

Cello – In Search of a Voice
Dr Kate Kennedy
Wednesday 9 September 2026

Introduction

- What is a musician's relationship to their instrument, and what happens when that relationship is complicated? My interest in this question began when an arm injury severely limited my professional playing. I could only hold the instrument, think through music and imagine the physical movements of playing, but there was a gulf between that imagined sound and what my body could actually do.
- Years later, during a photo shoot, I was persuaded to fetch my cello. The photographer immediately said, "This is it." I realised that without the instrument my silhouette felt oddly incomplete; with it, I was more at ease. That moment became the starting point for my investigation. As a biographer, what could I understand about this extraordinarily close relationship with our instruments, and what stories could those instruments hold?
- A cello is unusually bodily: it has a neck, shoulders, ribs, back and belly, and is roughly the size of the person playing it. Player and instrument fit around one another. Alone, each can seem to represent either potential or loss; together they make a composite being.
- Cellists often talk about their instruments as if they are alive. Pablo Casals called his cello his companion; Stephen Isserlis described his as his "spiritual alter ego". Can a cello have something like a biography: a birth, a voice, a history, periods of silence, damage, survival and even death?
- To answer this I travelled across Europe with my own cello and the Bach Suites as companions, following instruments and players whose lives had become entangled. Some of the cellos I sought are among the most valuable in the world; others are broken, improvised or experimental. The recurring question is what survives in an object after the person has gone, and what can be recovered by listening to it again. Here is a snapshot of six of the stories I followed.

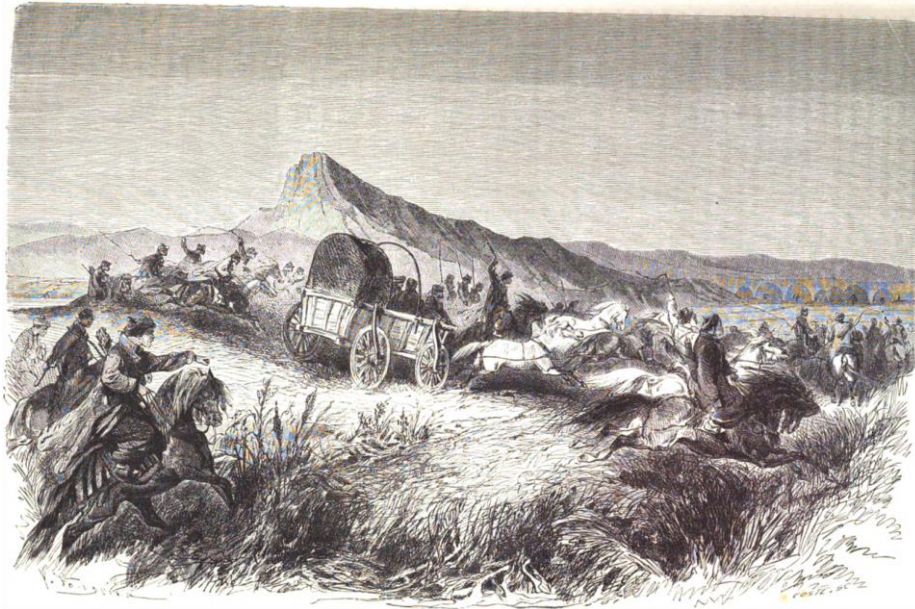


1. Lise Cristiani (1827–1853)

- Lise Cristiani was one of the first women to establish herself as a cello soloist, making her Paris debut in the 1840s. She is now almost entirely forgotten except for the instrument that bears her name, and for Mendelssohn's dedication to her of one of his Songs Without Words.
- The reviews of her performances reveal how difficult it was for nineteenth-century audiences to separate her playing from the spectacle of a woman holding a cello between her knees. Critics worried over posture, decorum, femininity and repertoire: what should a woman cellist look like, and what sort of music should she be allowed to play?
- Cristiani then did something extraordinary. She took her Stradivari cello east across Russia and Siberia, travelling through country barely mapped by Europeans, wrapping the instrument in wolf fur and dragging it on a sledge through snow, bogs and rivers. I became interested in the possibility that this journey also offered an escape from the gendered scrutiny of western concert life.
- At one point she was playing on the deck of a ship when whales, apparently attracted by the sound, began butting the hull. She and the cello survived. Cristiani herself did not return to Paris: exhausted by the journey, she died of cholera in 1853 in the Kamchatka region. Her body is lost; the cello came back.
- That survival changes the relationship between person and object. The 'Cristiani' Stradivari is now in Cremona's Museo del Violino. The player has disappeared almost completely, while the object has become celebrated, valuable and carefully preserved. Her name survives only through Mendelssohn's dedication, and, primarily through her cello.
- In the museum's "Treasure Trove", the great instruments hang behind glass in a dark, red room. I went there with violinist Min Kym, who had experienced her own beloved Stradivarius being stolen. She put her ear to the glass cases, trying to hear the silent instruments inside: a flicker of breath, a heartbeat, a voice waiting to be released.



