

The Swan – Saint-Saëns
by Margaret Hager, viola

I grew up in a musical family in Denver, Colorado. At various times in his life my father played trumpet, organ, and washtub bass. My mother played cello in local and regional orchestras, often played string quartets with friends, and travelled to Austria twice to play in an orchestra festival in Tyrol.

We were six children and all took piano lessons. In addition, our parents assigned each of us an instrument: My oldest sister got the accordion; my oldest brother the trombone; my next sister was handed a violin; I received a viola; my next brother got a cello; and my youngest brother the French horn.

Unfortunately, I only played viola a couple of years, because in 5th grade when I joined the school orchestra, the conductor was a trumpet player and I didn't think he knew a darned thing about strings, so I insisted on quitting viola.

Not many years later, my father died unexpectedly, and my mother needed to go to work. Because we were all teenagers at that point, she didn't want to leave home to work in an office and decided to give cello lessons. My brother was her first student, and over the next 30+ years she had many cello students of all ages.

When I graduated from high school, I went to college in Alaska for a year, which was a mistake for a few reasons: I had no particular interest in any kinds of studies, and Alaska was cold and dark, unlike Denver, which is most always beautiful and sunny.

After one year in Alaska I returned Denver, lived in my mother's house and worked at Taco Bell. When I was at home, I would see and hear her teaching her cello students.

One day when I was 20 years old, I asked my mother a question that truly changed my life. I said, "Mom, I'd like to play viola again. Can you find me a teacher and a viola?"

For me that opened up the world of music. I took lessons in Denver, went to music school in Philadelphia, and played in orchestras in Denver, Colorado Springs, and Austria.

Moving to San Antonio in 1995, I joined the Mid-Texas Symphony and love it to this day.

Ten years later, my mother, who had been in poor health, passed away. One of her famous quotes shortly before she died at the age of 88 was, "I only have 14 students now." The last student she taught was my brother's daughter.

I went to Denver to help arrange her funeral. My sister and I met with the minister of the church our mother had attended. It is a very large church with a large congregation. We told the minister we would like to have her service in the main sanctuary, which had a seating capacity of around 800. The minister tried to talk us into having the service in the small chapel, most likely because

he imagined that there would not be many people in attendance, but we insisted on the big sanctuary.

On the day of my mother's funeral hundreds of people attended: Former students and their families, musical friends from all over the region, neighbors, church friends, etc. It was a powerful tribute to the person she was.

The music for the service was provided by a cello ensemble composed of eight of her friends and students, and two string quartets made up of family and friends. Before the benediction at the end of the service, a cello soloist, *Jurgen de Lemos, along with John Kuzma on piano, played the magnificent piece, *The Swan*, a movement originally from *The Carnival of the Animals* by Camille Saint-Saëns. (A recording of their performance at the funeral is included below.) This beautifully graceful melody touched the hearts of all who were in attendance, and to this day *The Swan* has a special place in my own heart.



Yolanda Hager, cello

*Jurgen de Lemos, cello (formerly the principal cello of the Colorado Symphony)
John Kuzma, piano (formerly Minister of Music Montview Presbyterian Church)