

Bravo! Extravagant displays of love: Extravagant displays of love

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 10, 2007](#) issue

High on the list of people I have most admired is Mstislav Rostropovich, the great Russian cellist who died in April. I admired him first for his courage. In 1970 Rostropovich expressed his support for artistic freedom and human rights in a letter to Pravda, the state-run newspaper of the Soviet Union. In response, the Soviets stripped him and his wife of Soviet citizenship.

I also admired his passion for life, his exuberance and his propensity to show great love. I heard him play a Dvorak cello concerto, one of his favorites, in Chicago, and at the end of the performance, as the audience sat in silence, mesmerized, Rostropovich did an extraordinary thing: he stood up and kissed his cello. The audience erupted. Then he hugged and kissed a surprised Daniel Barenboim, the conductor. Then he hugged and kissed the entire cello section before moving on to the violins. He hugged and kissed most of the members of the orchestra.

Years later, I had the honor of meeting him at a dinner party. He insisted on sitting beside a high school cellist— my granddaughter. So I ended up sitting on the other side of him. He spent most of the evening in conversation with my granddaughter. When he finally turned to me, I told him I had been moved by a video showing him playing Bach in front of the Berlin Wall in 1989, as the wall was being torn down and communism was breaking apart throughout Eastern Europe. He told me the whole story: how, when he and his wife heard news of the wall coming down and knew that their own nation would soon be free, they had to do something. He flew to Berlin with his cello and took a cab to the wall, and then realized that he hadn't thought about a chair to sit on. He knocked on the door of the first house he came to, introduced himself and asked if he could borrow a chair.

He invited me to call him by the affectionate name, "Slava," that his friends used. At the end of our extraordinary evening, he called for a toast, Russian style. We toasted Russia and the United States; we toasted freedom, J. S. Bach, the Dallas Symphony

Orchestra and my granddaughter. Then he hugged and kissed all of us.

His love for music, for freedom and for people was contagious. Many of us who have been taught to curtail emotional displays could learn a thing or two about wholeness and about love truly expressed from this extraordinary human being. I thought about him during a week when I pondered again the story in Luke 7 about a nameless woman, "a sinner," who was also passionate and extravagant in showing love.