will be relevant to all music, from the Six Suites of Bach, through the 18th century virtuoso music of Boccherini and Anton Kraft, through the 19th and 20th century works of Tchaikovsky, Dvorak, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich, to anything written in the 21st century: Command of the cello; and Delight in the Virtuosity of the cello!!”

## Juilliard

Joel Krosnick has taught the cello and chamber music since his earliest professional life. He held professorships at the Universities of Iowa and Massachusetts, and has been artist-in-residence at the California Institute of the Arts. Since 1974, he has been on the faculty of the Juilliard School, where since 1994 he has served as chairman of the Cello Department. Krosnick has been associated with the Aspen Festival, Marlboro, the Tanglewood Music Center, the Daniel Days Music Festival, Ravinia, Yellow Barn and, presently, Kneisel Hall, of which he is an alumnus.

On 3 April 2021 Krosnick turned 80, but the indefatigable cellist remains very active. After 47 years, he is still teaching at Juilliard and taught the last class of the academic year there on 18 June 2021 via Zoom. Soon after, on 27 June he took up his job as Artistic Advisor of the Kneisel Hall Chamber Music Festival in Blue Hill, Main, 700 kilometers from home. He will continue to teach there until 15 August.

His reputation as a teacher is matched by his fame as a chamber musician. With his sonata partner of over forty years, pianist Gilbert Kalish, Krosnick has recorded a great deal of the cello sonata literature. Additionally, the duo has presented annual New York recitals, the last of which took place in 2015. As a member of the Juilliard String Quartet from 1974 to 2016, he performed the great quartet literature throughout North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. But the love for Servais remained: “For years, still well after I had joined the Juilliard Quartet, I continued to play this music, with which I’d had a life-changing love affair.



The Juilliard Quartet, ca. 1986: Robert Mann (1<sup>st</sup> violin), Joel Smirnoff (2<sup>nd</sup> violin), Samuel Rhodes (viola) and Joel Krosnick



The Juilliard Quartet, ca. 2015: Ronald Copes (2<sup>nd</sup> violin), Joel Krosnick (cello), Roger Tapping (viola) and Joseph Lin (1<sup>st</sup> violin) (photo Simon Powis)

## Sources:

- Electronic interview with Joel Krosnick, June 2021
- Film ‘Joel Krosnick: What to Play Next?’ (Riddle Films, Toronto)
- Wikipedia
- Kneisel Hall Chamber Music Festival

*Krosnick's Sonata recordings with pianist Gilbert Kalish, as well as the recordings of the Juilliard String Quartet, and numerous contemporary works are all available online on Spotify.*

