BRANNON CHO, a rising young cellist, dives into the first movement of Sergei Prokofiev’s Symphony-Concerto in E Minor, Op. 125. The virtuosic piece requires tremendous strength and dexterity to tackle complex finger work, triple fortissimi, and triple pianissimi, along with empathy for the fluctuating moods of the music.

After nearly 40 minutes of vigorous bowing, Cho glides into a sensual section, sliding the bow over the strings, building to the climax—a repeated arpeggiated figure in E major played first on the A and D strings, then on the G as well, high up on the cello’s register—for an exhausting eight seconds. Hiking his bow with a flourish on the final note, Cho rests and dabs the sweat trickling down his face and onto the curves of his 330-year-old instrument.

Fellow students in the New England Conservatory of Music master class applaud. Then comes a kindly “Do you need a sponge?” from Cho’s teacher, Laurence Lesser ’61. A gentle-looking man with lanky limbs and a puff of white hair, Lesser has played the cello for 74 years, and taught it since he was even younger than Cho. A math concentrator at Harvard, who instead pursued a music career, he studied with masters like Gaspar Cassadó and Gregor Piatigorsky and won major awards, including at the 1966 Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, where he met his future wife, the concert violinist Masuko Ushioda. He went on to perform with orchestras around the country, and around the world. Along the way, in 1974, he joined the faculty at the New England Conservatory (NEC). He served as president from 1983 to 1996, overseeing restoration of the acoustical gem Jordan Hall, before, as he likes to say, “re-rising” to teach.

The NEC last fall celebrated Lesser’s contributions, and eightieth birthday, with a concert by the NEC Philharmonia, conducted by Hugh Wolff. The evening featured Lesser’s own impassioned rendition of Ernest Bloch’s “Schelomo: Rhapsodie is cheered in the book. But look also at what that has wrought. Doctors in training, university lecturers, even public defenders have gone on strike to protest benefits cuts. The Labour Party, firmly in the grip of its hard-left leader Jeremy Corbyn, has converted disaffection with austerity—especially among the young—into a potent political force. Should Theresa May’s tenuous hold on government slip, Corbyn could easily take control in the next general election and introduce spendthrift policies that eliminate whatever good the austerity did.

The paradox is that if fiscal policymaking were left to prudent hands, austerity would almost never be needed. The authors do not deviate from the economics orthodoxy that governments should run surpluses in boom times and deficits in lean times. The German allergy to deficits of all kinds, in a show of Teutonic “moral superiority,” is rejected by Alesina as “bad economics.” But the same goes for countries that run up debts “for no good reason.” Take Greece. The country radically expanded public spending during years of strong economic growth, while neglecting to crack down on tax evasion, and accumulated a colossal debt load, which threatened to upend the entire Eurozone. The unwinding of the crisis remains painful (unemployment has persisted at Great Depression levels, and even under optimistic forecasts, Greece will be paying off its debt until 2060)—and gives ample opportunity to populists on both the left and the right.

Or look no further than the American economy. Despite a record-low unemployment rate and decade-long recovery, Congress has passed an enormous tax cut without an accompanying plan to pay for it. The budget deficit has swollen 17 percent at precisely the time it should be reduced. In the fiscal-policy kit, austerity ought to be a rare tool. Instead, it promises to become recurrent.

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Cho, a graduate of Northwestern's Bienen
School of Music and already a recognized
talent when he began NEC's Artist Diploma
program. Lesser seeks students with whom
he feels “a human bond,” and who “can do
more than just play fast and accurately—
people who have something inside of them
that's an itch they have to scratch.”

Following Cho's Prokofiev presentation,
Lesser offers a few comments. “The hardest
note in that piece," he says, is the first one, a
high B, “because you have to be able to hold
it long enough to make it sound like you're
as big as the orchestra.”

Cho strikes the high B again, drawing
across the strings with an almost defiant
tone.

“No, no—gently,” Lesser cautions, then
bodily sings the initial sound, but quick-
ly retreats, holding it enticingly low and
taut, like he’s making the audience hold its
breath, before raising the volume again at
the end. The note is held in a dip, like a sus-
pension bridge.

Cho tries again. “Now that sounds like
you're powerful,” says Lesser, smiling. “Of
course it starts loud, but now I can also hear
the growth that gives the impression it’s all
louder. That other way sounds like you're
desperate.”

The Symphony-Concerto also contains
what Lesser calls “the dance part,” in the
third movement. It “starts with this very he-
roic—dah-dah—dahdeeddahdeedoo,” he sings
again, explaining the piece, “and then it be-
comes a waltz—oom-pah-pah, oom-pah-
pah.” Lesser often pictures music, creating
a narrative in his mind. “That theme sounds
to me like a bunch of guys in the cadet corps
in St. Petersburg in the end of the nineteenth
century getting together and saying, ‘We
save our country. It’s up to us’—something out
of Tolstoy," he adds—a
fan of Russian litera-
ture, he’s read “Broth-
ers K" at least three
times—"then they all
go out and dance. And
in the middle of that, is a Jewish wedding
theme: eyump pah-pah.
A lot of Jewish culture,
and I'm Jewish, finds its
way into Prokofiev and
Shostakovich.”

