A WOMAN AND HER VIOLIN

By Ernesto Valdés

Artistic expression needs two ingredients: creativity and freedom of expression. Of all human activities, it rises above the rivalries and platitudes of politics and economic theories. The tragedy arises when the artist's expression cannot be heard, read, or seen by the rest of the world without political acquiescence of an oppressive government.

In December 1967, Nicolae Ceausescu, an orthodox communist, became head of state of Romania. His economic policies plunged the nation to levels of poverty brought about by shortages of food, energy, medicines, and other basic necessities. By the forces of corruption, terror, and isolation, Ceausescu's regime was able to survive for 25 years until his army rebelled and executed him and his wife.

In the capital of Bucharest, living beneath Ceausecu's cloud, were two young sisters learning the craft of playing the violin. Rodica and Michaela Oancea began in their kindergarten years and after enduring the bureaucratic mindless maze of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, wound up playing at New York City's Carnegie Hall. The story of that journey and the perils in between is the essence of this article.

I was a friend of the attorney who took on the immigration case and at her request I accompanied her in hopes that my knowledge of Spanish and smattering of Italian could offer a linguistic bridge to another Latin language of Romanian. It was an ambitious thought with modest success.

Seventeen years later, I met Rodica in her downtown flat to for this interview.

Rodica Weber (RW): [My name is] Rodica Cristina Weber. My maiden name is Oancea. I was born in Bucharest, Romania, on September 21, 1966.

Ernesto Valdés (EV): Tell me something about your family. Was it just you and your sister?

Rodica Oancea Weber: Just the two of us. My mother was an only child and my father had two brothers and sisters. In Romania, Dad was a mechanical engineer. Mom was a chemist, taught chemistry, and was principal of the high school. Neither of my parents read music. When my sister and I were very young, our grandfather's sister took care of us, she never had any kids. Because everyone else in the family was working, she took care of us and took us to school, actually she was a kindergarten teacher. One day, I was playing and singing with my dolls.... From my singing she realized I had a musical ear so when I was 4, she took me to music lessons, violin lessons. I asked her later about her reasoning, I asked, "Why didn't you pick another instrument, a piano or another stringed instrument?" She said, "Because I knew that in an orchestra there are more violins than there are pianos." So when I was 4, I started the violin with a teacher right there in the kindergarten. Then when I was six, I transferred to a special music school in Bucharest...you had to test in (audition)...and you start in the first grade and you go all the way to the 12th grade. I started there in the first grade and I stayed there in the George Enescu Music School.

EV: And did you go all 12 years?

RW: Yes. And then my family recognized that my sister (Mika or Michaela) had a musical inclination but they wanted her to do piano so we could do duets together, but you know how little sisters are, "No, I want to do exactly the same thing my older sister does." So she ended up going into the violin, too....It was required in this school starting in sixth grade until the twelfth to learn another instrument. So we both play piano, and actually we play a little viola, too. It is a similar instrument, the same position—you just read different notes. This was a very intense music school, you know, and you start theory lessons in the first grade and, I think, we started orchestra in the fourth grade.

So at an early age, I guess somewhere between 7 and 8, we went and took this audition and we were on TV every week—every Sunday, on a children's series on TV we were singing, we're acting, we're dancing, whatever little kids do. So when I was 13, I was picked to go and represent the Romanian television station, the only one that we had there, at an international convention of TV stations in Jordan—Amman, Jordan. So that was my first outing.

Actually, at the time, I was singing and accompanying myself on the guitar, so I wasn't even playing the violin for that event.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER: Ernesto Valdés was born and raised in El Paso, Texas. He has a B.A. from Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, a D.J. from South Texas College of Law, Houston, Texas, and he is working toward a Master's Degree in Public History, University of Houston. Abbey Simon's interview was transcribed by Suzanne Mascola.

As is so often the case in life, major events often begin surreptitiously like seeds buried in the desert that may wait years for rains that nourish germination. This first outing from Romania was to linger inside until it was transformed by each visit to the West into an irrepressible desire to be free. At this point in her life, Rodica met the reality of how political repression can impede artistry and creativity.

EV: So when you went out of town, did they [Romanian government] send anybody with you to make sure that you didn't run away, or to stop anyone who might want to take you away?

