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A TECH PIONEER'S FINAL, UNEXPECTED ACT

Upon receiving a diagnosis of brain cancer, Eric Sun set out to achieve some lifelong musical goals.

By James B. Stewart

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heart and in your soul," she said. "The understanding of things deepens."

Eric Sun heard the Brahms piece at a violin summer camp, when he was in junior high. He'd started playing, on a child-size instrument, at the age of four, and although he didn't really enjoy the lessons, he stuck with them, mostly to please his parents. Sun's father, Ming-Ting Sun, and his mother, Julie, were immigrants from Taiwan who went to the University of Texas at Arlington in 1980 and later settled in New Jersey. Ming-

Ting is a video-processing researcher. Julie is a certified public accountant. Eric was an only child until he was eleven, when his sister was born. By the age of three, he could recite lengthy Chinese poems from the calligraphy scrolls that hung in his home. In fourth grade, he asked to study the piano, and his teacher discovered that he had perfect pitch. When he was in seventh grade, his parents, at the suggestion of his teacher, took him to a violin dealer in Manhattan, who had a Stradivarius but wouldn't let him touch it. Sun tried several instruments before choosing one that cost sixty-five hundred dollars. It was a financial stretch for his parents, but, as his father told me, "Education is always the top priority in our culture."

In 1996, when Sun was thirteen, his father joined the faculty of the University of Washington, and the family moved to the Seattle area. Sun was placed in a program for students with I.Q.s over 140. Though slight of build, he was on the varsity tennis team. He also excelled at Ping-Pong. But he missed his friends in New Jersey and was slow to make new ones. Other students taunted him as a nerd.

Sun started taking lessons from Kyung Chee, a violinist with the Seattle Symphony and the Seattle Opera Orchestra. Chee told me that Sun displayed remarkable technical facility, but she often found herself urging him—sometimes even shouting at him—to play with more emotion. In 2001, as Sun's high-school graduation approached, he asked Chee if he could play the Brahms sonata for a senior recital. She thought there were few works more ill-suited to Sun, and her response was swift and direct: "Absolutely not."

This fall, I visited Sun and his wife, Karen Law, at their apartment, in Mountain View, California, and Sun recalled Chee's response. He told me that he'd thought he would give up playing after graduating from high school. He pursued computer science instead, and joined Facebook in 2008, four years after it was founded. At thirty-three, he had the kind of remarkable career that makes Silicon Valley a subject of persistent fascination and envy. I had first seen Sun a few months earlier, at a chamber-music program at Stanford University, which I attended as an amateur pianist. He was still slight of build, with a shock of dark hair, and looked younger than his age. I didn't know then that, about a year before, he had been given a diagnosis of glioblastoma, an aggressive brain cancer, and might have only months left to live. He was already making plans to give away the rare violin I'd heard him play.

In addition to his gifts for music and math, I later learned, he had an entrepreneurial streak. As a teen-ager, he'd taught himself computer programming and started a Web-hosting business, Alphapython Technologies, which he incorporated in 2000 and sold after enrolling at Stanford. There, he embarked on a double major in computer science and economics, and joined the orchestra. He met Sean Tyan, a fellow-student who took many of the same classes and, like Sun, was the child of Asian-immigrant parents and played the violin. The two became best friends and, during the spring break of their junior year, Sun, Tyan, and another friend visited Berlin, where they went to a concert featuring the young American violin prodigy Hilary Hahn. Tyan described Sun as having been "enthralled" by Hahn's performance of Erich Korngold's Violin Concerto in D Major, which none of them had heard before. The flashy, crowd-pleasing work foreshadows the popular film scores of John Williams, who wrote the soundtrack to "E.T." and "Star Wars." Watching Hahn, Sun told me, he realized for the first time "how much fun playing the violin could be." After the concert, he bought a Hahn CD in the lobby and waited in line for her to autograph it. He became an avid follower of her blog, and read up on the instrument she used, a violin made in 1864 by a noted French craftsman and violin dealer, Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume.

Back at Stanford, Sun started studying with Dawn Harms, a member of the music faculty who was a co-concertmaster of the Oakland Symphony and a member of the San Francisco Opera Orchestra. Harms recalled, "Eric could sight-read anything, and he has natural technique. But how do you emotionally move people through your playing? That's what we had to work on. Some people can do it, and some can't."