In class, he pushes
Cho to play the sec-
tion with less rigidity, to make it "swing,"
"The first one was good, then the other went
back to the smashing sound," Lesser says,
then addresses the entire group as much
as Cho: "It's all about—what mood do you
want people to feel here?"

“Joyful,” Cho answers, hesitating. “A little
miscellaneous."
“Yes,” Lesser agrees. “But joy is not yadetta,
yadetta," he adds, mimicking an agitated,
repetitive quality.
He has Cho repeat the waltzing phrase.
Then again: “But now, play the first note a
little louder than the rest, that's all.” And
then again.

“You want to make people smile—'Oh,
he's having such a good time playing!'—and
not see that you're working. It has to have a
kind of poise," says Lesser, who speaks slow-
ly and deliberately, so no one misses a single
word he has to say. Then he quotes a Russian
phrase—echoing his most influential teacher,
the Ukrainian-born virtuoso Piatigorsky—
and translates it: “Make it as light as feathers.”

Eight days after the class, Lesser was
at home preparing for a trip to Helsinki,
where he'd sit on the jury for the Interna-
tional Paulo Cello Competition 2018. Among
the 25 contenders were Cho and Timotheos
Petrin, another of Lesser's NEC master-class
students. While talking in his living room,
Lesser says he loves Helsinki, not least be-
cause Finland vigorously supports classical
music and musical education. It's also the
homeland of composer and violinst Jean Si-
belius, recordings of whose music are among
the hundreds of records, CDs, books packed,
along with stereo equipment, into a wall of
shelves that dominates the room.

He pulls out a few albums recorded by
his wife, also an NEC teacher, who died in
2013. There are photographs of her, and of
her with former longtime Boston Symphony
Orchestra (BSO) music director Seiji Oza-
wa, their friend, who is among the count-
less other musicians across the globe whom
they've known, played with, and admired
during the last half-century.

Life without music is unimaginable.
Raised in Los Angeles by a pianist mother
and a lawyer father, Lesser was introduced
to classical works early on. At a concert of
the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s youth or-
chestra, his parents asked what instrument
he wanted to play. He chose the double bass.
Too big, they determined, but, responding to
his preference for deeper sounds, gave him a
half-sized cello for his sixth birthday.

I'm still trying to learn how to play,” he
says, not really joking. “It's like practicing
medicine or languages: you never stop learn-
ing, you never stop growing.” At times, he
regrets not also mastering the piano. As an
adult, he'd occasionally plunk away at home,
he says, but “My wife would hear me and
say, 'Stop playing. Your sound is so ugly.'” He
smiles and shrugs: “Well, she was a great vi-
olinist and had an absolutely beautiful sound.”

By the time he got to Harvard, Lesser was
an accomplished musician and performer
who chose a liberal-arts (over a conservato-
ry) education because he also enjoyed math,
literature, and science. He soon realized that
he lacked his classmates’ laser-like penetra-
tion of mathematical challenges, but had, compared to his musical peers, an “inborn... natural spark.” After graduation, he studied for one year in Germany with Gaspar Cassadó, then returned home. By 1963 he was studying with Piatigorsky, a faculty member at the University of Southern California, where Lesser became his teaching assistant.

Piatigorsky had escaped Russia as a young man, living in Poland, Germany, and France before moving to the United States and becoming a citizen in 1942. A gregarious raconteur, he (along with Pablo Casals and others) helped transform the cello from its traditional, supporting role into a starring one, and often performed with the BSO, which at one point was directed by his longtime friend, Serge Koussevitzky. It was a 1953 recording of Piatigorsky’s “Schelomo” with the BSO that, for Lesser, epitomized the composition’s romantic, combative, and soulful resonance.

In 1970, Lesser left Los Angeles to become a cello professor at the Peabody Institute in Baltimore (now affiliated with Johns Hopkins); he moved to the NEC four years later. As with his mentor, Piatigorsky, also a pedagogue at Tanglewood Music Center, teaching for Lesser became integral to his artistry.

What’s required of a cellist? Lesser re-frames the question: “What does it take to be distinctive in anything? You have to master your craft, but you also have to have something to do with it. So, it doesn’t matter if you’re a cellist or a kazoo player.”

People attend arts events “because they’re hoping to get something that they don’t have,” he says. Too many young people these days “think they’re being judged, so they have to be perfect—and I think they should try to be,” he acknowledges. “But the most important thing is that they have to understand that they are there to share a vision or a feeling with somebody who is interested in knowing about that.”

Cho, he says, is “an amazing instrumentalist. In my work with him, I am trying build on that to get him to find out: what does he want to do with that?” Petrin, whose Helsinki repertoire included Shostakovich’s less well-known, but demanding, second cinksi repertoire included Shostakovich’s...