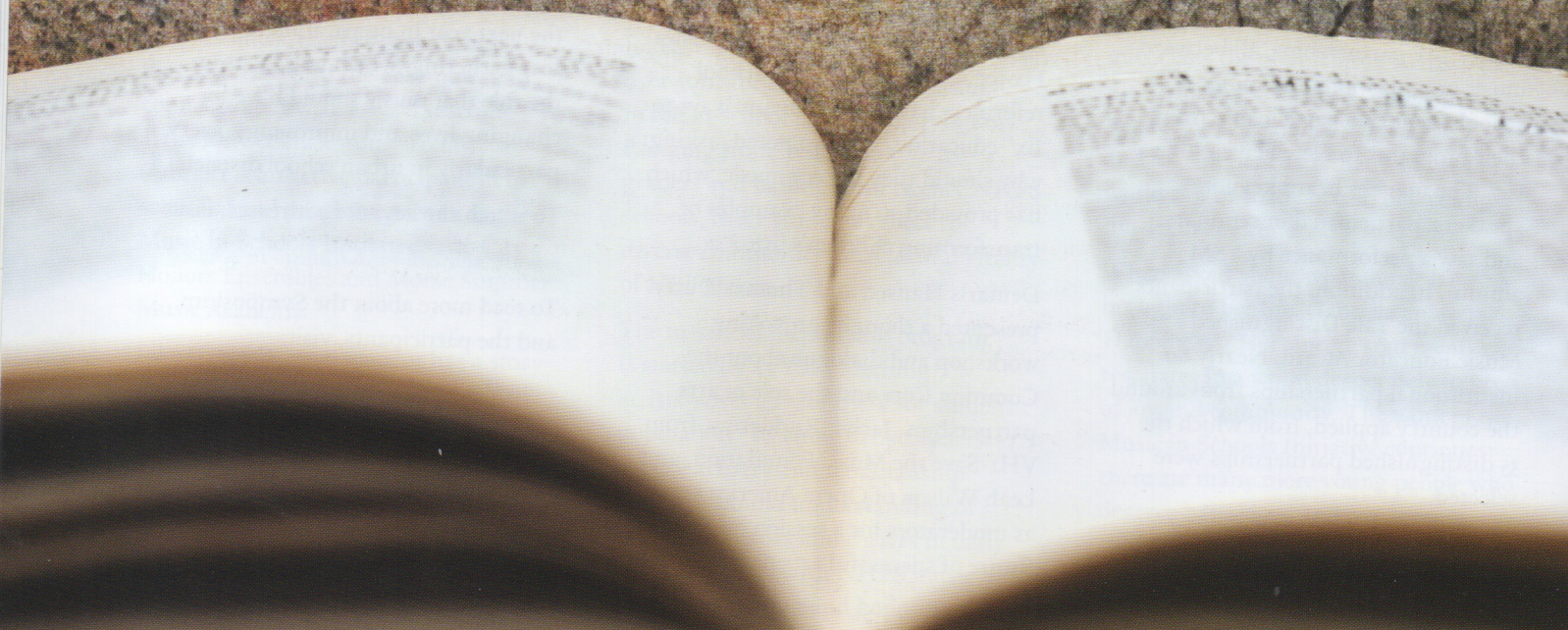


CAREER &



TRANSFIGURATION



L to R: Leona Francombe, Gerald Elias, Vivien Shotwell

By **Samantha Buker**

"I'M TRYING TO TELL A STORY AND TRANSPORT THE AUDIENCE. BEFORE THE WRITTEN WORD, STORIES WERE SPOKEN OR SUNG, AND WRITERS STILL CARE DEEPLY ABOUT THE MUSIC OF LANGUAGE."

Gerald Elias

VIOLINIST OF MYSTERIES

A month after graduating from Yale, Gerald Elias '75 BA, '75 MM had no idea he'd become a writer. He knew he had just won a difficult audition for one of the best American orchestras: he was joining the first violin section of the Boston Symphony. What started as his sabbatical project in 1997, a book called *Violin Lessons*, ended up as *The Devil's Trill*, the first of a mystery series that follows Daniel Jacobus, a blind violinist who solves murders plaguing the musical community.

Unlikely directions have Yale connections. Elias had wanted to educate violin students about difficulties they'd confront in their chosen careers. His own Yale mentor, Joseph Silverstein, concertmaster of the Boston Symphony for 22 years, was the model for what Jacobus says about the violin (but not for Jacobus' irascible personality). Equally, Silverstein influenced Elias' musical career as his colleague in the Boston Symphony and later as his music director in the Utah Symphony.

"You go in," Elias says, "idealistic, caring only about the beautiful." However, as his 36-year symphony career taught him, there are roadblocks: contract negotiations and fierce competition can break a musician. Elias admits that had he written his original book of lessons — one chapter per challenge — his reader would "have fallen asleep in five seconds." But when weaving the lessons into a whodunit about a stolen Stradivarius, he knew he'd hit upon a way to expand the audience for the music he loves.

Without the help of another Yale friend and mentor, Katharine Weber, he would never have gotten beyond a draft in a drawer. Weber, who taught creative writing, helped him embark on an unlikely crash course in how to write. *The Devil's Trill* took ten years but now he can write a book in a year.

