
A full-page photograph of Charlie Siem, a man with dark, wavy hair, wearing a dark blue polo shirt and dark trousers. He is standing next to a black grand piano, leaning his left arm on the piano's edge. He is holding a cigar in his right hand and looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and white.

Trained as a virtuoso classical violinist, Charlie Siem has made forays into fashion and pop music in his wide-ranging career.



Fiddler on the *Loose*

When violin virtuoso Charlie Siem isn't playing his \$15 million instrument, he relaxes with a fine cigar

BY KENNETH SHOULER
PORTRAIT BY RICHARD BOLL

Charlie Siem is madly fiddling away, playing Johannes Brahms' "Hungarian Dance No. 5" on a violin built in 1735. With frenzied bowing, he has the audience clapping and hooting with each rhythmic movement. Suddenly Lady Gaga, her hair a luminous teal, flashes onto the stage. Sporting a translucent body stocking that would make a fish net appear substantial, the reigning queen of transformative pop music embraces the virtuoso of classical violin music and plants a kiss on him.

Siem laughs at the seemingly odd juxtaposition of cultures as he recalls the scene that played out in 2011 at an after party for the Council of Fashion Designers of America awards: "On stage I'm used to seeing people being very reserved and they appreciate every note. I am playing this piece and out of nowhere she turned up right in front of me and started to kiss me on the cheek. It was a very unusual performance and one that I definitely remember vividly."

That performance, that party, that connection with a crowd who weren't devotees of classical music, says everything about the musician's ever-expanding universe. Siem has played with rocker Bryan Adams. He jammed with Peter Dinklage and The Who at the Royal Albert Hall. He's been in photo shoots with such brands as Ralph Lauren and Dunhill, Armani and Hugo Boss, Chanel and Dior. Karl Lagerfeld shot the Dior ad. He was photographed with his violin as an artist, not a model. You'll see him in a natty blue blazer, standing alongside his Porsche 911 GTS at the Palazzo Ralph Lauren in Milan.

British violinist Charlie Siem (pronounced “See-um”), now 34, has been described as handsome as well as prodigiously talented. The dual appeal isn’t lost on YouTube viewers. “Wow he is hot!” someone comments. “OMG... This man is perfect if there ever was a perfect man,” comes another breathless sentiment. “And his father is a Norwegian billionaire. Oh dear.” He has inspired a global army of fans called Charlie’s Angels.

Charisma suffuses his performances. With a violin tucked beneath his chin, Siem stands tall and lean with thick black hair, a fit subject for a Roman statue. As he conducts the English Chamber Orchestra in a performance of “Canopy,” his first original composition, a chorus of plucked violins starts the work. From the incessant pizzicato builds a spirited rhythm, until a lone violinist adds a quivering tone. In seconds Siem has filled in a sonorous, yet sweet melody on his Guarneri del Gesù violin, an instrument insured for \$15 million. The music takes flight. With chin, jaw and forehead concen-

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“My parents are not musicians; they didn’t give me anything particularly musical to lean on. But they’ve both been very supportive and given me sort of great tools to live my life.”

But it was through his mother that Charlie had his first meaningful rendezvous with music, at age three. He heard Beethoven’s violin concerto on the stereo of her Volkswagen Golf. “That melody cut right through everything,” he says, his voice softening. “Beethoven was a genius at simplicity. He could write a simple melody that cuts to the core and manages to evoke such profound meaning. A three-year-old doesn’t have much to say for himself, but that melody did exactly that for me. The music moved me

and made me want to learn how to play it,” he recalls. “It happened to be the violin that was playing the melody, so that’s what I started doing.”

By age eight, he was studying with a teacher who set the bar high. “I was going to a number of different places and started doing competitions to test myself and put myself under pressure.” By the time he was 11 he thought of quitting school to take up music full-time. “Maybe it was just a way of getting out of school,” he laughs.

He soon entered a whirlwind. He would study under Itzhak Rashkovsky, a Russian-Israeli who gave master classes in violin at Cambridge, as well as with the violinist and conductor Shlomo Mintz. At 15, he performed his first concerto with an orchestra and at 18, played with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London. He had a jam-packed schedule of 30 to 80 performances a year, but found time to devour William Manchester’s three-volume biography of Churchill and study the impish style and exploits of actor David Niven from his autobiography.

Jascha Heifetz was an early influence. His grandparents gave him a collection of the violinist’s complete oeuvre. “Certainly in my world, Heifetz is a god—he represents something that is lovely. So I sculpted my early impression of what I wanted from the violin.”

It took utter devotion. “Deep inside I had a calling. I had to be very disciplined. I was in school, so I would get up at about 5:30 in the morning and did about two hours before I went to school. Then I practiced on my lunch break for an hour. And then I practiced three hours when I came home.”

