

# LIMELIGHT

AUSTRALIA'S CLASSICAL MUSIC AND ARTS MAGAZINE

## Vadim Gluzman: walking his own path

By Maxim Boom June 9, 2016

**As a teen, a chance encounter with Isaac Stern set the Israeli violinist on the road to greatness. He shares his story.**



In every life, there are a few pivotal events when things suddenly change forever; those "sliding doors" moments. For the Ukrainian-born Israeli violinist Vadim Gluzman, his watershed came at the age of 16. "I think I had only arrived in Jerusalem about two weeks prior, and I learned that Isaac Stern was listening to young kids in the music centre. Everyone else had an audition time arranged probably two years in advance, but I just barged in, announced myself and said I wanted to play for Stern,"

Gluzman recalls. "Eventually, he came into the room and the receptionist explained to him there is a boy who came from Latvia, and he was kind enough to give me some time. A couple of hours later I came out of the music centre with a new violin, a scholarship, a stipend, and the understanding that I knew absolutely nothing about music, nor violin playing itself."

In the space of an afternoon, Gluzman's life in music had been set on an exciting new path. Under the guidance of a world-famous mentor, the American violinist and conductor Isaac Stern, a bright future awaited him. By contrast, his journey into the world of classical music had an altogether more humble beginning. Born into a musical household in Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe, the son of a conductor-father and musicologist-mother, his earliest introduction to his instrument reflected the severity of life under the Communist regime. "I was never asked if I wanted to be a violinist. There was no discussion or negotiation. I was seven-years-old and told I was a violinist, and that was that. Deal with it!"



However, the stark and blinkered realities of Gluzman's childhood were transformed when his family emigrated to Israel in 1990, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. "It was a culture shock," he tells me of his arrival in Jerusalem. "Personally, musically, artistically, you name it: there was a different attitude to everything. What excited me most was that I was my own man, able to make my own decisions. Freedom is a God given gift that was taken away from us in the Soviet Union,

so arriving in a place where democracy existed was like realising that I had never breathed before. Until I was 16, I wasn't allowed to breathe and I wasn't even aware that I wasn't breathing. Then suddenly I was given access to this oxygen, this freedom, and it changed my whole perspective."

Having lived a life with one solitary path to tread, the teenage Gluzman was now at a crossroads, where his own desires and ambitions could dictate the direction he headed. As the last vestige of his upbringing in the Latvian town of Riga, his violin playing became a symbol of a past Gluzman was relieved to have escaped, and despite his exceptional promise and natural aptitude for performance, the complex emotions his instrument provoked almost saw him put his violin down for good. "From such an early age I was told: "You are a violinist." The very notion that I could challenge that idea had been beyond reason, but now that I was allowed to question my world, and I started to doubt it. Was I really a violinist? There was a period where I thought that I was not. If it hadn't been for Stern and Arkady Fomin, my first teacher in Dallas when I went to study in America, I might have given up. They were guiding lights that took me from doubting my future to actually making it."

Through Stern, Gluzman was connected to global possibilities, which ultimately led the eager and ambitious young student to the United States. Here, Gluzman's close mentorship with the revered elder statesman of the American classical elite pushed him to succeed, although it was far from an easy ride. "He had this incredible energy in him, like an engine that never let him stop. Nothing was ever good enough, and I say that in the most positive meaning of that statement," Gluzman explains. "This was because he was only interested in what could be improved. There was no point wasting time on strengths when we could be perfecting weaknesses."

His childhood in the Soviet Union was a distant memory when another pivotal opportunity unexpectedly offered a connection back to his Russian heritage. As his burgeoning performing career began to grab the attention of American music lovers, the Stradivari Society of Chicago offered the then 23-year-old Gluzman the chance to play the *Ex-Leopold Auer* violin, made by the master luthier Antonio Stradivari in 1690. The instrument was so named after its former owner; the Hungarian, Jewish violinist remembered as one of the most important 19th-century pedagogues of the violin, counting legends like Heifetz, Elman and Gorski among his pupils.

20 years later, Gluzman continues to play the *Ex-Leopold*, and ironically, it's his deep connection to this instrument – which he describes as “a part of my body” – that has allowed him to make peace with some of the demons of his past, connected to his early training. “I realised that I found the connection incredibly inspiring,” he says. “I was schooled in the Russian tradition, and that tradition was founded with this instrument. So yes, I love the historical circle it has offered me, but I feel like while closing one circle it's also allowed me to start another one.”

As we discuss the lineage of great violinists with whom Gluzman is linked via his Strad, talk turns to another great virtuoso of the past: Joseph Joachim. The great 19th-century violinist was one of Brahms' closest collaborators, delivering the premiere of the composer's notoriously challenging violin concerto in January of 1879. As a keen advocate for contemporary music himself, Gluzman feels a kinship to Joachim and his relationships with the great composers of the day. “I think it's vital to remember that when Joachim played this piece, it was modern music. It's through his curiosity, his forward thinking, and his faith in composers like Brahms that we have this repertoire. Of course, I'm not suggesting that Brahms couldn't have written the concerto without him, but it would have been a very different piece without the input of Joachim.”

As Gluzman prepares to perform the Brahms concerto with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra later this month, he shares some reflections on the work, which he has been playing for almost three decades. “Many years ago, the very first time I played the Brahms with an orchestra, I stepped out onto the stage, and the orchestra began the opening tutti, and I remember thinking, “who gave me the right to play this music?” It had never occurred to me before, not while learning the piece and not while rehearsing it,” he recalls. “It wasn't until I was there, in the concert in front of an audience, that I had this thought, and it was like a cold shower. But it made me realise that I cannot carry the weight of all the greats who have played this music before me on my shoulders. That would be paralysing in a way. All I can do is communicate how I feel about this piece, as honestly as I can.”

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### **Vadim Gluzman plays the Brahms Violin Concerto with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, June 24 - 27.**

- See more at: <http://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/vadim-gluzman-walking-his-own-path#sthash.f3XX8Wkz.ps4wxTKV.dpuf>