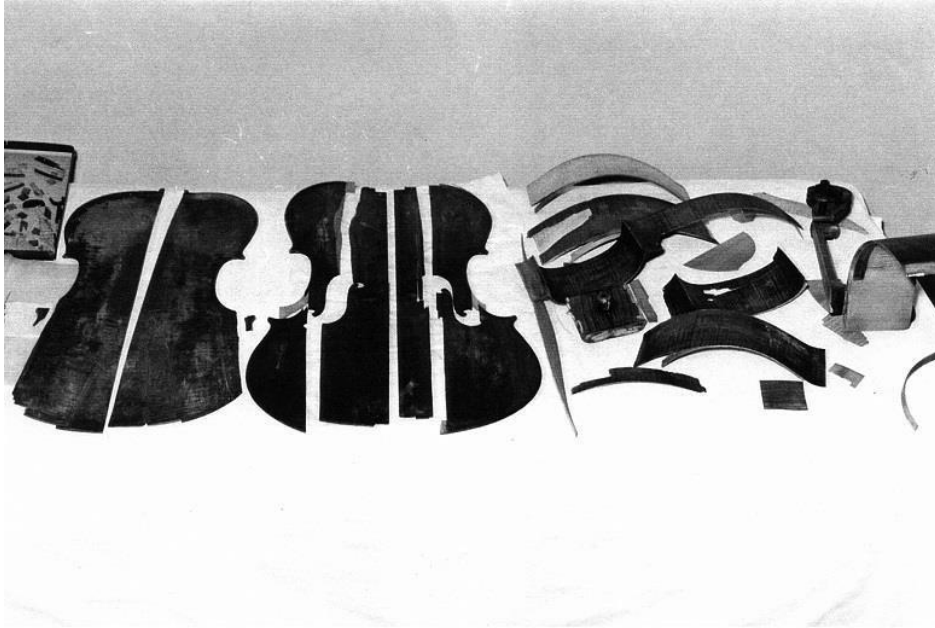
Lise Cristiani, whose Stradivari cello now bears her name.



Cristiani's journey took her and her cello across Russia and Siberia.

2. The Trieste Piano Trio and the wreck of the Ciudad de Asunción

- In Trieste I met violinist Renato Zanettovich, then 100 years old, the surviving member of the once great Trieste Piano Trio. Renato was too frail to talk, but his son told me about the Trio's cellist Amedeo Baldovino and Baldovino's Stradivari cello, the "Mara", with its varnish famously the colour of sunlight.
- The members of the Trio had grown up in Trieste during the Second World War. Renato remembered music as their means of blotting out what was happening around them: "Music with a capital M" became a way of living and, later, of surviving.
- On 10 July 1963, during a South American tour, fog grounded flights between Montevideo and Buenos Aires. Determined to reach their next concert, the Trio boarded the only vessel sailing, the Ciudad de Asunción, to cross the notoriously dangerous 250km of the River Plate. During the night the ship, lost in the fog, hit a wreck, caught fire, and began to sink.
- Baldovino grabbed the 'Mara' cello; the three musicians reached the deck amid panic and jumped into the freezing water with small life rafts. They spent hours in darkness and fog, watching other passengers lose their grip on floating debris and disappear. To keep themselves conscious, they talked about the next concert: fingerings, dynamics, speeds – anything that kept them inside the world of music.
- They were eventually rescued. The next day divers spotted what they thought was another body floating in the water. It was a cello case. At the naval base Baldovino opened it in front of cameras and found the Mara reduced to a mass of sodden black fragments.
- W. E. Hill & Sons spent more than a year reconstructing it, piece by piece. Against expectation, the cello survived and Baldovino believed that it sounded better than before, although its body still carries the scars of the wreck. An instrument can be broken almost beyond recognition and still retain both identity and voice.



