

# Young talent, Old Masters: Rachel Mercer and her Stradivarius cello

Cellist Rachel Mercer helps a fine Stradivarius instrument get regular play and sound its best

By [John Terauds](#) Entertainment Reporter

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Rachel Mercer with the 1696 “Bonjour” Stradivarius cello she has on loan from the Canada Council for the Arts. “It kind of plays itself,” she says.

Rachel Mercer is living proof that the road to success can be a group effort.

The Edmonton-born Torontonion recently won three years of use of one of the world's most valuable cellos, and spends most of her time on tour. Yet she has achieved this as a collaborator, not a solo star.

For the past nine years, Mercer has been a member of the Aviv String Quartet, headquartered in Israel. Closer to home, she is a member of the Made in Canada piano quartet. She founded the Mercer-Oh Trio with her sister Akemi and pianist Gregory Oh. She is principal cello with the Via Salzburg Chamber Orchestra. This season, she has been performing with Andrew Burashko's Art of Time Ensemble.

She is also guest principal cello for the Canadian Opera Company's upcoming production of Georges Bizet's popular opera, *Carmen*.

In the middle of all this, she has found time to appear in recital Thursday with pianist Minsoo Sohn, winner of the 2006 Honens International Piano Competition, for Music Toronto's chamber music series at the Jane Mallett Theatre.

This recital, which has cello sonatas by Beethoven, Rachmaninov and Shostakovich, along with a new piece by Mark Nerenberg on the program, could be one of the great concert bargains of the season, with a top ticket price of \$15.

The tickets may be discount-bin cheap, but the talent is top-drawer. Mercer – who started playing the cello at age 3, and who has been through the international music-competition wringer – is not seduced by the trappings of big concert halls and being a solo star. She loves what she does, and loves sharing the experience with other people as often as possible. "I'm really happy with the things I do," Mercer says brightly.

She does admit that all the travel can become tiring. Even though she's barely past age 30, she adds, "Now that I'm getting older I can start to feel that. But, at the moment, the kind of music I play, the kind of people I play with, and the kind of music I get to play, I can't give that up."

The cellist met pianist Sohn a few years ago at the Arthur Rubinstein International Master Piano Competition, where the Aviv Quartet was the resident chamber music ensemble.

"We played a Dvorak quartet together and he was fantastic," Mercer recalls. "He actually won the chamber music prize, not the competition. He is such a sensitive musician and so humble, and yet has huge knowledge and depth of feeling in him. It's amazing to work with him."

The two have played together several times, including at the Ottawa Chamber Music Festival in 2008 and at the Kitchener-Waterloo Chamber Music Society last week.

Mercer is overjoyed at winning the use (until 2012) of the Canada Council's \$7.5 million "Bonjour" Stradivarius cello, which was made in 1696. This is the third Old Master instrument she has been lucky –and talented – enough to borrow in recent years.

Like anyone who has tried their hand at one of these treasures, Mercer admits that there is something truly special about such an instrument. "You can do nothing and it sounds wonderful, it kind of plays itself," says the smiling player of the "Bonjour" Strad.

"Actually, if you really dig into it, it gives so much more. There's a huge range in the instrument and I have to learn how to use it."

Fortunately, there are plenty of opportunities. The cello is her constant companion. (Mercer admits with a relieved smile that the Canada Council takes care of the insurance for the antique cello.)

"I'm supposed to play it everywhere, that's what it's there for," Mercer says. She jokes about how her own cello sits in a spare room, unplayed. When she did her audition for the Canada Council last year, she realized she hadn't touched it in the three years since her previous audition, when she was granted the use of another Old Master cello.

"It was stiff and it needs some work and care," Mercer admits of her own cello. Like any acoustic instrument, it demands regular playing to sound and feel its best. Not that it's a bad cello – it was made by late-19th century French master craftsman Paul Baily.

Unlike many of her peers, Mercer hasn't recorded much, saying she prefers live concerts. "If you don't have the feeling of time moving in front of a live audience, you can't tell how to shape things," she explains. "Of course, it's also different in every performance."

It also helps when your collaborators are also your friends.

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Just the facts

**WHO:** Cellist Rachel Mercer, with pianist Minsoo Sohn

**WHERE:** Jane Mallett Theatre, 27 Front St. E.

**WHEN:** Jan. 14 at 8 p.m.

**TICKETS:** \$5-\$15 at 416-366-7723 or [www.stlc.com](http://www.stlc.com)