

Classical **MUSIC**

A close-up portrait of violinist Vadim Gluzman, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. He is holding a violin and bow in front of his face.

Vadim Gluzman

Straight-talking
Israeli violinist

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The Routledge logo, a stylized letter 'R' inside a circle.

Rich heritage

A concert violinist who is deeply aware of his musical roots, Vadim Gluzman is beginning to attract comparison with some of the greats, writes **Andrew Stewart**

Vadim Gluzman says he was born in the wrong place. The Israeli violinist entered the world in the old Soviet Union in 1973, the son of professional musicians. His natural curiosity and independent spirit, inevitably at odds with Homo Sovieticus, survived the formal rigours of early fiddle lessons, flourished under the demanding supervision of Zakhar Bron in Siberia and found their metier when he and his parents moved to Tel Aviv in 1990. By chance the teen-aged Gluzman met Isaac Stern in the Jerusalem Music Centre's entrance lobby and persuaded the veteran violinist to judge his playing. Anyone who has heard Gluzman at work will recognise why Stern's offer of a five-minute audition turned into a two-hour coaching session and secured the promise of regular lessons whenever the great man returned to Israel.

The superior quality of Gluzman's mature playing flows from his aristocratic teaching pedigree and years of hard work. His performances are hallmarked by rare tonal warmth, uncanny technical command and a style of individual music-making that many, perhaps most, critics would consider with fond nostalgia to be a thing of the past. When we met in London earlier this year, he had his Proms debut and the prospect of performing to the festival's knowledgeable audience in mind. He went on to score a major success at the Royal Albert Hall, creating a vision of Prokofiev's first violin concerto that had the *Times* reaching for comparisons with David Oistrakh and the *Guardian* describing Gluzman as the work's 'ideal advocate'.

Gluzman has little time for rose-tinted

views of Soviet society or those who insist that its education system trained superior musicians. But he is sure that classical music mattered deeply to countless millions living behind the Iron Curtain. 'Although I have my reservations about music-making in the old Soviet Union because of the lack of freedom and everything that followed from it, audience involvement was really something quite extraordinary in those days,' he comments. 'Sofia Gubaidulina told me that music needs a triumvirate of talent: composer, performers and audience. This idea of such a holy trinity in the music-making process is very important, which is why the "active" audience was developed in the Soviet Union, an audience that held expectations and standards and wanted to make music with you. They didn't want to sit back and say "Feed me". Finding an audience like that today is very special.'

British promoters who only discovered Gluzman's work at the Proms will need to join the queue waiting to book an artist clearly at the top of his game, one set to perform big romantic concertos this season with, among others, the St Louis Symphony, the Russian National Philharmonic, the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande and the Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse. He helped launch Peter Oundjian's tenure as music director of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra at the beginning of October with three performances of Tchaikovsky's violin concerto and is set to return to the UK next April for Bruch's G minor concerto in Poole and Portsmouth with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and Andrew Litton. His

long-range diary includes recitals at Wigmore Hall and in Paris and New York, a run across the 2013/14 season as the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra's resident artist and plum dates with the Atlanta Symphony, Czech Philharmonic, the Seattle Symphony and the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin.

Gluzman's stock has clearly risen in recent seasons, boosted by acclaim for his recordings for the BIS label (a compelling all-Bruch album among them) and widening recognition that he is the real deal. The violinist notes that it was his luck to study with two remarkable teachers: Zakhar Bron and Dorothy Delay. Both treated their students as individuals, employing bespoke keys to set young musicians free from any 'method' of playing. 'There would be lines of people at Bron's door in Novosibirsk begging him to take them,' he recalls. 'That happens for a reason. He was a great teacher. And so was Dorothy Delay. She never taught two people the same way. She was probably the smartest person I've ever met, a genius bright mind, incredibly well read and also what they call street smart in America. Her perception was unbelievable.'

Delay encouraged Gluzman to be true to himself, to take advantage of his openness to new ideas, new music and new approaches. Her teaching legacy is reflected in the breadth of his repertoire, which spans everything from Bach, Beethoven and Brahms to Auerbach, Kancheli and Vasks. It has also touched Gluzman's thinking about period style, to the point that he says he is ready to explore early violin concertos using a baroque bow. The idea itself would have been unthinkable during his formative years at music school in Riga. 'There was a right way to play, and that was the way your teacher played,' he explains. When did he decide there was more than one approach to playing the violin? 'I was a problem child from the beginning,' he replies. 'From day one at school I had the habit of asking the

"A rare tonal warmth and uncanny technical command"



'By nature I couldn't care about
being liked by anybody' -
Vadim Gluzman

question "Why?". I was thrown out of school and every orchestra I ever played with in the Soviet Union. I'm proud to say that I cheated the system most successfully by not going to school, if I couldn't stand it, after the sixth grade.'