RW: Actually, we did have, what do you call them? Spies? In every group, you know, every time we traveled outside....Sometimes we knew who they were, sometimes we didn't, but there were always one or two people watching our backs. I remember since we were young, we were taught by Mom and Dad, never to complain, not to talk on the phone about it with anyone, or even on the bus [about] being unhappy with the system. Talk about the president, or anybody that was a political figure. So we are trained at an early age not to talk about anything. We didn't know if the phone had bugs. So I guess the first time we started talking about it was the first time we traveled at age 13 or 14. I started traveling every year after that [Amman, Jordan] and coming home to Romania and seeing all the differences between the West and the East, the communist system, made it harder and harder and harder. And then when you are 14 or 15, you start to ask questions.

EV: After you went to Jordan for your first outing, which western countries did you go to?

RW: Oh, afterwards we started, we both started going to competitions. I went to Italy, I went to Switzerland, France.... We were in a children's chorus, the best in Bucharest. When I was 14, we traveled to Luxembourg and toured France, Belgium, Germany, we stayed with host families all over. But then we started going every summer to different festivals and competitions. Coming back home the first time wasn't too bad, but then repeating it every time, we started asking questions. You don't understand it at the time, exactly...what does freedom of speech mean? We didn't have the diversity of food, or chocolates, or fruits. But little things like clothes—you know, we were very narrow in diversity and that. "Look at all those kids, the way they're dressed," and then slowly, growing up you feel you could go West and you would be able to send a letter to someone overseas or in the West asking for a scholarship or stuff like that, which is how it happened that I got into the States.

EV: How was it that you got to the West?

RW: It's a long story, I'll try to make it short. I was eighteen years old and in the 12th grade and a good friend of mine, also a violinist, was a year older than me. In 1985, he was traveling with a little orchestra in France and saw a brochure about this festival in Lucerne, Switzerland where Mr. Sergio Luca was teaching. So what he did in France, he immediately wrote a letter [to Mr. Luca] and said, "We are two violinists from Bucharest. We'd love to attend your festival." So he came back and told me, "Look what I did. I don't know if anything is going to come from this." And actually that year we got a full scholarship for the summer of '86 to go and we just had to pay our way to get to Switzerland. We both went, of course, pulling some strings....My mother had some connections because we were on TV and we knew kind of high placed people who could help us get a visa. And we both got a visa and we went and we met Mr. Luca. [However] that year was the year I entered the conservatory after an entrance exam that was just the hardest I ever went through...120 to 150 kids audition for five spots; every year there are only five openings for the violin. I passed the exam and I was number two out of the five, but the competition was unbelievable.

EV: Just for the record, please explain who Mr. Luca is.

RW: Right now, he is the head of the violin department at Rice.

EV: And he was the person who was conducting this seminar in Switzerland?

RW: He was called the director of the program and said, "I'd like for those two Romanians to be invited and have full scholarships."

Sergiu Luca

EV: That was for you and your boyfriend?

RW: Yes. We got there late because of the visa, of course, but we got in. We played for him the next few days and afterwards he said, "Oh, I would love for both of you to come and study with me in the States. You're very talented and blah, blah, blah." Florine says of course because there is nothing else for him in Romania, but I hesitated and said, "Oh my God, I just passed this exam [for the conservatory]" and I was looking forward to going there and I had a great concern for my sister. I told him, "I have a sister and if I defect now, she's not ever going to be able to pursue a career."

If we were going to defect, we had to defect at that time; one could not just write back and say, "Sorry, I'm going to be studying for two or three years." They didn't allow that at that time under Ceausescu. You could not study abroad.

Another point I want to make...my sister is three years younger, we are both traveling with separate competitions – they wouldn't let us travel together. We were in different countries [at that time]. So while I was in Switzerland that summer, she was actually in Italy and when I was in Italy, she was someplace else.

Of course you could defect, but the other one had to suffer the consequences, you know. So I asked Mr. Luca to send scholarships for two. I went back and my friend, Florine, stayed there, as a matter of fact he is still in Switzerland, he ended up not coming to the States. He plays in a big orchestra in Geneva, so he's fine.

I went back the next year, '86 and Mr. Luca sent us scholarships for the Aspen Festival in Colorado. But that year, right

An 18-year old Rodica meets Pope John Paul II, in Rome, Italy, during a concert tour in Italy. About two years later, she defected to the United States.

when we were ready to get a visa, one of the famous violinists in Romania defected so nobody traveled that summer anywhere. I got so upset. Mr. Ceausecu was the one who personally stamped the artists' passports. So after we had to be really careful in corresponding with him [Luca] or talking to him on the phone, so we decided we should try for the following year, in '87.