Fragments of the "Mara" Stradivari

3. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch (1925–)

- Jewish cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch was sixteen when she was arrested after trying to escape from Nazi-controlled Breslau. On arrival at Auschwitz she happened to tell the prisoner tattooing her arm that she was a cellist. The camp orchestra needed one: its previous cellist was dead. That accident of musical identity helped to save her life.
- For her audition she played the slow movement of a Boccherini cello concerto. Playing in the women's orchestra gave her a function within the camp and therefore, precariously, a reason to be kept alive. The cello became something far more immediate than artistic expression: it was a means of survival.
- She was later transported to Bergen-Belsen and was close to death when the camp was liberated. Once she had recovered enough strength, she campaigned her liberators for a cello, and when one was found, she played for the other survivors.
- Anita went on to a distinguished career in Britain and was a founder member of the English Chamber Orchestra. What does it mean to say that "music saved her life"? Music cannot be separated from the grotesque circumstances in which it was required, but the cello remained part of the life that continued beyond them.



Anita Lasker-Wallfisch

4. Pál Hermann (1902–1944)

- Hungarian cellist and composer Pál Hermann was regarded in the 1920s as one of the great young cellists of his generation – even as a possible successor to Pablo Casals. However, as a Jewish musician living in Europe in the 1930s, he was gradually driven out of public life. He eventually went into

hiding in Toulouse.

- When Hermann was arrested by the Gestapo in 1944, his flat was sealed with his beautiful cello by Neapolitan maker Nicolo Gagliano inside. From the cattle truck taking him away he managed to get a note to his relative Jan Weevers saying that he had been arrested, but that the cello remained in the apartment.
- Jan cycled roughly 120 km carrying a cheap student cello, broke into Hermann's guarded flat through a back window, substituted the worthless instrument for Hermann's Gagliano, and escaped with the Gagliano in darkness under curfew. Hermann could not be rescued; his cello could.
- Hermann was deported from Drancy Camp in the suburbs of Paris to Kaunas, Lithuania. The men were taken to the Ninth Fort, where most were murdered. Retracing his journey, I stood between the mounds and spruce trees that were among the last things he would have seen, thinking about his cello, also made of spruce.
- The Gagliano survived the war but was sold by the family in 1952. Hermann's name disappeared from its paperwork – the sale catalogue described it only as having belonged to “a distinguished performer” – and by the 1960s the cello itself had vanished. One clue remained: an inscription burnt around the ribs, “Ego Anima Musicae Sum” – “I am the soul of music”.
- For years I searched for it, hoping that Hermann's recently rediscovered music might one day be played on his own instrument for his now elderly daughter Corrie, who had last seen her father and the cello when she was seven. I followed dealers, makers, old photographs and even tracked down the particular spruce tree from which the instrument had been made in the early 1700s.
- Then, shortly before a Wigmore Hall performance in 2024, Chinese cellist Jian Wang read my book, and thought he recognised the missing cello I had been describing. He put me in touch with the Australian cellist Sam Lucas, who Jian had seen perform on a Nicolo Gagliano with writing burnt around its ribs. The photographs arrived: the inscription was the same. The lost cello had been found.
- Sam joined us at the last minute at Wigmore Hall, to play Hermann's music on the instrument Corrie had not heard for some eighty-five years. The cello has since been reunited with Hermann's family in public performances, including in the European Parliament in Brussels in 2025 as the focal point of the EU's commemoration of the liberation of the camps. The object has recovered the history that had been taken from it: it will not again be described merely as the instrument of an unnamed “distinguished performer”.