During Sun's senior year, a friend persuaded him to enroll in Social Dances of North America I. Sun had never danced, but his musical background helped with rhythm and with memorizing steps. After mastering the basics of the waltz, the polka, and swing, he joined the committee that organizes Stanford's Viennese Ball, an annual white-tie event. Each year, members of the committee perform an elaborately choreographed waltz to open the dance. In this group, he found a warm sense of community that had long eluded him, and forged lasting friendships.

Sun graduated with honors, in 2005, but his grade-point average in computer science was below 3.0. He had got a B-minus in the course taught by Jerry Cain, the software engineer who created Facebook's "like" feature. He looked for a job as a computer

programmer but was repeatedly rejected, and ended up working at an economic-consulting firm. He stayed on in the Stanford orchestra, and helped audition new members of the ball committee. The following year, one candidate caught his eye. She moved like a ballerina, Sun remembered: “Her form was very different from everyone else, which isn’t usually regarded as a good thing.” It was Karen Law, who had just completed a master’s degree in thermosciences, a branch of mechanical engineering. She was one of the few women in the field. That year’s waltz choreographers paired her and Sun.

Law had begun studying the violin at the age of six, and she and Sun discussed what Law refers to as “the Asian arms race: your child plays either the violin or the piano, and preferably both. Then they have to be properly equipped with the best instrument.” The goals are to instill self-discipline and a work ethic, to get into a top college, and to confer bragging rights on the parents. Law was one of three girls, and, unlike Sun, had felt no pressure from her parents to play an instrument. She told Sun, “My parents always said things like ‘Don’t do this to impress us.’” Law’s career goal as a mechanical engineer was to advance the cause of clean energy. Sun’s attitude, she recalled, was “That’s a nice thing to work toward—but he didn’t see much evidence of it happening.”

After the Viennese Ball, Law told me, she and Sun realized that they “couldn’t bear to be apart.” A few months later, Sun was driving to an orchestra rehearsal when Law called him to say that a small lump near her throat had been diagnosed as thyroid cancer. Sun turned around and drove to her apartment. Law had a dose of radiation therapy that kept her in isolation for two weeks. She told only family members and close friends about her condition.

Sun and Law didn’t call attention to their relationship, either. They lived in separate apartments while Law worked on clean-energy research at the Sandia National Laboratories in Livermore and Sun pursued a master’s degree in statistics at Stanford. His friend Tyan said he knew that they were serious only after he went backpacking with them in Big Sur in 2008. In 2009, Sun did not mention to Tyan that he was planning to propose. At the Viennese Ball that year, Sun carried an engagement ring in the pocket of his tailcoat. He and Law won a waltz competition, and he momentarily thought of dropping to his knee during the prize-giving. Instead, he proposed the next day. He and Law were married in August, 2010, in a small ceremony in Half Moon

Bay, a resort town south of San Francisco. They choreographed a dance for the occasion, set to Glenn Miller's "In the Mood."

When, midway through his master's, Sun applied to the summer internship at Facebook, then based in Palo Alto, he was surprised to get the position. As an intern, Sun met Mark Zuckerberg at a Facebook "hackathon," one of the company's all-night coding sessions, at which it was traditional to serve Chinese food at 10 P.M. "Hey, I'm Mark," Zuckerberg said, extending his hand. Sun liked the egalitarian nature of the early Facebook. One of his favorite adages was "Nothing at Facebook is somebody else's problem."

Sun's first project was a paper examining how information spreads on Facebook, comparing it to how viruses spread contagious diseases. It was important work in the nascent era of social networking, with implications about how public opinion is formed and how advertising and marketing messages circulate. Sun described the paper as the first study of "a large number of real contagion events on a social network that accurately captures the genuine social ties that exist between people in the real world." It won the main prize at that year's International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media. In 2009, after Sun finished his master's, Facebook hired him permanently. He joined a project called Entities, which mapped and organized connections between a user and pretty much everything else—movies, restaurants, books. Sun embraced the company's mission of "making the world more open and connected" and, Law noticed, became as idealistic about his work as she was about hers. He often shrugged off criticism of Facebook, paraphrasing Zuckerberg: "We're never as good as people say we are, and we're never as bad." Years later, as Facebook came under increasing scrutiny—for distributing fake news and hate speech, and for enabling Russian interference in the 2016 election—Sun acknowledged to me that there were "huge problems," but remained upbeat.