While I was at a competition in Rome, my mother decided she's going to file for both of us to go to this other festival later on in the summer in Aspen. We had developed this code, so when I went to Italy toward the end of the trip, I was going to call her to say that if the United States visa doesn't happen, I'll just stay there [Italy] and I'll see what's going to happen, I'll get my sister out somehow. I told her…I was 20 and I cannot come back, it's harder and harder for me to go back. I'll find my way to the States somehow and try to get my sister, Mika. So when I called her and told her all I had decided, she said, "No, no, no, no, come home. We have the visas." My mother had bribed the right people and a few weeks later we left for the States. My parents had paid for our tickets to New York so we entered the States on a 30-day visitor's visa.

But two things happened to us. Before we left, my mother had some security problems at the school that week. She was interrogated for different kinds of suspicious things and my father was actually on a kind of blacklist the past few years before we left. So I guess we were really carefully watched. My parents decided, all of a sudden, to put us on the plane the week before Mr. Luca was expecting us. Events happened so fast…Mom said, "You're leaving tomorrow, I got your tickets for tomorrow." I asked her where we were going to stay, and she answered, "Oh, I spoke with a friend of a friend who lives in New York and he'll be able to help you for a day or two or three. Talk to Mr. Luca, see if he can change your ticket."

We got to New York a week early and didn't know anybody. We were just stranded, literally. The man we were to meet in New York only knew to look for two girls who were carrying violins; he didn't know what we looked like.

Our second problem was we could not purchase tickets from New York to Houston because you needed dollars. Besides, we just had about 25 or 50 bucks, something around there, we had little pocket money. The next day after we arrived in New York, I called Mr. Luca to see if maybe we could come to Houston sooner…to see if there was a way we could change tickets.

When he called back he asked me, "Do you think you are safe there, because it will cost much more money to change the ticket with three day's notice." I assured him we were safe so we stayed in New York for five days with this really nice gentleman.

We finally arrived in Houston where Mr. Luca and his wife waited for us at the airport. We went to his house where we stayed for the first two months, July and August. Once we were settled in we took off to the university [Rice] and Mr. Luca said, "We need to talk…I want to know if you really want to decide to stay in the States or are you just planning to do the festival and then go back?" You know, he wasn't sure. And I said, "No, we really want to stay, we really want to study with you." He said, "If doesn't make any sense to go to Aspen now, you can go here. So let's start and get your papers in order." So, that was the next step. We really need to get you settled legally. Our American visa was good for six months but our Romanian visa expired after a month.

EV: *What were some of the major problems you experienced when you first got here?*

RW: Although we had traveled a little bit before, it was still a little different. We were really growing up but we were still a little afraid. Like, a few weeks after we arrived, Mr. Luca had to go to Oregon where he had a festival. He said, "You are going to stay in the house with my parents, and in case of an emergency this is the telephone number you can call to ask for help if something happens in the house." So, one day the four of us were at lunch. Mr. Luca has this beautiful skylight over the dining room and in the middle of the day, just sitting there, part of it collapses. All the glass comes down, and we all just (makes the sound of gasps). So we had that telephone number, his friend that lived close by. She comes over and the first thing she says is, "Oh my God, what happened? Let's call the police." And my sister and I said, "No, you cannot call the police! (Laughter). No, we just applied for…you know, we want to stay here, we applied for asylum. No way, they're going to put us on a plane and send us back." "No, no," she tried to make us understand. "No you don't understand. This is just to make a report." We said, "NO!" So of course she called the police but we…the whole time the police were in the house looking around, we were in the closet hiding. We were literally in the closet with the door closed, you know…yup!

We were so scared. I said, "There is no way police can find out you are not legal and not send you back home." So what she [Miss June] did was she made a little joke and told the policemen, "I have two little girls from Romania, they are so scared [of you]…." Then for the next few days, when they were patrolling around there they saw us and waved at us and they'd yell, "Oh yeah, oh yeah, we are going to call immigration to tell them you are here." So you know, to us…we were so scared…we couldn't understand that the police had a different role here.

Mr. Luca Romanian was born in Romania and left when he was four or five years old and immigrated to Israel so he speaks Romanian. And then when he was 16, he made it into Julliard School of Music. Isaac Stern discovered him and brought him to New York.

EV: Do you have a sense that you lost your childhood because of music?

