

AMATI

EDITOR'S TEA: ALINA IBRAGIMOVA

The young Russian-born violin star's strongest appetite is for varied repertoire, solid partnerships and integrity both personal and musical – but she likes scones, too.

Jessica Duchon took her to the English Tea Room at Brown's Hotel, Mayfair...

I first encountered Alina Ibragimova when she was only 16 years old. She was playing the Sibelius Violin Concerto in a masterclass by Maxim Vengerov, held at St Paul's School, Barnes – the star turn of the evening, invited in from the Menuhin School, where she was then a pupil. The torrent of music that poured from her violin was so intense, so genuine and so moving that after her playthrough the audience began to applaud and refused to stop. Vengerov sat and smiled.

That was 13 years ago. Now everyone has heard her: Ibragimova, who turns 30 in September, is firmly established and hugely respected. This summer her fierce intelligence, vivid tonal imagination and serene, assured stage presence grace the Proms on no fewer than four occasions.

On 31 July and 1 August she gives two late-night recitals featuring solo works by Bach (part of a Bach series that also features Yo-Yo Ma in the complete cello suites and András Schiff performing the Goldberg Variations). Next, she joins Apollo's Fire for concertos by Bach and Vivaldi in a Saturday matinée on 15 August; and she plays the Mendelssohn concerto with the Bergen Philharmonic and Andrew Litton on 27 August. It sounds like a punishing schedule, but there is more still, in both concert hall and studio; where the latter is concerned, her latest recording on Hyperion is just out, consisting of the complete solo sonatas by Ysaÿe, and discs of the Bach concertos are on their way.

Prom Queen

I am treating Ibragimova to afternoon tea, but the creation she usually devours is repertoire, the more varied and exciting the better. She has notched up a healthy and ever-expanding number of recordings for Hyperion, plus exciting releases on Wigmore Live – the music ranging from Beethoven to the violin concertos by Roslavets ('the hardest thing I've ever had to learn,' she remarks), and from Bach to Szymanowski ('which I adore'). Even so, she is not exactly over-established at the Proms.

'My first Prom was when I played some tangos there when Maxim Vengerov cancelled,' she says. 'Then I premiered the Huw Watkins Violin Concerto a few years ago and played at Cadogan Hall [in the chamber music series] – but I haven't played any traditional repertoire in the Royal Albert Hall yet.' The prospect of the late-night Bach, she remarks, is 'at first a bit intimidating – but I'm looking forward to seeing

how it will transform the space. This music transforms any space into something else.'

The cavernous RAH can be startlingly good for such events: 'Even listening to encores after concertos, it always works. You can hear everything,' she says. As for the atmosphere, with the promenaders standing almost by her feet, that is second to none: 'There's such a great energy – there's nothing like it, ever. You feel the people standing really want to be there.'

Ibragimova's Bach occupies a world of its own: lean in vibrato, stylistic in bowing, yet always personal, intense, a kaleidoscope of insight and colour. 'When I was about 15, I started on Bach feeling I was after a certain sound,' she says, 'but I couldn't achieve it, because it's not only about not using vibrato. It's also about what you do with your bow – indeed, mostly about that. It took me a while. I enjoy the purity of sound without vibrato; I like the resonance of the violin without adding vibrato. The most difficult part was to balance the personal emotions with the structure and grandeur of the works. That I achieved by simply playing and playing and playing – there was no way round it. I had some baroque violin lessons at college, which helped. But I found it hard at first – and the pieces do change all the time. I should never be too comfortable.'

"We lived in a tiny flat with a lot of people and cats..."

We are both in danger of being far too comfortable at Brown's Hotel's English Tea Room in Mayfair: an oak-panelled, multi-cushioned setting for traditional indulgence par excellence. You can't beat a delicate cuppa served from silver teapots for the sense that you're being seriously pampered; and two three-tiered cake-stands are brought to us, laden at the bottom with trimmed sandwiches of many hues, and at the top with petit-fours – each a soupçon of chocolate gâteau, or the lightest of sponge-cakes, or a concoction of soft rice topped with purple berry jelly. By the time the scones arrive – three each, still warm from the oven – we are almost too replete to continue.

Tea, Ibragimova declares, is part of her heritage. She is not ethnically Russian, but Bashkir, born in Polevskoy into a musical family whose origins go back to Kazan, the largest city of the Tatar region. 'It's a completely different culture with its own language, food, everything,' she says. 'The TV in Kazan is in Tatar and the language is not similar to Russian at all – if anything it more resembles Turkish. And Tatar people are big tea drinkers, like the English! They drink tea with milk, just as the English do.' (Russian tea is usually drunk black.)

