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Vasily Petrenko: “Politics changes, but music remains …”

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Conductor Vasily PetrenkoPhoto © Mark McNulty

Vasily, you are no stranger to the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. You first performed with this orchestra back in 2012. Thirteen years have passed. Looking back now, without preparation, what has been most important in your life during these years?

Phew… So much has happened over these years… Not only in music, but in the world as well. The main thing, perhaps, is that I have come to understand very clearly that, despite any upheavals, whether pandemics or political events, music and art remain what unites us as people, what allows us to understand one another, to feel for one another, to empathise.

On your official website I saw your very moving tribute to Yuri Temirkanov, whose performances in Switzerland many music lovers remember with nostalgia.

What mattered the most for you in Yuri Khatuyevich, as a person and as a musician?

Yuri Khatuyevich Temirkanov was one of the most talented conductors of the entire twentieth century. The measure of talent he was granted by God or by providence was among the highest, probably, of all the maestros of that century. In addition to that, what was very important to me in him was an inner nobility, an inner purity musically, which was always felt in his interpretations, in his concerts. And, of course, I grew up attending rehearsals of the Distinguished Collective [the Honoured Collective of the Republic Academic Symphony Orchestra of the St Petersburg Philharmonic, note by N.S.], I attended many of them when I lived in St Petersburg. The contact between the artist and the orchestra, a creative closeness combined with a certain distance, the combination of these qualities in Yuri Khatuyevich was probably unique.

In Russia people like to talk about the uniqueness of our culture, about its special mission. This usually refers to several composers, writers and, of course, to ballet as a whole. Is it possible to speak about a Russian conducting school and, if so, do you consider yourself its representative?

> My generation and I, Vladimir Jurowski, Kirill Petrenko, Andris Nelsons, Kirill Karabits, were very fortunate. We received an excellent Soviet education, which probably had no equal in the world, and at the same time we already had the opportunity to go to the West and gain an understanding of European and American cultures. This combination of Soviet education and the absorption of other cultures probably resulted in a generation rich in soloists and conductors.

I would say not Russian, but Soviet. I am still a product of the Soviet or post-Soviet school. Now, of course, it is impossible to speak about it in those terms, since all the republics live as sovereign states. As for the Soviet school, my generation and I, Vladimir Jurowski, Kirill Petrenko, Andris Nelsons, Kirill Karabits, were very fortunate. We received an excellent Soviet education, which probably had no equal in the world, and at the same time we already had the opportunity to go to the West and gain an understanding of European and American cultures. This combination of Soviet education and the absorption of other cultures probably resulted in a generation rich in soloists and conductors.

As for the school itself, I studied in St Petersburg. I studied with Ilya Alexandrovich Musin, although my main teacher was Ravil Enverovich Martynov, I attended Musin’s classes informally. Now I clearly understand what was essential there, a system in which conductors had the opportunity, even as students, to stand in front of an orchestra every week, even if only for an hour. I must admit that I cheated a little. Since some students gave up their hour, I managed to take it for myself, after all, the orchestra was there anyway. There was probably no such system anywhere else. In the 1990s Jorma Panula from Helsinki [Finnish conductor, composer and pedagogue, note by N.S.] came to St Petersburg and asked questions about the organisation of conducting education, which was later reproduced at the Sibelius Academy. That is why there are now so many fine Finnish conductors in the world.

In that very first Geneva programme of yours in 2012 you included Shostakovich’s *Leningrad* Symphony. This time, Prokofiev’s *Symphony-Concerto for Cello*, another composer persecuted in the USSR. Is that a coincidence?

I perform both of these works regularly. Incidentally, at the end of April in London, at the Royal Festival Hall, there will be a particularly interesting project. Together with my Royal Philharmonic Orchestra we will perform the *Leningrad* Symphony with a special visual component created by Kirill Serebrennikov. Of course, for me, having been born and raised in Leningrad, this symphony is a landmark work, which I have heard many times, including in performances by Yuri Temirkanov. This music is a symbol of the human struggle against any tyranny, since part of the symphony was written even before the war and, as is always the case with Shostakovich, it still leaves room for personal interpretation.

As for Prokofiev's *Sinfonia concertante*, it is unfortunately performed far too rarely, and I try to promote it.

That is precisely why I would like to speak about it in more detail. Why, for example, in the West is this work referred to in the Italian manner as *Sinfonia concertante*, as it appears in the programmes of the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande?

Perhaps because of Slava [Mstislav Rostropovich, note by N.S.], who called it that. In addition, in the West the title "Symphony-Concerto" might be understood simply as a symphony performed in a concert. Whereas *Sinfonia concertante* as a very specific genre implies a soloist with orchestra, as in Vivaldi, for example, and in the Baroque period in general. Therefore, the designation *Sinfonia concertante* in the programme gives the audience a clearer understanding of the genre. Although there have been cases when this work was referred to as the Second Cello Concerto.