RW: No....We loved it so much that we never felt deprived of our childhood. Yeah, we had to work a little harder than the other kids but in the summer we would go to the beach for two or three weeks, we'd go skiing in the mountains. During the school year, though, we had to put away play time.

EV: When you got here, were you still able to communicate with your parents?

RW: Yes, we called them when we arrived and we called them when we applied for asylum. My mother lost her job...Both my parents were members of the Communist Party, so of course if you have a relative defect, [they] cannot force you to resign, but you are not a worthy member of the Communist Party if you allow that to happen. So, they were pressed to make sure they would find us, where we were and try to get us back home....And our parents would day, "We don't know where they are."

EV: How long was it before your parents came over here? Did they have to wait until the collapse of the regime?

RW: Only Mom had to wait until the collapse. My father came a year later. He was able to get a visa and come visit us with a visitor's visa...he bribed someone. This proved how at that time it was who you knew, who could help you in Romania under the Communist regime. What we did was we sent him a VCR. At that time there were not VCRs [in Romania]. You have to understand that the color TV came 10 years later after the States. So we sent a VCR and then it was delivered. Four hundred bucks at that time...four hundred bucks.

EV: Were you supporting yourself by that time, were you making money?

RW: No. Dad was still working. I mean, we would send little packages of coffee and stuff like that, but not actually money, no...we didn't have any money. We were lucky that Rice gave us a stipend to be able to pay our rent. I had a $350 stipend and my sister had $200. So with rent at $400, whatever we had left was for food. We were very tight for six to eight months. Then once school started people started hearing about us and we started gigging a little bit, you know...quartets, weddings, slowly...

EV: Slowly becoming capitalists...

RW: (Laughs) Right....But we found out that without a social security card, we couldn't even get the stipend. Mr. Luca paid the rent for two or three months. Then the dean at the time, he has passed away, Michael Hemmings, he paid for the rent one time. They were anxious to give us the money but the paperwork was not there, they said, "Sorry, we just can't give you...we have the money but...." It took awhile to get all that settled at immigration....At one point, about six months into it, we really missed our parents, we were very close to them and ...my sister was 17 and I was 20....At one point my sister even told my Mom, crying on the phone, "I'm going back. I can't take it any more."

That was actually triggered by the [Immigration & Naturalization Service] rejection only six months into the application. They came back and said, "You need to be deported...we can't give you asylum. You don't have enough reason for defecting. Your parents...if your father comes in tomorrow...he was the one that was tortured, he was the one on the black list." We tried to explain, "But we live in the same family, the same house, the whole family was affected." But I guess they didn't understand. We literally got a letter that said we had to be deported by a certain day. That's when Rice stepped up, and the dean and Mr. Luca said, "My God. No, no, no, this is not happening, this can't happen."

So they started calling TV stations and we were interviewed on television. They were trying to get community support and we started getting letters, affidavits of support, letters of support from Bela Karoli, who was a Romanian, and the musical director of the symphony...people who would write, "If you are sending them to Romania now, they are going to go straight to prison." Well, it all worked and our application was approved and we finally got our social security number.

I started my master's when I arrived and Mika entered undergraduate. We didn't speak enough English but we had to learn really fast and the first semester was really tough, you struggle all the time. I remember one of my first exams, the teacher said, "If there is something you don't know how to say in English, write that word or phrase down in Romanian and then come to my office with a dictionary. I just want to make sure you know the answer and we'll translate it together."

We got a lot of help like that, but I don't think it took us too long to really get a grip...We had in high school some English classes but not like we had private lessons at home. We could understand but it was harder to converse and speak right. I guess in six months we got it. We were watching TV, which helped, plus we were always talking to people around us in English so I guess we were forced to learn it.

In November of '89, I finished two years of my master's and this was my third year. Mr. Luca was already telling me, you can graduate now or you can graduate in May, so you can stay three or four years. And I asked him if I could audition for the symphony, and (laughs) he said, "Hmmm, you don't really need to audition right now, you can still wait till May. You don't need to right now." But I wanted to get my feet wet. Actually that year, '89, I auditioned for the Houston Ballet and I made it and I was playing there for a few months every year while I was in school. Finally, I went and auditioned for the symphony, I really didn't stress out over it because I knew I could stay for two more years if I wanted to be in school.

I was just lucky. I finished school in December and my job with the symphony started in January, right on January 3, I remember to this day, 1990. In May I graduated. My mother made it...in March 1990. This was after the revolution happened in December of 1989 so she was here for my graduation.