Sun felt that his credentials and skills were modest compared with those of the engineers and programmers he worked with, but he earned glowing performance reviews. Every once in a while, he wondered about his company shares—"Wouldn't it be phenomenal if they turned out to be worth something?" In 2012, Facebook went public; within two years, its stock price had doubled. In 2014, Sun was made a manager, a big step at a company where most people are referred to as "I.C.s," or "individual

contributors.” The same year, Facebook asked Sun to move to London and create a new team to work on Entities. Law got a job there as a manager at another fast-growing software company. Sun told me that he approached management the way he did chamber music, leading while listening, like the first violinist in a string quartet. To help foster a sense of collegiality, Sun and Law invited members of Sun’s team to take a ballroom-dance lesson together. There were more men than women in the group, and people recall Sun dancing with some of the men who didn’t have partners.

Sun and Law lived three blocks east of Wigmore Hall, a chamber-music venue, and near the city’s violin dealers and auction houses, including Brompton’s and Tarisio. The demands of Sun’s work at Facebook left little time for music, but he would sometimes drop by a showroom to try out instruments. Rare violins sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars, or even, in some cases, millions. In 2011, Tarisio set an auction record—\$15.9 million—with the sale of the “Lady Blunt” Stradivarius, which had belonged to Lady Anne Blunt, the granddaughter of Lord Byron.

On a visit to the Tarisio showroom, Sun met Carlos Tomé, Tarisio’s co-owner and the head of sales. Tomé listened to Sun play, and promised to watch out for a violin made by Vuillaume, like the one Sun had heard Hilary Hahn play. “I loved the tone of her instrument,” Sun told me. Vuillaume sold instruments to Nicolò Paganini and other leading violinists of his day. According to David Schoenbaum’s book “The Violin,” his workshop produced more than three thousand violins. He was a prize-winner at the Great Exhibition in London, in 1851, and was awarded the medal of the French Legion of Honor. Vuillaume bought and sold many of the best instruments made by the early Italian masters, and his copies of Stradivarius and Guarneri violins are highly sought after.

In 2016, Tarisio told Sun that a Vuillaume Guarneri copy was coming up for sale in London. Most violins have backs that are made with two pieces of wood glued together, but this one had a single-piece back, a feature that is coveted for aesthetic reasons. The violin, like Hahn’s, was made in the middle of the nineteenth century. As soon as Sun played it, he knew that it was for him: “The sound was warm, bright but not too bright. It was exactly what I’d been looking for.”

Tomé told me that many violinists liken their relationship with their instrument to a marriage. “There’s a deep level of intimacy,” he said. “The violin is made of wood, it

vibrates, it responds to the emotions you pour into it. It's moody, just like humans." Still, Tomé recalled, Sun was "very analytical, very professional," in his approach. He made three visits to the showroom, and then returned with Law. They took two violins into a private room. Law played each while Sun tried to tell the difference. As a test, she sometimes played the same violin twice. Sun consistently identified the Vuillaume. He paid just over two hundred thousand dollars for the instrument.

In all likelihood, Sun got a bargain. In 2003, Tarisio sold a Vuillaume owned by the late virtuoso Isaac Stern for a hundred and forty-one thousand dollars—a record for a Vuillaume at the time—and resold it ten years later for a quarter of a million dollars. In a recent private sale, another Vuillaume sold for close to four hundred thousand dollars. "The prices of violins may have levelled off over certain periods," Schoenbaum told me, "but, so far as anyone can tell, they've never gone down." When Tyan visited Sun and Law soon afterward, Sun showed off the violin and sheepishly told Tyan what he had paid for it. "I was shocked," Tyan said. "He and Karen were always so frugal. He said, 'It's an investment. It diversifies your asset portfolio beyond stocks and bonds.'"

Sun and Law spent two years in London and then returned to California, renting the Mountain View apartment, a modest one-bedroom. They thought of themselves as a typical Silicon Valley couple. They hiked, biked, kayaked, and camped; they followed a low-carb ketogenic diet; they tried to minimize their carbon footprint.

In London, Sun had experienced periodic bouts of nausea. Blood tests had showed nothing unusual. The symptoms persisted in California, and a doctor suggested a brain MRI, which she described as pro forma, given Sun's youth and good health. After the scan, however, the doctor suggested that he see a neurosurgeon right away. The neurosurgeon found a growth in Sun's brain, which looked like a malignant kind of tumor that might be difficult to remove. The surgeon recommended a biopsy. Sun texted Tyan, and called family members and close friends. Law had been discreet about her thyroid cancer, but she and Sun decided to be as open as possible about his diagnosis, which Law described as "a burden that simply can't be borne alone."

