



That Carbon Fiber Cello

By now we all probably know that Yo Yo Ma did NOT play his carbon fiber cello at the Inauguration and we didn't hear the real notes he actually did play. But Mr Ma does play a carbon fiber cello and did play one at the Washington Mall for 10 days in 100-degree heat during a Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 2003. He said that in heat like that he could control the strings on his carbon fiber cello in a way not possible on a wooden cello, and joked that the instrument could probably even double as a barbecue.

Because the instruments are virtually unbreakable, they are perfect for travel (easily checked as baggage with a really sturdy case) and extreme weather conditions. There are amazing weather stories. A cello owned by **Kaaren Makas**, (37 years principal cello, New Orleans Philharmonic, Emeritus principal, Louisiana Philharmonic) survived the flood waters of Hurricane Katrina, needing only new strings, bridge and soundpost, to be as new after spending two weeks under water.

Mark W. Dudrow, a cellist in Colorado, has another remarkable story at the other weather extreme. In a major blizzard, he had to abandon his jeep in deep drifts and white-out conditions to walk the final 3 miles to his home. He says, "I could not bear to leave my cello in the car due to risk of theft or being demolished by a snowplow... besides who wants to be snowed in without their cello?" He continues, "My Luis and Clark cello is housed in a molded SKG case, so I flipped it over on its face and dragged it like a sled, with the molded part of the case that protects the strings and bridge acting as a sort of keel/runner.

When we finally made it home I let it sit for an hour or so while the snow melted off into a pool on the greenhouse floor. Upon opening the case I found that drifting snow had gotten inside and there was water running down the face of the cello. So I dried it off with a paper towel and sure enough, it was not only playable, but still perfectly in tune!!!! Now that I can feel my fingers again, I am going to go play it!"

Julia Adams, violist in the Portland (ME) String Quartet agrees. She says, "Here in Maine, especially in the winter months, our fine wooden instruments have many problems adjusting to changes in temperature and humidity. The carbon fiber Luis and Clark eliminates those worries completely."

Price is another consideration. ACMP cellist **Wayne Benjamin** (Chicago, IL), who has owned his carbon fiber cello for about a year and a half, writes, "When you compare the price of these carbon fiber cellos (circa \$7000) to the wood instruments available for a similar price, such as an Eastern European or Chinese "student" level cello, I think the choice is unambiguous. The carbon fiber cello, to me, sounds as good as or better than instruments currently selling for \$30-75,000."

The carbon fiber cello is the brainchild of **Luis Leguia**, a cellist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra for over 40 years, who then, as he says, "Got bitten by the sailing bug." A comparison between the way old wooden boats were crafted and the manufacture of ultra-sophisticated boats in carbon fiber prompted him to wonder what a cello would sound like in such a medium. He made the first few cellos himself, and then teamed up with Steve Clark, a master in the production and fabrication of carbon fiber products and chairman of Vanguard Sailboats (an industry leader in supplying boats, accessories and services to the small sailboat market) for production. The coincidence has a certain serendipity that the new company, exploring new technology for instruments, should be named Luis and Clark and bring to mind the famous explorers, Lewis and Clark, who searched for the Northwest Passage in the early 19th century.

What's it like to play? Luis says, "It's lighter and responsive, and very strong. I wanted a cello that would sound great. I wanted the tone of a Stradivarius or Montagnana cello and I wanted it to carry out over orchestra when you play a concerto. And I wanted it with a beautiful quality. In the final result, you can see it's not a wood cello but the quality is beautiful, the power and reverberation is just superb, and the depth of it I find wonderful. I'm extremely pleased."

Wayne Benjamin now plays it exclusively, saying "It's so easy to play. It's not at all moody like a wood cello because the carbon fiber is totally inert and doesn't react to temperature or humidity. The body is



Yo Yo Ma with his carbon fiber cello

Photo: Kevin Sprague ©2008

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narrower front to back than a wood cello, so it is closer to the player and easier to bow and finger and its continuous curve on the sides (similar to a guitar) make it very comfortable to hold with no digging into ones knees. The cello speaks VERY fast – the notes just fly off of it. The response is really amazing. I can play this cello for hours without encountering arm, shoulder or back problems. On my wood cello I need to take an Advil break after about 30 minutes.”

Violinist **Laura Goldberg** bought a carbon fiber violin after performing with Luis and his “carbon fiber choir” ensemble in August, 2007. She says, “I bought it because it is a lot of fun to play! The tone is exciting and robust, and the design is cool and modern. The experience of playing on the carbon is different from traditional violins made of wood. The “feel” of the neck on the traditional violin is not the same as the smooth, slippery feeling of the carbon, so shifting positions feels very different. The instrument “speaks” a bit differently, too. The tone of the carbon is more direct and immediate than the wood. Also a bit brighter and stronger.”

ACMP Board Member **Linda Rosenthal** (Vn, Juneau, AK) says, “My husband Paul, the Artistic Director of the Sitka Summer Festival, and I each have a Luis and Clark violin and we also own a Luis and Clark viola. Paul uses them in performances. In fact, he’s quoted on Luis’s testimonial page as follows: “The Luis and Clark violin is not only a terrific solo violin, but it spent the entire month of June performing chamber music with Stradivaris, Guarneris, Amatis and many other superb traditional instruments. It takes its place completely naturally in the company of great string instruments.”

It is quite an experience to hear the carbon fiber choir. Outside the Hall, if you hear them before you see them, you have no idea that unusual instruments are inside. The appearance is dramatic — all the performers play carbon fiber instruments, and all wear white shirts with black skirts or pants to contrast with and highlight the rich black sheen of the instruments. On Friday, January 30, 2009, the choir performed in New York City The program, designed to show off the versatile range of the instruments, included Villa Lobos *Bachianas Brasilieras No. 5* for 8 celli and soprano, and *Bachianas Brasilieras No.1* for “cello orchestra,” the Edward Elgar *Elegy*, and *Concerto Grosso No 1* by Ernst Bloch. Performers included the cellists Luis Leguia himself, **Peter Sachon** who is currently playing his carbon fiber cello in the Lincoln Center Theater production of *South Pacific*, and **Mihai Marica**, principal cello in the New Haven Symphony, who won the distinguished first prize and the audience choice award at the 2006 Dr. Luis Sigall International Competition in Viña del Mar, Chile, playing his carbon fiber cello.

And the remark of the day? Musician to Luis: “Do you still recommend Windex to clean them?” Response: “Absolutely!”



The Carbon Fiber Choir performing at the Calhoun Performing Arts Series in the Mary Lea Johnson Performing Arts Center, New York City.

Back (L-R): Paul Ognissanti, Ben Clinesmith

Front: Mihai Marica, Peter Sachon

Conductor: Daniel Epstein

Below: The group performing Bloch’s *Concerto Grosso*
Inset: creator of the carbon fiber instruments, Luis Leguia



Photos by Beth Krieger, The Calhoun Performing Arts Center