5. The “Bee Cello”

- Professor Martin Bencsik studies the behaviour of honey bees. His wife is a professional cellist, and when she rescued a broken cello that was about to be thrown away, they had the wonderfully eccentric idea of giving it to a colony of bees. A cello is, after all, a wooden cavity of roughly the sort bees seek in the wild.
- The instrument stands in an orchard at Holme Pierrepont Hall near Nottingham. The f-holes have become the bees’ front doors. At certain moments the cello appears to darken as thousands emerge in a cloud, like black notes emigrating from the stave.
- Inside, the resonating cavity is solid with honeycomb and bodies. The bees have also altered the instrument. They have fixed the bridge and soundpost with resin and carefully modified the f-holes, filling small gaps while apparently respecting the varnish and preserving symmetry. Behaviour of this kind had not previously been observed in an ordinary hive.
- Some bees sit on the polished front and repeatedly stroke the varnish. Martin wonders whether they might be responding to their own reflections: perhaps the cello has, quite literally, given the bees back to themselves.
- The cello seems silent to us until an accelerometer is attached to its bridge. Through headphones, the colony becomes audible as rattling, rustling and droning vibration. On a windy day we also heard the air catching the strings: an almost imperceptible, spectral duet between the instrument and its inhabitants.
- I played Bach to them. Bees do not hear as humans do; they apprehend vibration through their bodies. They did not swarm or attack. If anything, the colony seemed to quieten slightly – as though politely tolerating a visiting cellist who had interrupted music that was already taking place.
- The encounter altered my sense of what it means for a cello to have a voice. Perhaps sound does not require a human performer, or even human ears. The bee cello is simultaneously instrument, architecture, scientific apparatus and home.



The “Bee Cello”



6. The “Open String” Cello project

- The final cello turns from preservation and recovery towards making something new. With Robert Brewer Young of W. E. Hill & Sons – the firm that had reconstructed the ‘Mara’ – I worked with discarded fragments of instruments, stray pieces of wood, old pegs and strings to create an experimental hybrid cello.
- The aim was to design an instrument that young musicians could eventually make for themselves: something drawing on centuries of instrument-making knowledge while using modern methods and materials, and simple enough to construct without years of luthier training.
- The project was conceived with young players in Rosario, Argentina, in mind (coincidentally, not far from the River Plate and the site of the Mara’s shipwreck). In communities where music can offer structure, belonging and protection, an instrument case carried on the shoulder has been described as a kind of “bullet-proof vest”. The players are accomplished; but good instruments are scarce.
- Making the prototype myself meant learning the cello from the inside out: shaping rough wood, understanding how its parts depend upon one another, and seeing an object that I had known for most of my life become strange again.
- We called it the “Open String” cello. Around it we placed words inspired by the inscription on Hermann’s Gagliano and by Ursula Vaughan Williams’s image of player and cello as a composite creature – half instrument, half person, something like a centaur.
- This cello does not yet have the accumulated biography of a Stradivari or Gagliano. Its importance lies in the fact that it has a story still to acquire, and is intended to pass into the hands of a young player who will give it one.



Making the prototype “Open String” cello

Conclusion

- I began my travels by trying to understand my own fractured relationship with the cello after injury. Following other players and instruments gradually made that private question much larger: what does an object retain of the people who have held it, and what happens when player and instrument are separated?
- These six stories move through very different kinds of survival. Cristiani disappeared while her Stradivari remains; the ‘Mara’ was shattered and rebuilt; the cello became a means of literal survival for Anita Lasker-Wallfisch; Hermann’s Gagliano survived his murder, lost its story and eventually found it again; the bee cello acquired non-human inhabitants and an unexpected music; and the ‘Open String’ cello begins with almost no history at all.
- The cellos are never simply witnesses. They are altered by what happens to them – by water, repair, ownership, silence, resin, memory and the bodies that play or inhabit them. Their biographies intersect with human ones, sometimes preserving stories that would otherwise disappear.
- In tracing those lives, and in making and playing cellos myself along the way, I found my own instrument becoming less an emblem of what I had lost and more a way back into sound. The journey to find other people’s cellos brought me, unexpectedly, back to my own.
- Pál Hermann’s inscription offers one possible ending: “Ego Anima Musicae Sum” – “I am the soul of music.” A cello cannot preserve a person intact, but it can carry something onwards: a name, a touch, a scar, a story, and the possibility of being heard again.

© Dr Kate Kennedy 2026

References and Further Reading

- Kennedy, Kate. *Cello: A Journey Through Silence to Sound* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024).
- Piatigorsky, Gregor. *Cellist* (New York: Doubleday, 1965)
- Faber, Tony, *Stradivarius: Five Violins, One Cello and a Genius* (London: Macmillan, 2004)
- Cowling, Elizabeth, *The Cello* (London: Batsford, 1975)
- Campbell, Margaret, *The Great Cellists* (London: Faber, 1988)
- Agamben, Giorgio, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999)
- Appadurai, A. (ed) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: CUP, 1986)