Sun broke the news on Facebook. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to tell everyone personally; please excuse the mass-blast," he wrote. "Yesterday afternoon I was diagnosed with a brain tumor." A few days later, during a weekly meeting that Zuckerberg holds for the company, Sun joined him onstage and said that he'd be taking a medical leave. He

recounted how Zuckerberg had introduced himself when they first met, even though Sun had known who he was. “I look forward to seeing you when you come back,” Zuckerberg said.

Tom Stocky, then a Facebook vice-president, said, “All of us just wanted to believe, Oh, this is a thing that sounds scarier than it really is.” Few of Sun’s colleagues had encountered a problem they didn’t think could be solved through technology. Shortly after Sun received his diagnosis, Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan, pledged three billion dollars to “cure, prevent or manage” disease—all disease—within a generation.

Sun’s surgery, on September 22, 2016, removed as much of the tumor as possible, and he began courses of chemotherapy and radiation. His mental capacities and physical dexterity were unaffected, but the pathology report from doctors at Stanford was grim: the tumor was an astrocytoma. Low-grade astrocytomas tend to be slow-growing and contained, but a Grade 4 astrocytoma, called a glioblastoma, is a ruthlessly aggressive cancer that has struck, among others, Vice-President Joe Biden’s son Beau and Senator John McCain. Glioblastomas are resistant to treatment, and are almost always deemed incurable, because they inevitably recur, usually in the same place. The doctors at the University of California, San Francisco, who also analyzed the tissue, said that Sun’s life expectancy could be as short as fourteen months. Sun had largely kept his emotions in check, but hearing this he wept.

After the surgery, Sun suffered intense pain, but insisted that he didn’t need any medication. One evening, he found Law crying on the balcony of their apartment in a rare outburst of frustration. “If you won’t help yourself, no one else can,” she said. He started a list, “How to Help Myself,” and on it he wrote, “Keep communicating with Karen, even if they are darker thoughts.” On October 20th, a few days before his thirty-third birthday, Sun wrote in a Facebook post, “It’s been hard to come to grips with having aggressive and incurable Grade 4 brain cancer; it’s been hard not to get angry and sad about it; it’s been frustrating that every pathology test after my surgery came back with the worst possible result; and it’s been hard to accept that modern medicine isn’t able to fix me.” At the same time, he wrote, “Every day I wake up not-dead is a gift.”

Sun and Law had other lists, detailing the things that they hoped to accomplish in life, a habit that Law had acquired while working as a counsellor at a science camp. Sun’s

list included a trip to Wimbledon; climbing Mt. Snowdon, in Wales; and a range of musical aspirations—from learning the Bach sonatas and partitas to performing the first violin part in Mendelssohn's Octet in E-Flat Major. The Vuillaume violin had fulfilled one of these goals.

Inspired by Hilary Hahn, who has spoken often of her devotion to Bach, Sun started working on Bach's six sonatas and partitas for unaccompanied violin, the most difficult parts of which George Enescu, a celebrated violinist from Romania, has described as the Himalayas for violinists. Sun practiced every day, even if he could manage only fifteen minutes between medical treatments. As he mastered each piece, he posted his performances on Facebook. He finished on November 12th, then turned to the even more difficult Paganini caprices, a set of twenty-four études, which he had often listened to in a recording by Itzhak Perlman. "It's something I always wanted to play when I grew up, like wanting to be a great baseball player," he said.

As he practiced, Sun told me, his new violin "felt like a good friend." The caprices were so difficult that he resumed lessons with Harms, his college teacher. "I hadn't seen him since he graduated," she said. "He was this hot shot at Facebook. He had a beautiful wife. He was dancing. He had the perfect life. And then he told me, 'I guess you haven't heard.'"

In January, Sun applied for the St. Lawrence String Quartet's annual chamber-music seminar at Stanford. The renowned ensemble, founded in Canada, has been in residence at the university for nineteen years. The seminar mixes young professionals with accomplished amateurs, and admission is competitive. It was something Sun had long wanted to do, but he had never found the time.

Sun was accepted and, three days later, he disclosed his diagnosis to Lesley Robertson, the violist in the quartet, who was overseeing applications. She assured him that his place was secure. The Mendelssohn octet was high on Sun's list of musical goals, and he contacted the members of the group he was assigned, encouraging them to choose the piece, which requires eight skilled string players—four violins, two violas, and two cellos. Mendelssohn wrote it in 1825, when he was sixteen; he intended it as a birthday gift for his violin teacher, and the first-violin part requires virtuosic skill. The masterwork has echoes of Mendelssohn's predecessors Mozart and Schubert. Like both

of them, Mendelssohn died young—at thirty-eight, apparently from a brain hemorrhage.

