

BINGHAM



Balancing Two Scales

By Jesse Hirsch

Besides practicing law, San Francisco Securities Area partner [Steve Machtinger](#) has another love: playing the viola. After 27 years in the Marin Symphony Orchestra, Machtinger discusses his musical life outside Bingham.

How long have you played music?

For well over 50 years. It started with my grandmother, a very fine pianist who was born in Russia. From the earliest age, I grew up hearing the beautiful sounds of Beethoven and Schubert. We had a violin in my attic that my uncle had tried to play but he never took to it. I always knew I would learn to play that violin.

But you ended up playing the viola instead?

I took violin lessons from the age of eight, but when I got to high school, there were too many violinists for the student string quartet. They basically handed me a viola and said, "Start playing." It ended up working out well, as I discovered there weren't many violists out there. People started paying me to play at different events and in recording studios as a backup musician.

Did you miss your uncle's old violin?

Not for a minute. I liked the family connection but it was a terribly made instrument.

For those not in the know, what is a viola?

It looks like a big violin. The sound blends well with the cello and the violin. I fell in love with the viola from the first time I heard it. It sounds a lot like the human voice. In fact, it is often referred to as the "inner voice" of the string quartet.

Did you ever consider playing professionally?

Yes, I did. I had a crisis in the summer before my last year as an undergrad. I had been studying pre-law but continued to play viola outside the classroom. That summer I went out to Aspen to study music under Lillian Fuchs, who was considered to be among the finest instrumentalists and teachers at the time. She felt that I could make a career of it and urged me to come study full-time with her at the Manhattan School of Music. I was almost convinced.

What made you change your mind?

I thought I could be a good, but not great, professional player. Ultimately, I decided I didn't want to rely on music as a career.

You never considered it again?

That's not totally true. After I graduated from law school, I saw there was an opening in the San Francisco

Symphony Orchestra for a violist. I decided to audition, and my audition happened to be on the exact same day as a job interview I had with the Securities and Exchange Commission. The Federal Building and the Symphony were actually across the street from each other, and I stashed my viola behind the receptionist's desk during my SEC interview.

Sounds like quite a crossroads.

Well, the interview ended up going better than the audition so my decision was kind of made for me. I ended up working at the SEC for many years.

But you've kept your love for music alive?

Absolutely. I feel like music and the law are my two greatest passions, and nurturing both of them gives me a wonderful sense of balance.

Where do you play?

I've been with the Marin Symphony Orchestra for 27 years. There are about 80 instrumentalists in this orchestra and the majority are full-time professional musicians. Only about ten of us are from the community-at-large, so I feel very lucky.

Future musical plans?

I would love to get a Bingham string quartet together, if I could find people here who play...

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