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## **Pioneering Spirit**

**[Has Cello, will travel – title in *The Strad*]**

Alexander Ivashkin is no ordinary cellist. Just the briefest of glances at his extensive concerto repertoire (over 60 works at the last count) shows a heightened taste for the unusual and exotic. In amongst the inevitable Dvorak, Saint-Saëns and Tchaikovsky warhorses, one not only discovers the likes of Tishchenko, Mossolov, Bortkiewicz, but also such evocative names as Vielgorsky, Korndorf, Tarnopolsky, Wustin and Raskatov.

Of the nearly 50 recordings he has so far made, the Rachmaninov Sonata, Prokofiev Cello Concerto No 1 and Sinfonia-Concertante, all Schnittke's cello compositions (for Chandos), and two Shostakovich concertos (for BMG) are about as 'central' as his discography gets. Otherwise it features a bracingly eclectic mix of Gretchaninov, Gubaidulina, Tcherepnine, Roslavets, Smirnov, Ives, Rubinstein, Martinu and Medtner, alongside a trailblazing collection of Australasian music entitled 'Under the Southern Cross' (reviewed in *The Strad*, April 1999).

No less original and arresting is Ivashkin's playing style. While there is no mistaking the technical impregnability of his Russian training, he projects his ideas with an almost improvisatory freedom. A typical Ivashkin performance takes nothing for granted, so that even the most familiar works emerge with a revitalising freshness which tantalisingly fuses the boldest of gestures with a moving poetic intimacy.

But then nothing about Ivashkin is conventional. He entered the Gnessin Special School for gifted students at the tender age of five, and for a while it seemed as though he would make his way in the world as a pianist. A chance meeting with Rostropovich soon changed all that, and within no time the cello had become the focal point of his studies. Yet Rostropovich's impact went much deeper than that. Inspired by the great man's all-embracing approach to music, Ivashkin began branching out into conducting, musicology, music journalism and criticism. 'It's very important not just to play but also to experiment with all forms of expression and experience,' he insists. 'A conservatoire training can only take you so far. We need something else. It is no longer sufficient merely to spend one's entire career playing the standard repertoire over and over again. It is important to travel and try to absorb as much as you can from different environments, cultures and experiences.'

Directing the Contemporary Music Group 'Bolshoi Soloists' for many years brought Ivashkin into personal contact with the likes of Cage, Crumb, Kagel, Nono, Stockhausen, Penderecki, Pärt, Denisov, Shchedrin and Schnittke. It was Schnittke who persuaded him to give more solo concerts; he also composed 'Hymn No. 3' (1979) and *Klingende Buchstaben* (1988) especially for him. Meanwhile, Ivashkin became intimate with the opera and ballet repertoires during a ten-year stint as a principal member of the Bolshoi Orchestra.

All these various experiences helped shape Ivashkin's musical philosophy, both as a player and teacher. His enthusiasm is infectious, his insights probing: 'I think we have to remember that culture itself is a collective memory of mankind. So in a way whatever music you play you are dealing with has the same essence but in a different shape. Music is not just a text. The writing down of music is merely a technical convenience. In a sense what makes a great performer is their close proximity to the essence of music – that which goes *beyond* the written text.'

One of Ivashkin's latest recording projects is designed specifically to bring him closer to the essence of a bygone age. 'I spent eight years living in New Zealand,' he explains, 'and found that its elemental, almost prehistoric, pre-Christian landscapes and weather patterns were reflected in the music. Meeting the Polynesian people on Cook Island was one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life. Their singing takes you back to a bygone era of innocence and purity. I may travel to Rarotonga to record with them or use pre-recorded tapes, but I am hoping to find a way of extemporising freely on the cello with their singing. I discover more colours when playing this kind of music, more possibilities as to where the music can take me, so I'm also hoping to commission some new music from Australian and New Zealand composers Peter Sculthorpe, Gillian Whitehead, and Chris Cree-Brown, with whom I've collaborated in the past'

'In my opinion, New Zealand and Australia are *the* places to be in the 21st century. They may not have the cultural history of Europe, but they offer something totally unique and special. Their music is minimalist in a sense, but also possesses a special organic naturalness quite different from European-American sophistication. My hope is that the cello can realise something elemental in this.'

It was the hypnotic individuality of Australasia – the sensation of being on a different world in a different epoch – that inspired Ivashkin and his cellist wife Natalia Pavlutsкая, to establish the Adam Cello Festival-Competition in New Zealand during 1995. 'It's important not just to compete but to work together as well, so we combined the competition with masterclasses, conversations workshops and concerts. In this respect it is quite unique. It's a long way to travel for most people, but exposure to the unique world of New Zealand is all part of the experience. We are going to hold a concert at London's Wigmore Hall in the autumn of 2005 that will feature all the competition's winners over the last ten years, many of whom are now leading cellists here in Europe. I'm also looking into the possibility of expanding the festival to incorporate special events in Britain and North America.

'I am always struck as to just how different the various players are at the competition, whereas during my training in Russia we all sounded very much alike. Masterclasses make sense because you enjoy exposure to a wide range of playing styles. It's something you can't just get from a book or a teacher. What is especially encouraging is the way young cellists are trying to discover things more intuitively, although ideally a player requires a combination of both technical discipline and interpretative freedom.