Today, Siem performs everywhere, playing Vivaldi’s “The Four Seasons” in the Netherlands or “Fugue in G Minor” by Bach in a church in Florence, or fiddling madly while accompanying Joachim Horsley’s frenetic piano in “Scheherazade in Cape



Lady Gaga surprised Siem with a kiss as he performed at a party for fashion designers. It wasn’t his first time onstage with a pop musician, however. He’s played with rockers Bryan Adams and The Who.

trated, but not tense, his face is in counterpoint—both focused and open. His eyes dart; first peering along the strings, now downward, now outward to the orchestra. After several minutes a faint smile creases his lips, happy with his creation, inspired by watching ecstatic climbers in massive trees in a London park.

Siem was born in London, on January 14, 1986, to a British mother, Karen, and Norwegian father, Kristian Siem, a shipping magnate who has been called Sweden’s answer to Warren Buffett.

Verde" in a Steinway piano factory in New York.

To go with his peripatetic success he relishes cigars, whether sitting in a café looking out over a piazza in Florence or frequenting a favorite haunt. "When I was 18, my violin teacher was a cigar smoker. Every time I came to a lesson he would pick me up at the station in Switzerland with an unlit, half-smoked cigar. That's how I established a kind of taste for the whole kind of lifestyle. It's a way of being."

What started as a "slow burn" is now part of Siem's day-to-day life. He slips several cigars into his violin case to take out after performances, and enjoys a range of Cubans such as Hoyo de Monterrey Epicure No. 2s and Romeo y Julieta Cedros de Luxe No. 3s.

"A big part of the cigar," Siem allows, "is having something between your fingers, and I guess as a violinist having that sort of physical connection with something like that has become such a habit. It's stepping back a little bit and relaxing and seeing things from a perspective. It's weird that a cigar allows me to do that."

To hear Siem describe the challenges of his instrument, he has earned the relaxation. He starts with the sheer mechanics: "The violin is a very small instrument. It's an awkward position physically, holding it up on your shoulder." Just making a decent sound is a hurdle: "You have to have the exact right amount of pressure and speed with your bow on the string, then the right amount of pressure and accuracy in terms of being in the right place on the string with your left hand to make the intonation correct." But it doesn't end because you have "to play, to interpret a piece of music that has thousands of notes, make them all fit together, fill phrases and, as it were, lift the architecture of the music up into the air, so that it creates something coherent and relatable to an audience." No wonder, Siem says, "You can lose sight of the fact that you are trying to sing out a line or a melody."

Now that he's achieved excellence how can it be sustained in the world of classical music?

"The key is finding yourself in the music," says Siem. "I have to read the notes and create an interpretation. I relate something of myself within the meaning of the music in order to say it to the public and see if there's something poignant or something meaningful within it."

Siem likes the approach so much he once slipped a handwritten note to himself into the velvet lid of his violin case that read: "Keep it light and playful."

The cigar is a tool in that regard. "I live in Florence, and when I'm not performing I have one outside facing one of the beautiful piazzas. Cigars are meditative," he says. "In the afternoon there's a lot of time building up to a moment that's going to be crucial as a performer. And you're sitting outside and that sort of heightens your experience."

His cigar regimen includes one after lunch and an occasional morning smoke at such venues as Harry's Bar and its upstairs cigar club. When he won't smoke is just before stage time. "I know that cigars do have an effect on your physical state," he says. "I don't like to tamper with that at all. I don't have any alcohol either."

He reflects on his foray into the world of fashion. "The two worlds don't traditionally go hand in hand," he surmises. "The audience of both worlds—the high end of fashion and of classical music—can be similar in some sense. It was not something that I was aiming for necessarily. It happened organically and I thought it would be an interesting adventure."

The adventure began when the photographer Mario Testino saw videos of Siem playing and invited him to play at his book launch. "The casting director for Dunhill was at the event and asked me to get involved in a new campaign," recalls Siem. "I'm not a traditional model in that sense. Never will be. It was accidental. It was something I would never have envisaged for myself. Then when it presented itself, I thought 'Well, it seems like a lot of fun and a great way to get more exposure.'"

It has brought him not only great exposure, but with it artistic satisfaction. He reflects on playing at Lady Gaga's party, where she also performed: "I remember being blown away by her—her voice, her activity, and her whole kind of musical vision is really something amazing." Another fond memory is performing "Baba O'Riley" with The Who. "I actually loved that in terms of the 1960s and 1970s music I liked," he recalls. "It was one of the last times that Roger Daltrey and Pete Townshend were on stage together. I jammed with Townshend. I couldn't believe it was happening."

For many, achieving violin virtuosity, making a splash in the fashion world and playing alongside rock gods might seem like a full bucket list. Siem soldiers on. "The key in life is to be challenged. To do something that allows you to push yourself to some kind of a limit and to see yourself in a more honest way through the process," he says. "I know that going onstage and playing does exactly that for me: It allows me to do something that's tough, that I can work for and that I can realize from time to time in a meaningful way. And so for now that makes sense. I really don't know—who knows how long I'll be alive and how long this will stay stimulating for me." ❖