Our tea arrives bang on cue. Brown's offers a substantial menu of fancy choices, but we keep it relatively simple; Ibragimova picks white tea, without milk, while I go for a good old-fashioned 'afternoon blend' of Darjeeing and Assam.

Prime among her early memories, she says, are 'the woods and my grandmother's cooking. I was very happy in Russia when I was little. We lived in a tiny flat with a lot of people and cats and I never felt I lacked anything.'

She started playing the violin aged four and was soon enrolled at the Gnessin School, focusing mainly on music rather than academic work. Her mother – now a violin professor at the Yehudi Menuhin School and Royal College of Music – taught her initially; both parents helped to supervise her practice regime. 'My mother always made sure I had another teacher as well so she didn't have to teach me all the time. It's hard to teach your own children.'

Ibragimova's father, Rinat Ibragimov, was first double-bass of the London Symphony Orchestra until he suffered a stroke a couple of years ago – Ibragimova says his rehabilitation has progressed well and that he hopes to resume teaching soon. It was his appointment to the orchestra that brought the family to London in 1996. 'I didn't want to move to London when I was told we were going,' Ibragimova says. 'But afterwards I quickly changed my mind...' Arriving in Britain, she says, 'It was very green, it was the middle of summer and I had my own room in the house. Eventually I went to the Menuhin School, aged ten or 11. I loved it there – even though I spoke very poor English and didn't really understand anything!'

At home – everywhere and nowhere?

Brown's is the most quintessentially English of surroundings; and Ibragimova has settled in Greenwich with her Scottish husband, the critic and broadcaster Tom Service, and two cats, one of whom she rescued as a kitten from the side of the A2. Her Russian accent is noticeable, but not overwhelmingly so. Does she feel thoroughly anglicised? 'I think unless you stay in the place you were born, you're never going to feel that total sense of home,' she says. 'I'm not completely anglicised, but today I would find it hard to live in Russia as well. I don't really know where I'm at home any more. But that's fine.'

Her schedule is so packed that she says she has no idea how many concerts she does per year: 'I'm usually home no more than five or six days per month – though this year has been slightly different...' She and Service married in the spring, having first met when he interviewed her for *The Guardian*. Some reactions to the idea of an artist marrying a critic can be a little strange, she acknowledges. 'But why shouldn't musicians and critics get along?'

'I need an instrument I can't always predict'

Her other partner-in-chief is an Anselmo Bellosio violin, made in Venice around 1775. 'It's very beautiful, quite golden-sounding,' Ibragimova says. 'I've had it for about ten years and though I've occasionally tried others, I seem always to come back to mine. I like that it responds to me always with different things. So many violins are set up to be strong, loud and beautiful whatever you do. But I find sometimes the aim is that they sound oily and warm, yet somehow that's all they can do. I get really frustrated with that. I need something I can make sound ugly, something I can't always predict. I'd much rather that than this impersonal "perfection"...and that somehow makes it more difficult for me to like a violin.'

The instrument is loaned to her by Georg von Opel: 'He bought it for me and is a very generous supporter of young musicians.' She has grown used to travelling with a valuable instrument, but, she adds, 'I'm always aware it's next to me. On a day like today when I haven't brought it, I'll have sudden shudders! I have to keep it with me in the bedroom when I sleep – I need to know where it is.'

Ibragimova's centred calmness makes it difficult to imagine her ever suffering performance stress. She has been performing since the age of six – and sure enough, she says, stage fright is not an issue. But that was not always the case. 'When I was at school, for a while I even got ill before I had to play,' she says. 'Then I decided it's a mental thing – I have to tell myself I'll stop getting nervous. And it worked. If you really tell yourself things at the age of 12-13, they tend to work.'

Studies with Gordan Nikolitch at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and with Christian Tetzlaff in the Kronberg Academy Masters Programme set her up for rapid progress. In 2002, she won the London Symphony Orchestra Music Scholarship.

Three years later the BBC New Generation Artists scheme snapped her up: 'It's a great scheme, and was incredibly useful,' she says.

'You're never scared of a microphone ever again...'

It also proved in certain ways a baptism of fire. 'In those days you weren't allowed to repeat anything – which meant I was pretty much out of repertoire after six months. Everything else you had to learn very quickly; and a lot of performances are broadcast live. So the first time I played the Beethoven Concerto was during a patch of two weeks when I had 16 concerts and was also taking exams. And I was virtually sight-reading from the music on stage, and it was live on the radio. But then,' she twinkles, 'you are never scared of a microphone again, which is great!'