The beauty of the blind violinist is that not only are his other senses (taste, touch, hearing) more acute, it also explains why Jacobus identifies clues others miss. Additionally, Elias notes that Jacobus sees more clearly than others the musical world for what it is, "the stuff that goes along with the music, marketing, PR, theatrics, hysterics and egos."

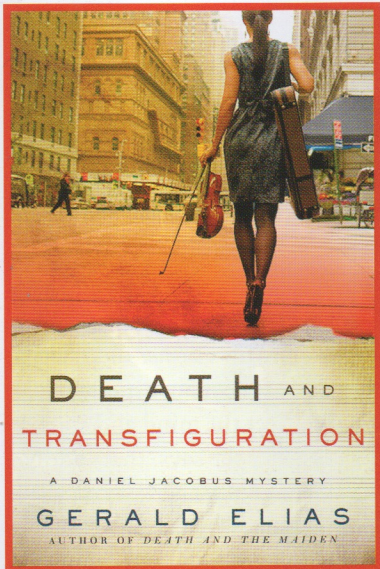
His fans regularly write thanking him for opening a door to music for them.

Elias' newest book, *Playing With Fire*, about the life and death of a violin-making shop, comes out in spring 2016. But Yale alumni may be most excited about the book he's working on right now, since it takes place at a music school not unlike the one they attended.

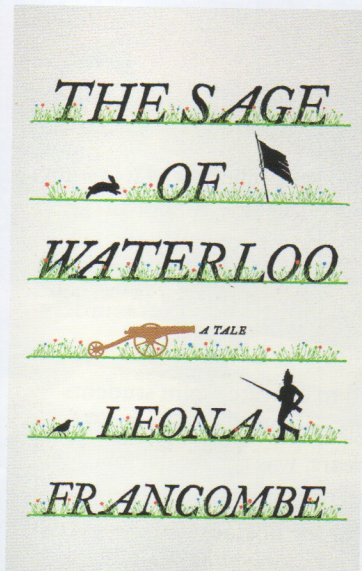
Leona Francombe

FROM PIANO TO TYPEWRITER AND BACK AGAIN

Like most pianists, Leona Francombe '81 MM started young. She also had a second love: escape through books. When she was thirteen or fourteen she decided to strike out and write one herself. Tapping away laboriously on her father's old black Royal typewriter, she



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created her first “infant” novel. But her real beginning might have been at Yale, in a certain class called “Writing on Music.”

“We were asked to write an encyclopedia article about any composer we wanted,” reflects Francombe. “Since there was much more piano-playing than writing going on in my life at the time, I decided to flex my imagination and invent a composer for the assignment: Anton Belinsky, complete with a Soviet back-story and tragic death.” She admits that while her professor was not amused, she did manage to fool some of her classmates, who spent time in the music library looking up Belinsky. She later honored her ruse by giving this Belinsky a minor role in her first mature novel project: *The Mist Catcher*.

This one novel is especially close to her. Though unpublished, *The Mist Catcher* did make her a semi-finalist in an Amazon competition. It investigates one of the main aspects of music Francombe has been exploring: its mystery. How does it affect the mind and spirit? How does it transcend, ennoble, and empower? “All burning issues,” she says, that “oddly enough, seem to interest few serious musicians these days.” We have all experienced it, that moment where music becomes this living force that unifies the hand, instrument, sound and listener. Maybe even for a whole concert.

“Alas,” says Francombe, “like all great magicians, music will probably never reveal how, exactly, she does this.”

Her deep passion for history also plays a huge role. For *The Mist Catcher* this meant mining an original manuscript in the Brussels Conservatory’s library: Joseph-Louis Roger’s *Treatise on the Effects of Music on the Human Body*, published in 1803.

Her latest novel, *The Sage of Waterloo*, takes us to the site of the famous battle. The protagonist, a philosophical rabbit, recounts the Battle of Waterloo while looking back on his own life and recalling the life teachings of his wise old grandmother. Its debut marked the 200th anniversary of the battle in June, 2015.

As all the YSM graduates in this story have learned, writing and music share deep links. Francombe says, “Music and writing have shared a common source in me for so long that to do only one or the other wouldn’t be an option.”

For her, “phrasing, sonority, character, and structure” are essential to the handling of both words and notes. The practice of the two shift as the phases of the moon. One waxes as the other wanes, then vice versa — just as life, children, and teaching commitments change one’s priorities.

The links are so entwined that Francombe turned from writing about Waterloo to composing a piano meditation on the same subject after *The Sage* came out. Her music is a visceral response in sound to the ruin of Hougoumont Farm and the empty, brooding landscape around it. (She lives just down the road.) Her many wanderings inspired her to depict “what hangs on the silence there.” Today, the old farm has been renovated. But before that, her son, a digital arts student, made a video (available on YouTube) of his photo work there, which accompanies her *Waterloo Meditation*.

“Working on *Waterloo Meditation*,” she confesses, “has inspired me to compose other musical journeys through the landscapes and moods of my books. I’m really excited about this synergy. I’ve begun mapping such a piece for *A Song of Deeds*.” This is the work she’s shopping around to publishers currently. Her present music-centric writing project is also inspiring her to compose an accompanying musical journey.