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FEATURE

VADM GLUZMAN ON PLAYING LEOPOLD AUER'S FIDDLE

The Ukrainian-born violinist's Stradivarius was slated to give the world premiere of Tchaikovsky's Concerto, but its former owner had other ideas.

by Angus McPherson on June 18, 2019

When Ukrainian-born violinist Vadim Gluzman performs Tchaikovsky's well-loved Violin Concerto in Perth and Melbourne this month, he will do so on the violin that was to have been used for its premiere – were it not for the reservations of its former owner, legendary violinist and teacher Leopold Auer.

While the instrument has a storied past, it's been in Gluzman's hands for 20 years now. "You know how a tree grows roots into the ground? This is how I feel with this violin," he says of the 1690 Stradivari, on extended loan to him through the Stradivari Society of Chicago. "It is basically an extension of who I am."



Gluzman admits that under those circumstances it's difficult to be objective, but for him certain qualities the violin possesses are outstanding, and he imagines they were also an inspiration to Tchaikovsky, Glazunov and other composers writing for Auer. "It has an unusually dark low register," he says. "It feels like I am playing a viola. And it has the most incredibly sweet top register."

Listening to Tchaikovsky's Concerto, he says, you can see how he uses these features. "The very first note that the soloist is playing in the Tchaikovsky Concerto is immediately showing the instrument in all its glory," he says. "If I were an audience member, I would pay attention to that – I always do myself when I hear this Concerto. The opening is very telling, both for the instrument and the player. It's quite incredible."

"And it has the most incredibly sweet top register," he says.

The upper and middle registers are shown off in Tchaikovsky's "gorgeous" *Canzonetta*, he explains. "If I were able to write three bars in a row, that's how I would have used it, if I was writing for this instrument," he says. "He was the master of cantilena, or the most amazing lyrical line, and he uses it in the most glorious way."

When I play or listen to the second movement, I always imagine that this could have been one of the themes in *Eugene Onegin*, it is so beautifully operatic.”

While Auer was slated for the first performance – and Tchaikovsky’s dedication – Gluzman’s Strad missed out on the world premiere when its former owner famously rejected Tchaikovsky’s Concerto as unplayable.

Auer would explain, decades later, that he had doubts about the concerto’s “intrinsic worth”, writing, “I found it would be necessary, for purely technical reasons, to make some slight alterations in the passages of the solo part,” though he denied that he had called the Concerto “unplayable” in its original form.

Gluzman greets Auer’s assertion that the Concerto was somehow “unviolinistic” with a degree of scepticism. “Auer did not object to premiering Glazunov’s Violin Concerto,” Gluzman says. “It is my opinion – it is the opinion of many of my respected colleagues – that the Glazunov Concerto is much more, shall we say, awkward, violinistically speaking. It is much more dangerous. Yet Auer did not think twice to accept the dedication, and to premiere the piece.”

What then caused him to reject the concerto? “It could have been anything,” Gluzman says, “He did not want to spend the time learning the concerto, he didn’t *have* the time, one could speculate.”

There might even have been more personal reasons behind the rejection. “I could also quote Tchaikovsky’s letter to his brother Modest, where he refers to another piece that he wrote for Auer, *Sérénade Mélancolique*, and he mentions it, ‘by the way I have just finished the piece for *that* Auer’,” Gluzman says. “Tchaikovsky being the gentlest and the most respectful and refined person, even to his brother who was his closest confidant, I sense some kind of tension in the way he mentions Auer.”

“So one never knows, maybe there was some kind of bad air between these two,” he says. “We will never know for sure. But I think what is important for us to remember, is that he made all his students play it.”



Auer’s rejection, which in Tchaikovsky’s words “had the effect of casting this unfortunate child of my imagination into the limbo of the hopelessly forgotten,” wasn’t the only misfortune to befall the work. When the premiere did happen, in 1881, it was played by young violinist Adolf Brodsky, with Hans Richter conducting (a reportedly under-rehearsed) Vienna Philharmonic. What followed was a brutal review from the critic Eduard Hanslick’s in Vienna’s *Neue freie Presse*, in which Hanslick described Tchaikovsky as an “inflated” talent, “obsessed with posturing as a man of genius, lacking discrimination and taste.”

“The violin is no longer played,” he frothed. “It is tugged about, torn, beaten black and blue.”

It was a time and place where column inches were devoted to arts criticism with impunity, so Hanslick had plenty of room to put the boot in, riffing on an image of the *Finale* transporting the listener to “the brutal and wretched jollity of a Russian church festival” before finally concluding: “Friedrich Vischer once maintained that there were pictures which one could see stink. Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto for the first time confronts us with the hideous idea that there may be compositions whose stink one can hear.”

Tchaikovsky was very unlucky, Gluzman explains. “His First Piano Concerto was dismissed by Nikolai Rubinstein as almost a piece of garbage,” he says. “This was someone who Tchaikovsky looked up to, this was his mentor, one of the most important people in his life – and he does that. It breaks his heart, of course. And then Auer dismisses his Concerto, only two years later, upon the premiere, for it to be dismissed by *the* most important music critic at the time. I can’t even imagine what it must have felt like for Tchaikovsky.”

Like Rubinstein with the Piano Concerto, however, Auer eventually walked back his rejection, publishing his own edition of the Concerto (having tweaked the perceived ‘unviolinistic’ elements) and even performed the Concerto himself. “I had a really touching experience last season,” Gluzman says. “I played the Tchaikovsky with the Gewandhausorchester and, as I often do, I went to listen to the second half of the concert.”

An usher handed Gluzman a program, which included a note on the orchestra’s first performance of the piece. “Little did I know, the first performance by the Gewandhausorchester of the Tchaikovsky Concerto was by Leopold Auer in 1896,” he says. “So I’m sitting there having just played the Concerto on the very violin that played it for the first time with that same orchestra, 120 some years before.”

Gluzman describes the moment as “almost physically” closing a circle in history. So does he feel the weight its history when he plays the violin? “I do believe that we all leave our mark on the instrument, the instrument is alive – very much so,” he says. “The instrument dictates its own character, but at the same time the instrument takes on certain characteristics of players that have had a close and long relationship with the instrument. I believe somewhere this violin carries a little part of Leopold Auer, most definitely.”

Gluzman is loath to claim any kind of link between his approach to playing the Tchaikovsky and Auer’s however (though he does allow he was probably influenced early on by recordings made by Auer’s students, Jascha Heifetz, Nathan Milstein and Mischa Elman) and indeed his own approach to the work has evolved over time. “I was thinking about it just recently,” he says. “I was playing with the Cleveland Orchestra last month, and somehow I was reminiscing – just with myself – how I used to play it and what I do differently.”

The violinist learned the Concerto almost 30 years ago as a teenager. “Of course, we look for immediate satisfaction. We look for the most effective effect, for the loudest loud, the softest soft,” he says. “And I guess with time one realises that there are many other things that are so much more important in music. You start looking for structure, you start looking for expression, gradation of expression, you start looking for collaboration. That for me is the key word in music making. Any music is chamber music, and any orchestra that I play with inspires me in one way or another. It is in a way a reflection of this moment. It will be this moment in Perth, and then it will be a completely different moment in Melbourne.”