

Down with the bow – up with the baton – a changing landscape



By Howard Smith © July 2006

SINCE Russia's music schools closed their doors and their teachers emigrated following the fall of Soviet Communism, the country's musical landscape has changed beyond recognition.

Last month acclaimed violinist Evgeny Bushkov - now a busy, much sought-after conductor - spoke of present-day orchestral life in Moscow.

In 1999 Bushkov made his final decision to take up the baton after meeting in Baltimore with Leningrad-born Dmitri Kitajenko, former music director of Philharmonic orchestras in Moscow (1976-1990), Bergen (1990-1998), and Frankfurt (1990-1996).

The Russian violinist and conductor were both making their US debuts and Bushkov performed Max Bruch's *G minor Violin Concerto* while Kitajenko conducted the Baltimore Symphony.

"I knew Kitajenko already of course", says Bushkov. "My mother, the violinist Zarius Shickmurzaeva had performed as a soloist with him, in the USSR and abroad.

"I felt this was the right man to study with. Already, whilst appearing as a soloist, I had received several offers to conduct chamber ensembles, amongst which was the orchestra of the Festival de Musique de Luxeuil.

"But at first it wasn't so easy to get the attention of Kitayenko. At that time he was conductor of the Bern Symphony Orchestra and I would visit him there and have private consultations with him.

Bushkov made his highly-praised conducting debut in Mozart's 41st Symphony - 'The Jupiter' - with the orchestra of the Festival de Musique de Luxeuil.

"I decided that learning how to conduct was not simply about having lessons, but also meant collecting experiences and watching other conductors' rehearsals. Kitayenko advised me:

"The way you conduct depends on your physical and musical qualities". It's a school of thought in which you express yourself through limited physical movements.

"Conducting technique is made up of a certain system of directive movements to which musicians have become accustomed but it should not be over strict and it should depend on each individual conductor. Kitayenko's believes one should be very self critical. He advocates recording all rehearsals and concerts so that one can analyze them afterwards."

Eventually Bushkov left for additional private studies in the USA - the date, September 11, 2001. "Our flight was delayed because of the terrible things happening in New York and other eastern states," he recalls.

For several months I stayed in America listening and watching through many rehearsals and concerts.

Buskov returned to Moscow in 2002 and worked briefly with an ensemble called the Metropol Youth Symphony Orchestra. Unfortunately it was disbanded due to a lack of financing.

However Yuri Bashmet had just formed the Novaya Rossiya Symphony Orchestra under the auspices of the Moscow Philharmonic Society. "An extremely busy solo schedule prevented him from working with the orchestra full time," Bushkov recalls. "To train its young musicians would have required at least 50% of his time; so he invited me to fill the position of assistant conductor from the end of 2002."

HS : What 'plan of attack' do you favour when preparing a new programme ?

EB : "If I'm rehearsing a familiar work with my own orchestra, then I already have a good idea what to expect. When guest conducting experience doubly is important; one has to plan carefully how much time to allot for specific aspects of the score. Some passages will need to be worked on and others will automatically improve. One must have confidence in the musicians and help them to achieve the final result, while reacting to each mistake.

"I find it especially exciting to prepare for a first rehearsal. Today we have phenomenal opportunities to see other conductors at work through visual and audio recordings. Not so long ago this was only possible if one had a mentor, someone who had studied with one of the great conductors and was able to tell you how something should be played with attention to certain details.

On the downside, there is now almost too much information now and it's very difficult for young conductors to find their own style. As Celibidache said, "we must create - not reproduce". It is very important to find ones own personal style.

HS : Is the repertoire adventurous or conservative? Here it is often cautious to cater for traditionalists and ensure that there are audiences that attend the concerts.

EB : "I am privileged to suggest programmes to Yuri Bashmet. In addition we get suggestions from the Philharmonic Society. Sometimes their suggestions are useful at other times they go against the general development of the orchestra - particularly when it comes to 20th century music.

The Philharmonic society would have a problem with the symphonies of Honegger or even De Falla's 'El Amor Brujo'. Fortunately for us, Bashmet is powerful enough to insist on certain programmes if wants them played and of course his name alone will guarantee big audiences. Sometimes, to assist in the development of the orchestra, we suggest Russian repertoire to our guest conductors from abroad.

HS : Are your rehearsal times adequate ?

EB : "Yes they are, and this is one of the most attractive parts of the job. It's something that our guest conductors appreciate enormously. If a particular programme for a guest conductor is going to take as many as 5 or 6 rehearsals, our policy is to do everything in our power to accommodate them. We also make sure that the orchestra is well thoroughly prepared with bowings and articulation before a guest conductor arrives."

HS : In many countries orchestras must rely less on State finance and more and more on businesses and private benefactors. As they do in America. Is this also true in Russia ?

EB : "Yes it is. While a few Moscow orchestras, such as the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra, the Radio Orchestra and some others receive grants from President Putin's administration, many Moscow orchestras rely largely on sponsorships."

HS : How large is a typical administrative staff ?

EB : "It varies from orchestra to orchestra, but a typical administrative staff is between one and twenty. If the orchestra needs to promote itself then personnel is required for advertising, ticket sales and fundraising. Typically there's an administrative director, a staff administrator, a librarian, an assistant librarian, stage managers and of course, the Intendant. Our orchestra's staff is not that large because we are part of the Moscow Philharmonic Society and they promote all our concerts and sell the tickets."

HS : What is the greatest change in musical life since the fall of Communism ?

EB : "The collapse of the music schools and the fact that so many teachers left Russia to teach abroad. Many of them did not return and their places have not been filled.

As a result we suffer at the moment from a dearth of good young string players. The music schools have no governmental support and thus it's no longer certain we can rely on them to provide the next generation of players. At the moment one feels that the profession of a musician is out of fashion in Russia."



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