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EDITOR'S LUNCH: Maxim Rysanov

The Ukrainian viola star Maxim Rysanov, celebrated for his sweet, powerful tone and his passion for commissioning new works, enjoys a Turkish feast with Jessica Duchen during the 2015 Istanbul Festival

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There could be worse places to meet Maxim Rysanov for lunch than Istanbul. It is June 2015 and we're both here for the Istanbul Music Festival, an annual feast of world-class performances held mostly in Hagia Eirene – a 1,600-year-old Eastern Orthodox church and museum in the gardens of Topkapi Palace, framed by the oldest and most beautiful quarter of the Turkish capital. Rysanov is partnering the violinist Arabella Steinbacher in Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante; beforehand, I am presenting an introductory talk. Istanbul has more than a goodly number of eateries and cafés of many shapes and sizes; we are meeting in one of the city's upmarket, business-orientated restaurants, Boğaziçi Borsa, where an open-air terrace affords a fine view across to the Bosphorus. Our interview is peppered with the calls of ships' horns over the water as cruise liners greet or bid farewell to this confluence point of east and west.

At 37, Rysanov is that excellent rarity, a true star of the viola. As he breezes over in black t-shirt and dark glasses, instrument case over one shoulder, it occurs to me that the viola has more than a little in common with Istanbul itself. It's the bridge between two worlds – Europe and Asia, for which read violin and cello, for poetry's sake; it both unifies and defines the individuality of

those that surround it; and its beauties are often misunderstood or underestimated, yet when given their head can offer up treasures galore.

Much progress has been made, thanks to performers like Rysanov and his predecessors – great pioneers like Lionel Tertis, William Primrose and more recently Pinchas Zukerman, Yuri Bashmet and Lawrence Power – in moving the viola towards equal status with its string siblings. ‘Not as equal as one would wish,’ Rysanov remarks. ‘But it’s certainly much more advanced now as a solo instrument and much more played by young soloists, which is fantastic. ‘More repertoire is being written for viola every day; someone recently said to me that apparently there are now 7,000 concertos written for viola. The trouble is, they are sometimes not very good! Only a few are masterpieces. So it’s as if the universe has been created, but we are the ones who have to create life so it can continue. Therefore we have to commission a lot of new music.’

‘Music has to be good, whatever style it is...’

Rysanov has made it his mission to increase the quantity of fine works for his instrument. ‘I’m very interested in contemporary music, but I’m very selective also,’ he insists. ‘I do believe that music has to be *good* – whatever style it is. Before our day, so much happened in the past 400 years that if I were a composer I’d have no idea what to write!’

The first composer we discuss is the Bulgarian-born, UK-resident Dobrinka Tabakova, a recording of whose warm-hearted and often startlingly inventive chamber music, entitled *String Paths*, was nominated for a Grammy last year. Rysanov conducts the Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra on this disc as well as playing the viola; other soloists include the violinist Janine Jansen, the cellist Kristine Blaumane and the accordionist Raimondas Sviackevicius.

‘Dobrinka has become a big viola pioneer because she’s written a lot of music, mainly for me, since we were in college at the Guildhall together,’ Rysanov says. ‘We were friends; she started writing for viola; and this tradition kept going. Her chamber music always has very interesting viola parts. I’m

incredibly happy about all this because I really like her music. She's very honest, I think, about her approach and how she sees the world.'

In company with Schubert

Admirers of the Latvian composer Peteris Vasks can look forward to a world premiere in 2016 of a new concerto for Rysanov. And there's a less familiar figure on the horizon, too: the Ukrainian-Russian composer Sergey Akhunov. 'I'm fascinated by his work,' says Rysanov. 'He's in his late forties and started composing classical music only about five years ago. He used to be in a band and composing pop songs for quite famous pop singers, but he told me that he realised this is absolutely not the way he wants to work now. He wants to do something more serious and he gave up all the money side of this life. He's in the so-called minimalist style, but he has depth as a person and I think you can hear it: there is very honest beauty in his music.'

Akhunov has composed two pieces for a major project that Rysanov is bringing to London in October, and plans to record later: a programme entitled 'Homage to Schubert'. 'To me Schubert is something a little beyond everything,' says Rysanov. 'I'm collecting repertoire for this homage. Dobrinka Tabakova is writing a Fantasy Homage to Schubert drawing on part of the C major Fantasy; there'll be the two pieces by Akhunov, one called *6:36 in Schubert's Company* and the other is *Erlkönig*.'

Together with the Scottish Ensemble, led by Jonathan Morton, Rysanov is bringing this programme to the Wigmore Hall on 24 October. It is his second Wigmore appearance in six days: on 19 October he joins oboist Alexei Ogrintchouk, violinist Boris Brovtsyn and cellist Kristine Blaumane for a BBC lunchtime concert of Haydn, Britten, Schubert and Mozart.