Bunking school in Soviet times proved surprisingly easy for a lad who understood how to turn rigid rules and expectations to his service. Whenever Gluzman's 'why' questions were stonewalled, he would simply tell his teachers that he wanted to enter a competition. 'These were seen as the cornerstone of musical life in Russia,' he notes. 'If you didn't win competitions, then you were nobody, a failure. Entering competitions meant you received an individual school attendance plan so you could prepare. I didn't go to half of these competitions but I used the free time to see every movie, play hockey and stay away from school. And I read everything, from books on orchestration to great literature. Education must come from your desire: I had the desire and was lucky to have the right environment in which to learn at home.'

Vadim Gluzman is clearly not one for playing the game. He has made sure progress without following anyone's rulebook, whether set by Soviet apparatchiks or marketeers of the global music business. He admits to making mistakes in the past, not least by playing the wrong works to kick-start his career. Each experience taught him to listen to his instincts, to put the music first. 'By nature I couldn't care about being liked by anybody,' he says. The line

is not an affectation; in fact, it is part of the straight-talking musician's downright charm. 'I do not play violin to be liked by others,' he continues. 'I play violin because I need to play. Often I can be blunt, both personally and musically. That represents honesty to me. Maybe this is a reaction to my years in the Soviet Union – I don't know. But I always make it explicitly clear to others what I would like to do, what I wouldn't like to and, in a way because of that, who I am. I think we should all start from this place, rather than with a guessing game of maybe, perhaps and what if. I believe I've been able to maintain my old-fashioned ways. I'm almost 40 and it's working!'

We speak at length about the great legacy of Russian Jewish string playing and its influence on Gluzman's music-making. He insists that its values, unlike the world in which they were forged, have survived as part of a living tradition. Does he think his gifts for playing violin were inherited? 'It's a question I think about very much,' he replies. 'I believe the roots of this were socio-economic but then it transpired that there were some natural predispositions to violin playing. The moment the first Jewish kid from a shtetl made it to St Petersburg to study, and his family made it with him, the next morning every mother's son was playing violin back home. So many played violin that it was mathematically inevitable that one of them would become a Michael Jordan of the instrument. And yet there was Oistrakh, Milstein, Elman, Zimbalist – a huge number of extraor-

dinary great Jewish violinists. That leads me to think that this was something more than just a matter of statistics.'

Vadim Gluzman's tone, rich and warm, has something of Nathan Milstein about it. He laughs when I ask if he modelled his sound on Milstein's. 'I wish I could!' Where does the sound come from, then? 'Well, I play on his teacher's violin, the "ex-Leopold Auer" Stradivarius, so maybe this is it. My ideal sound comes from Milstein's generation, not the generation after. If I were to describe it, I would be describing the sound of Oistrakh, Milstein, Elman, probably not Heifetz. I grew up listening to their recordings. Am I imitating them in some way? I probably am but it's not conscious.' He adds that the Soviet music education system produced very few musicians with the individuality and artistry of his aforementioned heroes. 'With the exception of a few god-given geniuses, the music-making from the Soviet stage was very strict and narrow. I find good western musicians to be much more engaging, more open and more imaginative than equally fine Soviet musicians, simply because in my experience they have been exposed to so much more and were never told "No you can't".'

Gluzman is regularly partnered in recital by his wife Angela Joffe or his closest friend Yevgeny Sinaisky. He notes that their shared experience of Soviet music education has left lasting marks on the way they dissect performances in close detail. 'We have the advantage of speaking a common language that's not understood by most people in the places where we play,' he notes. 'I speak bluntly to my wife and to Yevgeny, whom I've known since we sat at the same desk from the first grade at school. Being critical of how we perform is with us from our training under the old Soviet system. Before we've even walked backstage after a concert, we're already mortified by what we have done. This is the danger of the Soviet system and why some technically fine performances are seemingly uninspiring, simply because every next step has been calculated. If you don't surprise yourself, how are you going to surprise your audience? We are very careful not to let that training kill our creativity or spontaneity in performance. For me, internalising a piece can only be done on stage. You can study the score and digest it in rehearsal, but the real thing always happens in the moment on stage.'

'My ideal sound comes from Milstein's generation'



MARCO BORGREVE

www.vadimgluzman.com