Perhaps not all readers know that this *Symphony-Concerto* was written by Sergei Prokofiev on his third attempt, the work on it lasted many years, and in its present version it was completed in 1952, dedicated to Mstislav Rostropovich and first performed by him in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory with the Moscow Youth Orchestra conducted by Sviatoslav Richter. I am surprised by the choice of orchestra, not the most prestigious at the time, and of conductor. Do you know the background to this story?

I do not know the exact background, but I have some assumptions. Towards the end of his life Prokofiev often collaborated with unexpected performers. His Seventh Symphony, for example, was performed on children's radio, which is why many in the West consider it a "children's" work, and much has to be explained. So I think there were a number of reasons. Prokofiev was dissatisfied with the First Concerto. Grigory Piatigorsky called it "unplayable", although the premiere did take place, so it could be played. It was simply not very effective for Piatigorsky, perhaps. And then, 1952 was not an easy time. Many works were performed not in the capitals, but somewhere nearby. I assume that Prokofiev had some doubts about how it would be received.

How do you feel about the fact that performers are increasingly stepping onto the conductor's podium, and not only instrumentalists but also singers?

> How can I put it… Many excellent musicians or singers think that it is a rather simple profession. There are many orchestras in the world today that can in principle manage without a conductor, it is simply a matter of rehearsal time. But the quality of performance will, of course, not be the same as with a good or great conductor. Unfortunately, many realise the complexity of this profession

only after they have retrained. Conducting technique is important. In principle, I believe it is better to be an excellent soloist than an average conductor. But Slava Rostropovich, for example, left a huge mark in Washington, where I am now, precisely as a conductor. At the same time I remember his visits to St Petersburg to the Distinguished Collective. The musicians adored him, but expected from him above all anecdotes. Conducting is a complex profession, not everyone succeeds in achieving everything in it. Unfortunately, today the amount of publicity sometimes matters more than the quality of performance.

According to one of Prokofiev's biographers, Ivan Vishnevetsky, an amusing story is connected with the *Symphony-Concerto*. Allegedly the second theme contained a quotation from the popular song "And who knows why he keeps winking…" by the composer Zakharov, one of the active participants in the campaign against "formalist" composers. Allegedly Prokofiev deliberately distorted the melodic outline of the popular tune, but at a preliminary hearing Zakharov recognised it and a scandal broke out, after which Prokofiev was forced to replace Zakharov's theme with one of his own. Today, as far as I know, the finale is usually performed in the original version, that is, with the theme from V. Zakharov's song, and more rarely in Rostropovich's version, without it. Which version will Swiss audiences hear?

We need to look at the score that the orchestra will have. Unfortunately, I have already encountered situations where my conductor's score did not correspond to it. There are not two different editions, it is simply that orchestral parts can vary. [As far as we have been able to establish, this refers to the version edited by M. L. Rostropovich, note by N.S.]

Have you already had the opportunity to perform with the cellist Kian Soltani?

Yes, I have worked with him a great deal, from a very young age. He is a remarkable cellist.

Soltani studied in Basel with Ivan Monighetti, which is probably not enough to classify him as a representative of the Russian cello school. However, Monighetti himself was the last student of Rostropovich at the Moscow Conservatory, so the connection is still there, is it not?

I have also worked with Ivan Monighetti on a number of occasions, and in his playing I certainly felt Rostropovich's influence in terms of interpretation. Kian is more of a European product, with a different way of thinking and approach, more precise and analytical than emotional and spontaneous, as was often the case with Slava. But I am interested to see what Kian will bring to this music with his mixed heritage, with his warmth. He is a radiant person, and in this he resembles Slava, despite all the dramas of his life, Slava remained a very radiant person.

Soltani plays a cello by Antonio Stradivari, "The London, ex Boccherini". Do instruments by this maker really have a special sound, or is this part of mythology?

As for violins, I would say yes, they do have a particular character, although today among the approximately thousand instruments attributed to Stradivari there are differences. Nevertheless, they differ from Guarneri, Guadagnini and other Italian makers by a special nobility of sound combined with power. As for cellos, I do not think that for Stradivari this

was, so to speak, his primary instrument. The instrument is, of course, magnificent in itself, but there are others, by other makers, that sound no worse. In general, this is very individual and depends on the combination of instrument and performer, on how closely they are connected and on how fully the performer can reveal the instrument's potential.

