

Fiddle of the ages

By BARR DAVIS 12/19/2013

Violinist Vadim Gluzman will perform in concert with his wife, pianist Angela Yoffe.



When Vadim Gluzman comes here next week to perform two concerts at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art together with his wife, pianist Angela Yoffe, he will bring with him not only his impressive array of talent and skills but also some historical riches.

Although Gluzman currently resides in Chicago, he has a strong bond with this part of the world. He made aliya with his family from the USSR in 1990

at the age of 16, and it can be said has never looked back.

Many olim have undergone trials and tribulations here, dealing with the cultural transition, bureaucracy, etc., but Gluzman's aliya was probably one of the most successful on record.

"To say I have a strong connection with Israel is an understatement," he says, adding that things took off for him musically almost as soon as his teenage feet hit the tarmac at Ben-Gurion Airport.

He had hardly unpacked when his path crossed that of one of the world's most celebrated classical musicians.

"Meeting [legendary violinist] Isaac Stern was one of those innocent serendipity moments. At the time, I didn't really know who Isaac Stern was, so I didn't really prepare for meeting him much in advance. I couldn't really speak to him because I didn't know much English. Someone told him there was a boy from Ra'anana, where we were living at the time, who wanted to play for him, so I just played for him, and he said, "Welcome to the club." That all took place at the Jerusalem Music Center at Mishkenot Sha'ananim. "Two hours later, I found myself with a scholarship and a new violin," he recounts.

But if Gluzman thought it was all going to be smooth sailing from then on, he had another thing coming. While he received a solid early musical education in the USSR – in Latvia and in Russia – when he got here, he realized there were some gaps in his learning curve.

"I was in seventh heaven, with the scholarship and violin, but then I was told that I had to play chamber music. I hadn't played chamber music before. In the Soviet Union it had all been about playing solo and virtuoso show pieces," he explains.

"I hadn't even played a sonata before I left the Soviet Union."

For the next three years, Gluzman played nothing but chamber music. It was a stiff task to begin with, but he soon felt the benefits.

"It was difficult at the start, but it was the most enlightening experience of my life. Because of that, I am the musician I am today -- for better or worse," he laughs.

So, it would not be stretching things too far to say that Gluzman's aliya was a happy one. In fact, it wasn't just the musical leaps that the youngster made here that made the USSR-Israel transition such a welcome move. He had an immediate emotional bond with his new country.

"I had a feeling of coming back here, even though I'd never been to Israel before," he says. "I can't explain it, but as soon as I got to Israel, I knew I had only one home.

My aliya was a success for my music, but you can't separate music from life around it. It was a success in every respect.

Musicianship reflects who you are as a person, and you cannot overestimate what it means to find a home."

Gluzman underwent another happy formative experience when he was in the first batch of up-and-coming violinists to take part in the violin master class program at the Keshet Eilon Music Center in the Galilee.

"It is hard to put into words what being at Keshet Eilon was for me – it is part of who I am," Gluzman declares. "I was in the first group of young violinists – I think there were 12 of us -- who went there. We needed not only to be integrated into society but also to be trained as professionals. I suppose, in a way, you could call me a chalutz [pioneer]. The whole concept of the master class was a complete novelty in Israel back then, although I had taken part in open lessons before that were also open to the public."

In that respect, the master classes at Kibbutz Eilon were something of a healing experience for young Gluzman.

"My memory of open lessons from the Soviet Union was public humiliation, not a constructive lesson."

Gluzman has had the opportunity to give back to Keshet Eilon some of the rewards he gained.

"I was later asked to come back to Keshet Eilon, and I have been teaching for 15 years now," he says proudly. "Next summer we will celebrate 25 years of the course. It has grown from a small program for a bunch of kids to the greatest summer course on the face of the Earth. I am proud to be part of it."

Although he was steeped in the history of classical music, he also has a penchant for playing works by contemporary composers and feels that that is imperative to keeping the art form alive. He recently performed the British premiere of a piece by American composer Michael Daugherty at the Wigmore Hall in London.

"You need variety in life and in music. You can't eat ice cream all the time; some felafel is welcome, too," he says. "If we don't give a chance for new voices to be heard, the art stops developing."

That said, Gluzman digs deep into history in an instrumental sense. He plays a Stradivarius from 1690, known as the Ex-Leopold Auer, after its previous owner, Hungarian violinist Leopold Auer.

It is on extended loan from the Stradivari Society of Chicago. The violinist says the instrument's rich history imbues his own playing with some added value.

"I have friends whose musical opinion I greatly appreciate, and they tell me that Tchaikovsky sounds different on my fiddle. The violin is happy. I feel that, and I will be playing a Tchaikovsky composition in Tel Aviv – Memory of a Dear Place. And to think that [legendary 20th-century Lithuanianborn Jewish violinist] Jascha Heifetz learned from the same violin that I play today is a wonderful feeling. By the way, my wife says the Stradivarius is the only other woman she will tolerate. In Russian, a violin is feminine, and for me, the violin is definitely a female instrument."

Gluzman's repertoire for his December 26 concert with the Israel Camerata Jerusalem includes works by Mozart and Bach. Yoffe will join him for a concert on January 4 in a program that features compositions by Mozart, Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky, and 20th-century Italian-American composer Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco.

For tickets and more information: (03) 607-7020 and www.tamuseum.org.il.