

"I just put on blinders, ignored the apparent futility of it, and kept at it," he told me in a recent interview. We scheduled a meeting here in our office as Charles, an HLAA member, lives in nearby Potomac, Maryland. He offered us a concert of classical music, some written for the guitar, others transcribed from other instruments. After the program, we sat down and talked about how he was able to get so far in music with such an apparent disability for this field.

**A**t the tender age of 15, Charles Mokotoff (54) experienced a sudden onset of hearing loss in both ears, leaving him with a severe-to-profound loss. Medical intervention was unsuccessful and he was given one hearing aid and sent off into the world. He had already been playing guitar in, as he puts it, "in one pretty bad rock band after another," and decided to continue playing despite the loss.

"I just put on some blinders, ignored the apparent futility of it, and kept at it. When I hit college at 17, I met someone playing classical guitar, and that was it. She was working her way through some lovely Renaissance music. I was totally awed by it. I picked up a classical guitar somewhere and just kept on plugging. Luckily for me there was a fantastic teacher in my area who had worked with one of the great Spanish virtuosos for years. She was very strict with me and laid the groundwork for my further study.

"Besides the incredible beauty of the music, one of the attractions was that the whole thing was solo. I didn't have to worry about communicating with other members of a band or ensemble." This may be a common experience for people with hearing loss, avoidance of social situations.

Apparently Charles had quite a feel for it. He graduated *cum laude* from Syracuse University with a bachelor's degree in music, concentrating on classical guitar and then went on to Ithaca College, where he received a master's degree in the same field. He was immediately hired to teach in the music department at Ithaca and began a career that had several impressive highlights.

### **First Stop: Carnegie Hall**

He made his Carnegie Hall debut in 1987. The *New York Times* commented that he was, "exceptional among debutantes...a thoughtful, gentlemanly artist, technically fastidious and able to coax a range of sounds from his instrument." Charles went on to several concert tours in the Far East, including stops in Singapore, the Philippines and Hong Kong. The *Hong Kong Standard* called him: "An artist who possesses vast guitar technique and musicianship..."

This range of sounds was quite evident to us as he played music from the Baroque to modern times. Our staff was delighted with his facility on the guitar and music he offered, most of it unfamiliar to us.

He tells us that communicating overseas with many for whom English was not their first language was a particular challenge. "Despite all the cards being stacked against me, I just kept at it, but around 1992 or so I was ready to pack it in." He felt he had reached as far as he could go, and had begun to look into himself and wonder what it would be like to live life where he didn't feel his hearing loss would be something peculiar.

"I never felt it handicapped me from an artistic, musical perspective. I could obviously play well—no one listening to me knew I had a hearing loss, and I was really making it in the music world. But I wanted to see what it would be like to be up front about my hearing loss. I felt I had to throw off the burden of a professional career in music to do this. I was just dying to know what it would be like to tell people I was hard of hearing and feel it was okay."

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## Charles Mokotoff

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He started and continued to run the Guitar Program at Northeastern University in Boston for nine years. At Northeastern there is a very fine program for American Sign Language (ASL) and interpreter training. Just for fun, he took all the ASL classes offered and even some interpreter training. With fluency in ASL, doors opened that allowed him to meet and really get to know the Deaf world.

"It was just fantastic in Boston, with a good-sized melting pot of people who are hard of hearing, culturally Deaf, oral deaf, and everyone in between. If you could use sign language, you were in the club."

Finally, in 1992, he embraced hearing loss, stopped performing and took a job at the Learning Center for Deaf Children in Framingham, Massachusetts. That led to another job at Gallaudet University and relocation to the Washington, D.C., area. He began a new career in information technology, which led to his current post at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland. Along the way he stopped playing entirely, for 16 years.

"Around 1990 or so, I just hung it up. Got a job in the IT world and started a family. I just said goodbye to the guitar for quite some time. It was a period of reflection and self-examination for me. I also became fluent in American Sign Language and met lots of fascinating people, both deaf and hearing."

### One Day...16 Years Later

"But one day, really just one day, I felt I had to play again. I felt I had to play one particular work from my

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early studies. I couldn’t get it out of my head. So I took my old concert guitar, out of the closet, the very instrument on which I recorded my CD and did all my concerts, and started to play again. It was slow going for about a month, but things picked up quickly."

Now Charles balances an active life of performing on a volunteer basis for churches, libraries, performance clubs, small recital series, and other venues with his job at the NIH. "I do lots of small gigs around the D.C. area, but also some full recitals. I performed a concerto with a local orchestra this season, and have a few recitals out of the area." He says his most important job, though, is being a father to his 14-year-old son and 11-year-old daughter.

"If you have the talent for music, it’s yours—no one can take it away. A hearing loss, even as severe as mine, won’t stop you. But it is the social aspect of it all, meeting audience members, making phone calls for work, teaching music students and the like, that really took its toll on me. It was much tougher 25 years ago, but thanks in no small part to the advocacy that has led to so much progress in assistive devices, captioning and the like, and the fabulous camaraderie one garners from groups such as HLAA and the Association of Adult Musicians with Hearing Loss ([www.aamhl.org](http://www.aamhl.org)), things are better now." He particularly

enjoys performing at HLAA chapter meetings, where his classical guitar is easily accessible via the audio loop or FM system for the audience with hearing loss.

He concludes: "Would I do it differently if I had the chance? Probably not. Not a day goes by I don’t give thanks for my ability to play such wonderful music and to be able to communicate with a diverse range of people. This whole experience has enriched my life immeasurably."


### Enjoy the Music of Charles Mokotoff

Visit [www.charlesmokotoff.com](http://www.charlesmokotoff.com) to learn more about the artist, enjoy samples of his music, watch videos, and see a list of upcoming recitals.