At around the same time that Sun was accepted for the seminar, Law learned that the Sunnyvale Community Players, a local theatre group, was mounting a production of “Fiddler on the Roof” that would run from late September into early October. Law remembered that, in the movie version, “there’s an awesome violin cadenza,” written by John Williams, who reorchestrated much of Jerry Bock’s original Broadway score. This could satisfy two more of Sun’s goals—playing as the concertmaster in an orchestra and playing what amounted to a concerto with an orchestra.

The show’s music director told Law that he’d never been able to find an amateur violinist who could play it, given its high-speed runs and enormous range. (Williams wrote the part for Isaac Stern.) Law asked him to send Sun the music. In May, after ten days of practice, Sun auditioned, and got the part. Sun begged his doctors to keep him alive and healthy enough to perform the solo in October.

Given his resources and contacts, Sun had access to experimental treatments for brain cancer, but he and Law decided that they’d stay in California rather than spend their time travelling to distant medical centers. He did enroll in a clinical trial at Stanford that required threading a plastic tube through his right arm into his heart, which meant he couldn’t use his bow for four weeks. (He took the opportunity to strengthen his left hand and to practice left-handed pizzicato, a plucking technique required for the Paganini caprices.) Otherwise, he had the standard treatment, with the usual side effects of nausea and fatigue.

At an appointment in mid-June, Sun’s doctor told him and Law that a new tumor had formed in Sun’s brain, and that tumors had spread to his spine; they were inoperable. Sun abruptly left the doctor’s office, followed by Law. “This is it, isn’t it?” he whispered to her.

Sun and Law gathered their close friends at their apartment. Tyan told me that, as soon as he arrived, he could sense that there was bad news. After hearing it, “we realized he wasn’t going to be one of the lucky ones,” Tyan said. The group asked questions about the treatment options, and Sun tried to lighten the mood, noting that things could be

worse: during radiation treatments for the tumors on his spine, unlike the ones for those in his brain, he could at least move his head a little.

“He went around talking to all of us, asking, ‘How can I make my passing easier for you?’ ” Tyan recalled. Tyan found himself pondering the lessons of a humanities course he and Sun had taken called *Visions of Mortality*, which asked, “Is death bad for a person, and if so, why?” He thought about a quote from Epicurus: “When we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we do not exist,” though he didn’t find it especially comforting.

Law, too, struggled with feelings of helplessness. She wrote to me that, although she’d tried to conceal it from Sun, she’d often cried—“in childishness, when things that were so easy with Eric as a partner suddenly had to be carried by me alone; in frustration, at no longer having certain choices in my life; in anguish, knowing that there is more suffering to come in Eric’s final days; in uncertainty, knowing that the challenge of rebuilding my life still awaits me.”

Sun and Law had already talked about how to distribute his wealth, and what he wanted done in his memory. They endowed a scholarship at Stanford for women in STEM fields and offered financial aid for applicants to the chamber-music seminar. The day after Sun received the news that the tumor had returned, he wrote to Tomé about the Vuillaume violin. He knew that Tarisio offered grants to young artists, and suggested that one of the prizes be the use of his violin for a year. Tomé had been closely following Sun’s Facebook posts. “I almost wish I didn’t know about his pain, but at the same time I couldn’t look away from it,” he said. “Could he get to the next Paganini caprice? Would he make it?” Tomé was “humbled” by Sun’s suggestion that he donate his violin. “I think a top, promising young violinist should be so lucky to play on your instrument, and we can certainly arrange for this,” he immediately replied.

That same day, the chamber-music seminar began. Telling his group that he was still in shock, Sun disclosed the latest developments. He had to reschedule only one rehearsal to accommodate his treatment regimen, which included renewed radiation. Toward the end of the seminar, Robertson described Sun’s situation to some young participants to help them recognize “that making music can literally be a matter of life and death,” as she told me. “And, even when it’s not life and death in the strictest sense, it should feel

like it's life and death. That profound moment of making music that takes you to another world is something we're very privileged to experience."

Most of us in the seminar knew nothing of Sun's condition. When we gathered at the final recital, at Stanford's Campbell Recital Hall, the room, which is meant to hold a little more than two hundred people, was packed beyond capacity, and there was a sense of outsized anticipation that was hard to understand. The recital opened with the Mendelssohn octet, a work filled with the exuberant optimism of youth. The spirited performance drew a thunderous ovation. Quite a few people were wiping away tears. Some were sobbing. Puzzled at the extreme reaction, I turned to a violinist next to me, and she explained.