It was on the scheme, too, that she first began to work with the French pianist Cédric Tiberghien. 'I like partnerships,' she says, 'and now, after ten years, we know each other so well that it's just easy and natural to play together. And with Steven Osborne it's been great as well.' She and Osborne recorded the Prokofiev Sonatas last year; and with Tiberghien she is to set down the complete 37 Mozart sonatas. Her string quartet has notched up a decade this year: 'We are the Chiaroscuro Quartet and we play on period instruments,' she says. 'Three of us met at college, but Pablo Hernan Benedi, the second violinist, joined us later – ten years ago he would have been only 13...'

Refusing to go glam

Ibragimova has resolutely held out against the glam-up, dumb-down marketing to which some parts of the music business like youthful women to succumb. Her website offers a different sort of vision, with edgy, urban, black-and-white shots full of wintery trees and graffiti. "I like arty photos – it's an opportunity to bring a little more art into our presentation," Ibragimova says.

A double tragedy touched her life, however: these photos are by Sussie Ahlburg, who drowned in a Hampstead Heath swimming pond in 2013. Weeks later, Ahlburg's partner, Matt Fretton, took his own life in grief. He had been Ibragimova's first agent. In some ways her website on the one hand and her clarity of focus on the other remain a tribute to them both.

She remains permanently grateful to Fretton for having guided her progress so carefully. 'It's a tough world for someone young, just starting out,' she reflects. 'Many people want to pull you in certain directions and it's hard to be strong enough to know what you want straight away. My education was always about not being "successful", but about doing your best, being honest and achieving something in yourself that's good. Something else may come or may not, and it isn't the point.'

Alina Ibragimova Ysaye 'We're told we have to sound more masculine. I don't see why'

Even though she rejected the glamour route, she understands where those demands are coming from. 'It's what's popular,' she shrugs, 'and after all, music is a business, part of the entertainment industry. Of course it's art, it's more sacred and serious than that, but there are people who are in it for the business and therefore have to make certain decisions about their priorities. It's good that I had the advice I did and trusted that glamping up wasn't what you had to do.'

'It's a lot to do with marketing. I know so many great festivals, but I look at the leaflets and there's always a young, pretty girl on the cover. I don't understand why it always

has to be a young, pretty girl. If we're going to go there, there are lots of young, pretty boys in the world who happen to be fabulous musicians!

In training, too, some issues affect young women disproportionately, she suggests. 'We're often told that we have to play more strongly and sound more masculine. I don't see why. I'm aware that there are women who feel the need either to be overly feminine or to be more man-like; I just wish we all felt naturally fine in the world. Perhaps we'll get there. But it's taking a little bit too long.'

The scones are also taking a little too long to eat at this stage of fullness. Even if Ibragimova needs energy with her schedule to fulfil – forthcoming trips to the West Cork Festival, Cambridge, Cheltenham, Switzerland, Denmark, New York, Amsterdam and those Proms are just the start – this carb-laden glory will certainly obliterate any need for dinner. We quietly request doggy-bags before heading out and home.

Alina Ibragimova plays at the Proms on 31 July and 1, 15 and 27 August. Her CD of Ysaÿe's solo sonatas is out now on Hyperion.

Alina Ibragimova and Jessica Duchen had afternoon tea at the English Tea Room, Brown's Hotel, Mayfair.

ALINA IBRAGIMOVA: IN PERSON

If you could play only one composer from now on, who would it be?

Schubert. But that is just today's answer!

What's your ideal instrument, whether or not you already have it?

I tried a beautiful del Gesù a few years ago and loved it. I love my violin too, however: it's the one that knows me best and that I know best. In the end it's not how a violin sounds, but what it makes you do that counts.

What makes you happiest?

Being at home, relaxing, cooking, doing yoga...

If you could change three things about the set-up of your profession or its training, what would they be?

I'd like women to feel that they don't need to prove anything – and that they can be themselves, whatever that may be.

I'd like music education to be richer, because the rest of the world is so relevant to us. It's not about practising ten hours every day.

And I'd like it if promoters would not close their eyes to different repertoire. I hate the notion that many musicians have to play programmes that 'sell better'. There's so much great music out there and it just needs to be given the chance. Once it is, it'll be loved.

Which music and musicians do you most like to listen to?

I love David Oistrakh, but I also love Gypsy music and I think I get as much out of listening to that as to classical performers and repertoire.

Do you think classical music needs to be 'saved'?

No. I think classical music needs to be trusted. People shouldn't try to turn it into something else, or change it, or be in any way artificial with it. You want real emotion – and that will always come through.

You're queen for a day – what do you do with your power?

I'd love to be able to give everyone what they want, so people can be happy and do good things. I don't know if the queen can make that happen, though. Can I be a fairy godmother instead?

6th July 2015 Jessica Duchon
Editor's Lunch, Interviews