His CD is available on CD Baby: <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/charlesmokotoff>.

Feel free to contact him directly at [mokotoff@gmail.com](mailto:mokotoff@gmail.com) with any questions or comments.

#### Editor’s Note:

After Charles performed for the HLAA staff, HLAA Executive Director Brenda Battat said that with her cochlear implant she really loved music and "could enjoy the nuances of Charles’ music. With my hearing aids, it always sounded as if the musician was ‘tuning up’ and not really playing." 

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Barbara Kelley is deputy executive director of HLAA and editor-in-chief of Hearing Loss Magazine. She can be reached at [bkelly@hearingloss.org](mailto:bkelly@hearingloss.org).

# Q&A *with Charles Mokotoff*

## **Who is your favorite composer?**

I am a big fan of Mozart, as well as Isaac Albeniz, Enrique Granados and some relatively lesser known contemporary guitar composers such as Leo Brouwer, William Lovelady, Nikita Koshkin and Stepan Rak.

## **You don't play with music in front of you. How do you memorize this wide repertoire?**

Music is with me always—I have rarely had to work to memorize something, as it comes pretty quickly. I grew up with a lot of these traditional pieces so the music makes sense to me. Having been trained in music theory as well as performance practice, I can often see the musical logic that makes it simpler to remember what comes next. The hard part is physically doing it while under pressure. But we all have our lapses; the trick is keeping everything flowing if you get lost for some reason!

## **What type of guitar do you play?**

I have used many instruments since I began playing again in 2006. It is actually ironic, since in the first iteration of my career, I was faithful to one guitar for almost 15 years. I think it is the Internet, with the temptation of all the wonderful guitars out there that has made me change guitars so frequently. I am currently using the finest guitar I have ever owned—an instrument made in Germany, in 2002, by the master luthier Matthias Dammann. I have bonded with this instrument and use it exclusively since purchasing early in 2009. I have brought this guitar with me when going to the audiologist to “tune” my hearing aid for music. In this way, this particular guitar is now my baseline and all other guitars tend to deviate from it. I have listened to recordings of it carefully, without hearing aids (using high quality headphones) and feel comfortable that the sound I am hearing with the aid matches “reality.”

## **How do you market your work?**

It is a much different world for guitarists these days, and I can sum it up in one word—“Internet.” When I was doing my thing in the '80s I had to send out typed sheets of paper with my PR, headshots, and cassettes. Then I spent at least an hour or two daily on the phone. Now, one URL does it all. You send a couple of emails and there you go—contact made. Of course it isn't any easier to get a gig, but at least by the large number of contacts you can make, the odds increase greatly. The downside of this is a lot of players are perhaps better at websites and publicity than the guitar, so that can't be too good. I am overwhelmed with the sheer number of guitarists, many who are quite accomplished. You can hear them all going at it on YouTube—which has to be one of the wonders of the world.

## **What was it like returning to music?**

Coming back to the guitar after a long break was a complicated experience. Overall, my hands seemed to move like always—just a bit slower—but I didn't recall anything to play. Reading music came right back of course, but I grappled with scales, arpeggios, tone production, and other guitar techniques, like anyone does. It all came back faster than I could imagine.

The big thing was more psychological; i.e., I am technically not a professional guitarist anymore. Wow, this is fun! I was just doing this because I wanted to, not because I needed or had to. There were many other hobbies I could pursue, but with my training and diligent study many years ago, why not enjoy myself with the guitar? As a single dad with a full time work commitment, it is unusual for me to get more than two hours a day of practice during the week, as much as four on a weekend depending on schedule. Not a day goes by that I don't thank the industry of my youth so that I am able to rely on a technique I honed long ago.

## **What are your future plans in music? Will you be releasing a new CD?**

I can't bite off too much more in the guitar world these days, since I have young kids and a full-time job. I have been able to keep this going very well as a dedicated hobby. Perhaps in a few years I can give more time to it. But for now, it stays fun. I really do sound better and better. There aren't a whole lot of things great about getting older, but this, the ability to interpret music naturally, to build on the diligence of my youth and to understand how to practice is, for sure, one wonderful thing about maturing. I already started to do some recording of how I sound now in preparation for a new CD in the near future.

## **Tell us a little more about your hearing loss and music.**

My adult life is made up of three major eras: 1) professional musician striving to keep hearing loss a secret; 2) living as a deaf adult, not playing music while adapting to Deaf culture and lifestyle; and 3) accepting hearing loss as a part of life and guitar as a serious hobby. For sure, the first era took the most out of me; the combination of practicing, studying, performing, traveling, teaching, and all the while pretending to be hearing was quite a plateful. It is a darn good thing I did this one first!

In the second period, I was glad to throw off the shackle of pretense, get a haircut that let the world see my hearing aids and be forthcoming in informing anyone that they needed to adjust to me, rather than vice versa. Learning sign language and exploring Deaf culture was consuming. Eventually I realized it still wasn't the right place for me. It took almost 16 years to figure this out.

Now deep into the third period, I feel I have gleaned the best from the previous two and made this all come together. I am enjoying this time, though I must say when I hear some young guitarist playing rings around me, I do wonder what I would play like had I not put the guitar down for so long. As it is, I get to perform with far less pressure, and thanks to all the wonderful musicians I have met and opportunities I have been lucky enough to grab, life could not be more fascinating.

## **What advice do you give to young people with hearing loss who have musical talent?**

If you can hear your instrument, can really listen to yourself play, can hear others you admire playing and know what you want, then go for it! I would say the same thing to a hearing or hard of hearing student: You have to love practicing. You need to look forward to your time with your instrument. This isn't a chore—it is an obligation. There is an old cliché in the music business that I firmly believe: no one does this professionally because they want to, they do it because they have to, and you really have no other choice. **FM**



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