EV: So from the Houston Symphony how did you get to Houston

Continued on page 57

1978, I guess, he invited me here for one day to come and "see for yourself." I had known him for a long time so I came. I stopped off, and he showed me what I would have to do, and what my duties were and I have been here ever since.

When I decided we should organize the Houston International Piano Festival, Milton, who died a few years ago, helped me enormously. I mean, I had the grandiose idea of starting this piano festival but if it had been left in my hands, the detail, the nitty-gritty, it probably would have never seen the light of day but with the assistance of Miriam Strain, it suddenly came into fruition and it has been here now for over 20 years or so.

EV: Is the goal of your teaching more technique and mechanics?

AS: No, it is not that. I am teaching first and foremost an interpretation of what is on the printed page. In other words, some of them think that because a composer writes notes on a page that that is all there is to it. But it isn't that. I mean, we can all recite a Shakespearean speech and it is the same. Put another way, we can all read the Bible but everybody reads it and understands it in a different way. The same thing happens with the printed page of music. The notes on the page are just the first step, how we get to understand them within the piece of music is another. In other words, if you see a forte, an F forte, it doesn't mean you have to play it like you are hitting someone in the nose. If you see a pianissimo, it doesn't mean a pianissimo that you don't project.

Pianissimo to me, at the piano, may be the most challenging if I am playing on stage of Carnegie Hall, which has 3,000 seats. That pianissimo has to be heard by the student who sacrificed his meager funds. Or, if an actor in a drama whispers into the ear of his beloved, "I love you," the guy in the last seat in the theater also has to hear, "I love you." That is an element which people in the theater, people in music, in opera call "projection." The public wants to love what a performer is doing and if they are not being reached by the music they may not know how beautifully he may be playing.

I have always had friends who were artists, not because I pretend to be one of them but because I envy them. Over the years I have found they have one thing in common: an incessant urge to convert the intangible into impressions the rest of us can grasp. Thus from notes inked on paper in a distant time, the pianist lends his interpretation in a way that carries us into worlds beyond us or, perhaps, within us. As Abbey reminds us, however, it is not the degree of the artist's mechanical perfection that moves us; it is the artist's interpretation that illuminates the music.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."
The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon a blue guitar."

"The Man With the Blue Guitar"
Wallace Stevens, poet (1879-1955)

A woman and her violin *continued from page 53*

The Houston Symphony Fidelis Quartet, in front of Carnegie Hall, June 10, 2005. Left to right: Cristian Macelaru, Jefferey Butler, Ilgin Aka, Mihaela, Rodica and Wei Jiang.

Baptist University?

RW: In 1995, I got a call from the dean, I was in school at the time. Dr. Ann Debour, and she got a referral from the dean who used to be there who was a conductor, Dr. Bob Linder. He knew of me from performing with him and he recommended me to Dr. Debour who was looking for a violin professor; they had only one student that year. So she called and I said, "Sure, I'd like to give it a try." I started with one student in '95 and now I have six. So, you know, we are trying to build this within the department.

EV: Tell me how "Tre Voci."

RW: Professor John Henderson at HBU, and the cello professor, and I started playing together and we formed "Tre Voci." We went to New York in 2003 and had our debut there. I made my Carnegie Hall debut there in 2002 with John on the piano and Tre Voce. Then I went back in 2004 with another pianist friend of mine. In 2005, Fidelis Quartet, which is a quartet from the Symphony, which includes my sister, my cellist from Tre Voci, Jeffery Butler, are going to New York to make our debut as a quartet.

EV: Have you ever returned to Romania?

RW: Four times. I went back starting in '93, right after the revolution. It was sad because the people who were still there have a hard life. In a way, during communism everybody was the same, everybody had enough food, nobody was starving. Everybody had jobs, right now, it is very hard, there is very rich and very poor, there is no middle class. You know, it's shocking. It's very hard for us, I realize going back, to talk to my old teachers or friends that are still living there and they somehow expect a little bit from you, from us coming from the West, to give them presents, or money to help…It's tough.

My sister and I are very lucky to be where we are today and of course I'd like to thank Mr. Luca for bringing us to the States, but to also thank our parents for bringing us to the level where we are now and everything that we are and for our education from such an early age, you know, in music the earlier you start the further you get. Anyway, I'll try to make a career out of it. It's really hard, but that's what I love to do.