It was Carlos Tomé, a friend with whom I frequently play chamber music, who introduced me to Sun. I scheduled a trip to California in September, hoping to see his "Fiddler" performance. He urged me to come early in the run. In late July, Sun drove to Seattle to visit his parents and for a lesson on the "Fiddler" passages with Kyung Chee, his high-school teacher, who had joined Facebook in order to follow his medical progress. Sun had the notes of the cadenza in his fingers, Chee said, but she pressed him to be more emotional. "Let's back off the technical aspects," she told him. "It's the slow notes that are more challenging. It's basically a Yiddish melody, very heartfelt." By the third or fourth time through, he was playing differently. She admired the violin and lent him her bow, made by François Nicolas Voirin, who was Vuillaume's cousin and who worked in the Vuillaume workshop. At the end of their lesson, Sun reminded her that, when he was in high school, she hadn't let him play the Brahms sonata. Chee paused, suddenly overcome. "You can play the Brahms now," she said.

Tyan, too, had detected a significant change in Sun's playing. "Some of it might be the confidence of playing on such a nice violin," he said. "Plus, he's practicing an hour a day. He'd spent so much time and energy working, and now music fills that void." During the run-up to "Fiddler," Sun was taking two lessons a week from Harms, even when he had to squeeze them in between radiation sessions. In the past, Sun had criticized the violin superstar Joshua Bell for "over-emoting." But now he studied videos of Bell, and incorporated some of his theatrical moves and body language. He and Law called it J-Belling. "He was trying to convey his own personal story and the story of the fiddler," Law said. "He pushed the boundary of what he felt comfortable

with.” In contrast with his playing as a college student, Harms said, “he’s really starting to communicate something deeper. I’ve been blown away.”

When I met Sun and Law at their apartment, I hadn’t seen Sun since the seminar, though we’d been talking regularly. He’d lost weight, most of the sight in his right eye was gone, and much of his dark hair had fallen out. He said he’d been struggling with nausea and short-term memory loss. A few weeks earlier, he’d had radiation to shrink some tumors on his spine, close to his neck, which were threatening the nerves that control the arms and the fingers. The radiation made him dangerously susceptible to sunburn, and when we walked down the street, for lunch at a health-food café, he wore heavy dark glasses, a black scarf around his neck, and a large safari-style hat.

His doctors had been wary of his taking on a role as demanding as the one in “Fiddler.” He had to walk and play at the same time, which was difficult with his impaired sight and depth perception. The orchestra had worked out a plan to cover for him should he suffer any sudden problems onstage. Law and Tyan sensed that, given the importance he attached to “Fiddler,” his decline might accelerate once the play was over. Six weeks after the last performance, he went into hospice care and, less than forty-eight hours later, died in Law’s arms. It was November 23rd, fourteen months after he received his diagnosis.

On the afternoon of my visit, in September, Sun carefully removed his Vuillaume violin from its velvet-lined case and showed me its single-piece back. He’d made it through fifteen of the twenty-four Paganini caprices. He asked me to select a Bach solo partita movement at random—an exercise, he said, that kept him from playing only his favorites. I picked the bourrée from the first partita, in B minor, which he dispatched despite its difficult triple and quadruple stops (three or four notes played at once). He had me follow the score as he practiced his “Fiddler” solos from memory. Then he suggested we play something together. I went to the upright piano, which he’d had tuned for my visit, and he handed me the score for Brahms’s first violin sonata. Law recorded us as we played.

I arrived early for that night’s performance. The program included a brief biography of Sun and described his violin. “Due to an incurable brain cancer, this production of ‘Fiddler on the Roof’ will be his final set of public performances,” the note read.

“Thereafter his violin will be loaned to the Tarisio Trust: Eric Sun–Karen Law Vuillaume Fellowship.” As the show opened, Sun entered at the back of the auditorium, in costume as the fiddler. His cap covered his scalp; the dim lighting concealed his damaged eye. He made his way down a set of shallow steps onto the semi-darkened stage while playing the haunting opening solo. After intermission, the orchestra played the Williams film music, and Sun rose from his seat in the orchestra and moved to center stage. He launched into the cadenza, playing with a passion and a virtuosity I hadn’t heard from him before. He blazed through the runs and easily landed the highest notes. When he finished, there was a standing ovation, even as the orchestra resumed. Sun smiled, acknowledging the applause. Then he blew a kiss to the crowd and the spotlight dimmed. ♦

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