We have spoken in detail about Prokofiev. Let us not overlook the second work included in the programme of the upcoming concerts, Brahms's First Symphony. It is known that the Swiss hold it particularly dear, since the composer worked on it in the summer of 1874 on the shores of Lake Zurich, and even earlier, in 1868, after a long quarrel with Clara Schumann, with whom he was passionately in love, he sent her a postcard from Switzerland with an Alpine tune, "From high mountains, from deep valleys I greet you a thousand times", which he used in the finale. What does this work mean to you?

First of all, there is a connection within the programme, since Brahms also worked on this symphony for a very long time, at least thirteen years. Initially it was in fact a piano concerto, just as with Prokofiev, the concept changed. For me, in the context of what has happened to all of us, this symphony is close because of what happened to Brahms himself. As a very young man he was proclaimed throughout Germany as the new Beethoven. I think it was precisely this burden on his shoulders that largely prevented him from publishing what he was writing. In addition, everything that happened with the Schumanns, he helped to raise their children and, unlike Clara, he visited Robert Schumann until his final days, seeing how he simply wrote the names of German towns on the wall. After which he would return to Clara and assure her that things were improving.

The complexity of his life was reflected in his search and in the drama that is present in the First Symphony, in the theme of fate, of pressure, of the weight of responsibility. In the first movement there are many hidden references to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and in the second and third, and even in the relatively pastoral scherzo, one hears references closer to Schubert. We hear a latent drama despite all the beauty of nature, for example. The rethinking of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" in the final movement is unique. Many have attempted to write in the manner of the Ninth Symphony, but no one has achieved such organic unity as Brahms. The movement towards the major, towards the final chords, towards self-affirmation, towards affirming that one is worthy of the title given thirteen years earlier and will continue the musical mission entrusted to one, that is probably the meaning of Brahms's symphony.

Almost a year ago the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London announced the extension of your contract as its Music Director until 2030. It is clear that Londoners value you highly, but is it usual practice to extend a contract for six years at once, and how do you yourself find working with this orchestra?

More often contracts are extended for a shorter period, although in Russia most conductors have lifetime contracts. In Liverpool, where I spent 15 years, I essentially had an open-ended contract. It is not entirely unique, but it allows one to plan over longer periods, which is very important today, since only such planning makes it possible to realise many projects. For example, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra's touring schedule for 2028 to 2029 is already in place.

I consider my collaboration with this orchestra very successful. The orchestra is unique in its structure, which resembles a cooperative. The leading role belongs to the musicians, they form the board of directors and have the right to take many decisions. Technically,

they hire the CEO, they hire me. In addition, the musicians are also shareholders of the orchestra. One has to work very hard, since the state provides only nine per cent of the budget, the remaining ninety-one per cent must be earned through recordings and concerts. And there is a great deal of touring. In London I give around ten to twelve concerts per season with this orchestra and sixty to seventy concerts worldwide. Unfortunately, in London the level of pay for musicians compared to the cost of living is one of the least favourable, so they have to work a great deal. There are usually at least two rehearsals a day. As a result, the musicians support each other very strongly. You know, I see how it can be in orchestras. It is probably difficult to come to the same place for thirty years and work with the same people. Personal tensions and conflicts arise. In the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra there is nothing of the kind.

On 2 March 2022 you were one of the first to take a clear position regarding the war in Ukraine and decided to suspend your activities in Russia “until the moment when peace is restored”. Do you think that moment is approaching?

> I consider it my duty to return to Russia once the war is over, since the public is not to blame. It has already been deprived of the opportunity to hear music performed by most of those who used to appear on the Russian stage. Moreover, my return will to some extent help to restore connections. Politics changes, wars begin and end, but music always remains.

I thought then that this moment was approaching. Now I am in Washington, and the entire local establishment is somewhat shocked by the actions of the newly re-elected President of the United States, but I hope that the bloodshed will stop as soon as possible. I think most people in the world hope for that. As for what comes next, I consider it my duty to return to Russia once the war is over, since the public is not to blame. It has already been deprived of the opportunity to hear music performed by most of those who used to appear on the Russian stage. Moreover, my return will to some extent help to restore ties. Politics changes, wars begin and end, but music always remains. Beethoven lived through eight wars, was born in one state and died in another, although the territory was almost the same. But if one now asks someone to name political figures of Beethoven’s era, they will probably name only Napoleon. Beethoven, however, is known and remembered by everyone.

I have one project that I would like to realise after the end of hostilities, to perform Britten’s *War Requiem* in Moscow and in Kyiv with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, local choirs and soloists, as was customary, from the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia and Ukraine.

What a wonderful project! I sincerely wish you, and all of us, that it comes to fruition.

Thank you. In the meantime, I invite all readers to the concerts in Geneva.

Russian music in Switzerland
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