

## 'I want my music to touch and reach people, and in my mind, everything I do has that objective'

about how in his family, he wanted to play violin, but his sister already played violin, so he ended up playing the cello,' she says. 'When I heard that, I understood it as a violin he was playing, 'cause I was four. So I said, "Mum, I want to play violin." She helped me figure out where to buy one. I was like, "Isn't this kind of small?" and they said, "No, you start on that size and you get the bigger one later." It didn't take me long to figure out that it wasn't the right instrument, but the local tuition programme I was on never had a small cello. I didn't want to play violin – I was just trying to hang on until they had a cello for me.'

'Hanging on' involved staying on the violin (with a couple of flirtations with woodwind instruments) until the age of 14. At first, attending free group lessons, her progress depended in large part on her own gumption. 'You'd get the music and some basic insight and get to go home with your instrument, which is amazing – but I didn't get much instruction. I had a really good ear, and I can think of so many times that I'd go to orchestra rehearsals and, although I couldn't really read the music, I'd just listen to what the other violins were doing, and just fake along. Little by little I got better at reading, then I started on a different programme and for about four good years I had some serious violin instruction. As soon as I could kind of play, I got tired of it, because it wasn't really the instrument that I liked. It was always the cello for me – even now, I still long to play that instrument.'

**BUT SPALDING WAS STILL AT THE MERCY** of whatever free resources were on offer, and so the cello continued to elude her. Nevertheless, what did happen was life-changing. 'When I decided to quit violin, a few days later a bass became available. If you play written music for years, and have the sensibility for improvised music, it's like a breath of fresh air – it's wild. After the first few minutes of touching the instrument, my music teacher came in and explained a blues progression to me – "Basically just play notes from this scale, in any order

Spalding has written new material for a jazz string trio



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you want – it all sounds good. I'm going to play these chords, and you just play quarter notes – that's called a walking bass line." And I was like, "Damn, this is good, this is it. That counts as music, right?" I was hooked.'

At this point, I ask Spalding about the bass she plays today. She replies with warmth. 'The consensus is that it's either French or German, from before the turn of the century. It's a three-quarter – well, it became a three-quarter, but I think it used to be bigger. It's a flat-back, carved out of spruce, with a cherrywood fingerboard. I bought it from someone who said they bought it from a guy who played it in a symphony for 50 years. And you can kind of feel that – it really speaks.'

'Ron Carter talked about the importance of always practising in tune, because in a very literal sense, you're dealing with vibration and the wood is physically vibrating. So the more you play in tune, the more you're vibrating the wood at that frequency, so when you go to that note, it's open to that note. I thought he was full of it, and then I started feeling it with my instrument and I was like, "Wow, when the notes are in tune, it's like it's open – it sings." I imagine that would be one of the effects of playing the same instrument for 50 years. I like basses that have been opened up, and you can feel the difference in your skeleton, when it's sitting on your pelvic bone. You play a note and the wood is moving.'

This affinity with her instrument marks Spalding down as a string player through and through. And if she is currently expressing this alongside an exploration of her vocal and songwriting talents, a more wholesale testament to the influence that string music has had on her is just around the corner. 'The next record is going back to those roots,' she explains. 'Recently, I started realising that there are a lot of sounds, timbres and music that I'm hearing that don't really come from jazz and radio music. They come from years of listening to chamber music, playing chamber music and being in orchestras. So it >