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Jules Eskin, legendary BSO principal cellist since 1964, dies at 85

By **Bryan Marquard** | GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 16, 2016

As a 5-year-old, Jules Eskin sat close when his father played the cello, drawn by the instrument's sound – and more.

“Tone! Tone! That’s the whole story! It’s tone! If you have a tone, you can do anything,” Mr. Eskin said in an interview posted on opuscello.com.

“Without tone, you do nothing! And once you have that tone, you need to speak with that tone!” Then he quoted his former teacher, the legendary cellist

Gregor Piatigorsky: “You must taste the blood of that tone!”



BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA ARCHIVES

Jules Eskin.

A renowned musician in his own right, Mr. Eskin became the Boston Symphony Orchestra's principal cellist in 1964, and his tenure was

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Symphony Hall to China. He was 85 when he died of cancer Tuesday in his Brookline home.

“Jules Eskin is a legend in the cello world,” the cellist Yo-Yo Ma said in a statement through the BSO. “A role model for me, he has always embodied the best of what a cellist could be – a consummate musician as a solo artist, an ensemble musician, and as principal cellist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.”

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Performing under BSO music directors Erich Leinsdorf, William Steinberg, Seiji Ozawa, James Levine, and Andris Nelsons, Mr. Eskin was featured as a soloist in pieces including Ernest Bloch's “Schelomo,” the Brahms Double Concerto, Beethoven's Triple Concerto, William Schuman's “A Song of Orpheus,” and Richard Strauss's “Don Quixote.”

Reviewing a 1982 “Don Quixote” performance, Globe critic Richard Dyer said Mr. Eskin “was simply magnificent as the Knight of the Doleful Countenance because he is so magnificent as a cellist. Eskin is such a strong and centered and unfussed musician; his playing was noble in tone and in character.”

In 1964, Mr. Eskin also became a founding member of the Boston Symphony Chamber Players, which at the time was the only chamber ensemble composed of a major orchestra's principal players, according to the BSO. The ensemble's 2011 recording "Profanes et Sacrees: 20th-Century French Chamber Music" was nominated for a Grammy.

"There is no doubt that Jules Eskin will be counted as one of the legendary cellists of the 20th and 21st centuries," Mark Volpe, the BSO's managing director, said in a statement.

Malcolm Lowe, the BSO's concertmaster, added that Mr. Eskin "embodied the heart and soul of our string section. He had an inspired musicality and infallible instinct coupled with a masterful understanding of the cello, its sound, and its role in all of the music that we played. His sound was always present, always poignant, and always incredibly moving."

On Feb. 6, Mr. Eskin performed for the final time with the BSO as Nelsons conducted Prokofiev's "Romeo and Juliet." In a statement, Nelsons said Mr. Eskin "brought the orchestra such a wealth of experience and influenced the glorious sound of the orchestra for more than half a century, a staggering commitment for which we owe him so much."

Born in Philadelphia, Jules Louis Eskin was introduced to the cello by his father, Samuel, a tailor who emigrated from Russia and auditioned unsuccessfully for the Philadelphia Orchestra. Instead, he played in

small orchestras for silent movies. At 7, Mr. Eskin had already been taking piano lessons for two years when his father bought him a cello. “I used to have little contests with my father, who had a very nice tone,” he said told opuscello.com. “He would say: ‘Let’s see who can play this the most beautifully.’”

The extended family was musical, too. Mr. Eskin’s second-cousin Mark Ludwig is a BSO violist; Mark’s brother Michael is a former Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra concertmaster. Mr. Eskin’s cousin Irving Ludwig – father to Mark and Michael – was a longtime Philadelphia Orchestra violinist. “This has been as natural to us as a craftsman giving his trade to his children,” Mr. Eskin told the Globe in 2012.

As a teenager, he told opuscello.com, “I was ready to flee the family home.” Mr. Eskin auditioned when the Dallas Symphony’s conductor was in Philadelphia and, at 16, was offered a contract.

He also studied at the Philadelphia Musical Academy and at the Curtis Institute of Music, where Piatigorsky was one of his teachers. During the Korean War, Mr. Eskin enlisted to play in the Army band, “which was a sort of Glenn Miller-type orchestra,” he recalled. While in the Army, he won a Walter W. Naumburg Foundation award in 1954, and subsequently performed a debut Town Hall recital in New York City.

After leaving the Army, he stayed in New York for several years to play with what was then the City Center Opera, and later moved to the Cleveland Orchestra, where he spent three years as principal cello under

conductor George Szell.

Mr. Eskin, who as a teenager had been a fellowship student at Tanglewood Music Center with Serge Koussevitzky conducting, auditioned in 1964 to become the BSO's principal cellist. In the years since, he traveled extensively with the orchestra internationally, including the historic 1979 tour of China when Ozawa was music director.

Nearly as passionate with non-musical endeavors, Mr. Eskin was known among other things for his love of fast sports cars and his ability to do chin-ups. "He's a renaissance man. He was an outdoor hiker and traveler, and he opened up many people's eyes to the world," said his son Sacha of Honolulu.

"He was not only an artist and a musician, he was very loving. He shared with me many things – how to do things, how to be the person I wanted to be," Sacha said, adding that his father "was very creative and very soulful. His music was from the soul. You can't repeat it; you can't remake it."

Mr. Eskin, whose earlier marriages ended in divorce, married BSO violinist Aza Raykhtsaum in 1986, a few years after she joined the orchestra. The two were "in love since shortly after we laid eyes on one another," she told the Globe in 2012.

“Jules said I was the love of his life and he cherished me. I loved him dearly,” she added in an interview Tuesday. “He was my soulmate musically, intellectually, emotionally. We had an incredible bond and we made music together 24 hours a day. We were never separated. It was an incredible love story. We were basically one – one soul.”


In addition to his wife and son, Mr. Eskin leaves his older son, David of Yorktown Heights, N.Y.; a stepdaughter, Anna Raykhtsaum Tratt of New Rochelle, N.Y.; and five grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held at 3 p.m. Wednesday in Stanetsky Memorial Chapels in Brookline. Burial will follow.

“Jules had an uncanny ability to pull at your heart strings when he played. I think some of the most beautiful sounds that I’ve ever heard came out of his cello,” said his good friend Arnold Steinhardt, a founder and first violinist of the Guarneri String Quartet.

For Mr. Eskin, integral to those sounds was the tone he coaxed from his cello, which was there from the beginning. “I had it immediately as a child,” he told opuscello.com. “It’s crucial. You have to hear it in your ear.”

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