

An ode to a great cello teacher

ON THE UPBEAT



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Murphy's Law certainly applied to Cristina Fernández de Simón de la Cruz as far as her flights into and out of Goa were concerned: Everything that could possibly go wrong, did.

To start with, her luggage got left behind in Paris, so she arrived at our doorstep with just the clothes she was wearing, and a fresh top that she presciently had packed in her little backpack. And typically, it was a weekend, so it was impossible to chase up anything from our end until the Monday. But neither this nor the jetlag after being shunted around at airports in Paris and Mumbai prevented her from turning up on time, fresh as a daisy, to her first day of work as cello teacher, at the office of our music charity Child's Play India Foundation. Her luggage eventually showed up, a few days later.

And unfortunately for Cristina, to add to her woes, she had booked her return journey, both Goa-Mumbai and onward, with Jet Airways, as it was the cheapest deal on offer. She had no idea the airline company was in deep trouble. You can guess the rest. When it abruptly crashed to a halt, the rug got pulled from under her feet, with no ticket back home at the end of her stint. A vague promise of "a full refund" was made by email, and all the alternative itineraries were much more expensive than the one that she had booked on Jet.

To her credit, she took all of this in her stride. She didn't miss a single session with the twenty-plus cello students entrusted to her. She did all the following-up with the Jet authorities on her own time. Her dedication to her work was nothing short of exemplary. She didn't lose her focus despite her personal issues.



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Cristina was at work before schedule, cycling to work from her accommodation. She quickly assessed how far her predecessor had taken each child or adult learner, and challenged each to go further, with appropriate music and/or etudes for each.

If there were unexpected cancellations from students, she would offer to work longer with those who were present. If there were gaps between students in a day's schedule, she would herself slot in extra time for a child who needed extra attention and was able to make it.

To say that all her students, young and old, absolutely loved her, would be a gross understatement. We had the unprecedented phenomenon of a child spontaneously returning twice and even thrice in one day, for extra instruction or go off into an available room to practice. Practice charts had never

been fuller. Some children would wait expectantly outside her studio, waiting for a free moment to demonstrate to her how they had practiced what she had taught them earlier. A word or nod of appreciation, or a pat on the shoulder would make them beam with pleasure. Cristina arrived before our annual summer camp. Many of our little cellists (the youngest only six) were rank beginners, had had only been playing the instrument for a few months, and naturally therefore had no orchestra experience. Cristina worked like a stevedore between rehearsal sessions to get them playing (a simplified part where necessary) as a cello section. She insisted on including even the littlest cellist in at least some of the pieces. I agreed, but privately felt it was a tall order in the limited time frame we were working with. But she did it.

Cristina had earlier also worked with Xiquitsi Moçambique, a music initiative with much in common with us; this is indicative of her high motivation towards music as a vehicle for social change and empowerment. She was coming to work with us for all the right reasons, for all the reasons that she had gone there as well.

She didn't ask for time off from work to go sightseeing or socialising; she did all that on her own time, in the weekends. She worked even on holidays if children were able to come to her class.

She planned ahead, even for the time after her eventual departure. Each child and adult learner had a clear road map of how to practice, exercises, scales, arpeggios, pieces to begin to tackle later. When she learnt that one of our disadvantaged children had his birthday on the day of his class with her, she sur-

prised him (and everyone else in the office) by turning up with a birthday cake! He was visibly moved by the gesture.

When a child learned that her accommodation was not far from the Goa Science Centre, he went into such raptures over the delights and wonders to be found within, and lobbied so hard that they should visit together, that she relented, put aside her own evening plans and agreed to take him there after work. She bought their admission tickets and shared his excitement with the hall of mirrors, the maze of swirling and falling marbles, etc.

She mentioned this to me in passing, some weeks later. Amused, I wondered how they had got there, as it's a fair walk to the Goa Science Centre from our office. It turns out that they took turns cycling, while the other ran alongside, all the way! That must have made for quite a sight! But it is also indicative of her genuine affection for "her" cello children. She gave them love, and they loved her right back by working and playing their hearts out.

When she left, it was an emotional good-bye and parting for all of us. Warm, giving, conscientious, morally upright human beings like Cristina renew our hope in the goodness out there and the goodwill we continue to attract from far and wide. We have also had the odd experience of the overseas teacher who turns up for all the wrong reasons: self-seeking, self-advancement, work-shirking, mendacious, and duplicitous. One Cristina is worth a thousand of these. She is a shining example of how much goodness through music can be achieved when people reach out with all the right intentions. We wish her well in her music career, and she knows that there is a place for her at Child's Play whenever she should be able to return.