'Young players are so much more flexible nowadays. I recently took a masterclass in Kiev and heard same young man play Bach, first in the traditional Russian style – all big sound, soulful, with lots of vibrato – and then in a more sparing, authentic style and both were equally convincing. It was remarkable. However, there is not the same kind of national identity as before, even if there are still discernable differences between French, German and Russian teaching. It is vital to keep these national identities because without them we are in danger of losing the tradition that gave birth to the classics in the first place.'

Maintaining that difficult balance between tradition and expanding horizons is a constant feature of Ivashkin's work at Goldsmiths' College, University of London, where he was appointed Professor of Music, Head of Performance Studies and Director of the Centre for Russian Music in 1999. 'I enjoy my teaching because I don't like anything to become a routine exercise and every student brings their own unique qualities and challenges. Their interests may vary from pop culture to gender studies. As a result I find myself learning all the time, and I encourage aspiring

students to do the same. It is no longer enough just to become a master craftsman on your chosen instrument.'

Another vital part of Ivashkin's musical life is his contact with different composers, and his insatiable appetite for the unusual and neglected. Back in January he gave the world premiere in Winnipeg, Canada, of the Cello Concerto by Nikolai Korndorf (1947-2001). 'Much as I love playing Dvorak, Schumann (also in the Shostakovich orchestration) and Tchaikovsky, I feel particularly drawn towards less familiar works such as the Korndorf. Nowadays the younger generation of players and listeners want something a little different, something out of the ordinary, something that has a special relevance to us today. Korndorf spent the last ten years of his life in Canada, and his Cello Concerto dates from several years before that, yet it was never performed publicly. It's a fantastic piece. The first movement is a strange mixture of tonal music, Indian raga and turkish Maqam improvisation, with an Oriental/Asian feel. The second is minimalistic toccata and very difficult for the orchestra. It took me a while to learn it, I can tell you!'

Ivashkin recently gave the Moscow premiere of the Korndorf, at the Conservatoire Great Hall, only this time on his Yamaha electric cello: 'The orchestra is huge in this piece and so the extra amplification for the cello came in really handy Ivashkin adds. Other recent premieres includes the Gretchaninov Concerto, composed back in 1895, recorded by Ivashkin for Chandos in 1997, but never before performed in public, and a new, partly theatrical piece '*Terminus*' for cello and orchestra by Russian-Azerbaijani composer, Faradz Karayev. Ivashkin also hopes to work more closely with amplification, electronics and computers in the future.

Another trailblazing premiere, given in Hamburg in October, was of a reconstruction of Brahms's Double Concerto for cello, with the solo violin line woven into the orchestral fabric. Although no incontrovertible evidence has yet come to light, some scholars maintain that Brahms originally envisioned the work simply for cello: 'The more I play this piece the more I feel that Brahms might have intended the piece this way. Some of the divisions between cello and violin in the Double Concerto can feel slightly artificial, whereas the solo version works more convincingly. I'm taking the piece on tour in the Southern Hemisphere in April-

For Ivashkin it is not enough to simply view life only through the 'f-holes' of a cello. Whether he is playing, conducting, writing, composing, teaching, collaborating or administrating, he brings the same sense of adventure, of excited exploration. His love of travel extends to languages, semiotics, philosophy, cuisine, even fashion. 'In the modern world, if you are to do your job properly, in order to give an audience the fullest range of experience you have to draw down on the widest possible background. I think the world is bigger than some performers will admit to! I enjoy being a vital part of what is happening around me. For me, it is not enough to be merely an observer – I want to be a part of everything.'

## **Julian Haylock**

### **IVASHKIN'S CELLOS:**

#### **1. Early 19<sup>th</sup>-century French. Unlabelled.**

This was my first professional cello which I bought when I joined the Bolshoi. I used it a lot when I played solos with the orchestra. It's a very fine instrument with a clear,

well projected sound. It also works extremely well in the contemporary repertoire and for recital programmes.

## **2. Stradivari copy made in 1993 by Bruce Carlson.**

In 1993 I bought a Stradivari copy cello made for me by the great American maker Bruce Carlson, who is based in Cremona. He modelled my instrument on a late, unusually large Stradivarius pattern. It has a very bold, strong sound, so whenever I play anything modern, especially something like Shostakovich, I always use this cello. I like it so much that I subsequently bought several more instruments from Bruce for my wife's and my pupils.

## **3. Giuseppe Guarneri cello of 1710, called 'S. Teresie'.**

Some years ago a good friend of mine, Chris Marshall, a devoted supporter of the arts, offered to buy an instrument that I could have on permanent loan from New Zealand's Bridgewater Trust. I tried a number of different instruments at Beares, London, and the one I fell in love with was a 1710 Guarneri. It is a beautiful, rather small cello, with a table in spruce, and back, scroll and sides in beech. This is unusual, and yet it produces a wonderful, intimate sound. The more you put into it, the more it rewards you.

## **4. Yamaha electric cello**

A commercially available instrument suggested to me by one of my very old friends, remarkable cellist David Geringas, initially for silent practice. I've now decided to use it for performing the Nikolai Korndorf Cello Concerto in Moscow. The orchestra is huge in this piece, so the extra amplification for the solo cello comes in really handy.