East meets West

The music we're discussing is new, but our repas is traditional – though embarrassingly for us, it is far from traditional to eat lunch in Istanbul during Ramadan, which is the situation in which we find ourselves. We're beset by guilt; few diners are present today in a restaurant that is clearly geared up for many more. Ramadan forbids Muslims to eat during daylight hours, and this

year it has fallen in mid June, around the longest day of the year. Later, around 9pm, as the sky over the Bosphorus turns apricot and gold, Istanbul families will emerge into Taksim Square to enjoy the end of the daily fast to the accompaniment of traditional Turkish music played in a specially erected bandstand.

As lunch-munching westerners, we try to be at least reasonably restrained. First, some starters – we call them mezze in London, but in Turkey you may find them termed ‘olive oil specialties’ instead: hummus, stuffed vine leaves and silky spiced-aubergine babaganoush, with fresh-baked Turkish-style bread. As main course, chicken kebab on skewers, flavoured with lemon and herbs, with rice and plentiful salad. I have found a new favourite dish: gavurdagi salad, which is made with chopped tomatoes, red onion, walnuts, parsley, radishes, cucumber, pomegranate seeds and tangy sumac, lightly sprinkled with chilli flakes. The kick of Turkish coffee rounds off a perfectly calibrated treat.

Rysanov himself is something of a meeting of east and west. Today he is based in London – ‘at least, that’s where all my stuff is,’ he says – but also has a place in Budapest, as his girlfriend is the Hungarian cellist Dóra Kokas, formerly of the Kelemen Quartet (and younger sister of its second violin, Katalin Kokas). The strings world is small indeed.

He was born in Kramatorsk, Ukraine; his family members remaining there are a source of considerable anxiety for him, as the town is only about 35 miles from the front of the ongoing military conflict with Russia. His mother is a violinist and teacher and his father was a clarinettist, though the couple divorced soon after Maxim was born and he says he remembers little about his father. There have been surprises in store, though.

‘Life can give you things back,’ Rysanov remarks. ‘My father was married once before once and had two sons, but I never knew of their existence. When Facebook appeared, I found two brothers with the same surname as mine. One lives in Russia, the other in Poland: both are musicians, one a clarinettist, one a cellist. It was quite a shocking moment, like one of those TV

shows! We wrote to each other and when I played in Krakow my older brother came over to visit. He's principal cellist in an orchestra in a smaller town and he arranged for me to come and conduct a project, so we had three days there to catch up.'

Two teachers are more than enough

Aged 11, Rysanov was sent to Moscow to study at the Central Special Music School. His favourite memories of the place include being thrown out of bed at 7am to do his morning exercises by a teacher 'who used to boast about all the famous guys she had thrown out of bed to do their exercises – people like Vladimir Spivakov and Mikhail Pletnev!'

On leaving school, he headed for London and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. 'My teacher in Moscow, who was fantastic, was married to Rinat Ibragimov's double-bass teacher,' he explains, 'and when Rinat came to London he learned that the Guildhall offered full scholarships. Coming from a normal Soviet family I would never have been able to afford to study in London. So I took an exam and won the scholarship – then I stayed a long time.'

His teacher there was Jack Glickman; he felt no need to look any further. 'He was incredible,' he declares. 'He was my second major teacher. Personally I think that having two teachers is more than enough, rather than taking an endless succession of masterclasses and consultations. The main thing Jack taught me was to start thinking about what I'm actually doing on my instrument. In Moscow I was doing what I was told – though probably quite well – but here I had to start making my own choices.'

'The whole system in London was so different for me from Moscow that I was a little bit lost at first,' he admits. 'The difference is that in London you're hardly forced to learn. If you don't want to learn, you can pretend you're learning – but they taught me to *want* to learn. Maybe it was also my age – I was perhaps a bit older and smarter.'

Baton charge?

Aged 17 Rysanov won the Valentino Bucchi Competition in Rome – ‘my only first prize ever,’ he remarks. ‘I’m a second-prize sort of person.’ He won the latter in the Geneva Competition (2005) and the Lionel Tertis Competition (2003). ‘It’s not such a bad thing,’ he points out. ‘Sometimes the second prize winners go on to more interesting careers.’ He was a BBC New Generation Artist from 2007 to 2009 and in 2008 Gramophone awarded him its prize for Young Artist of the Year.

But then he added another strand to his musicianship: he took a conducting course at the Guildhall. ‘At the end of that I won the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra’s scheme for a young conductor in association,’ he says, ‘but I decided not to take it up. It was a difficult decision, but something inside me still needed to prove to people that the viola could be a solo instrument...’

Several years ago, he says, he began to feel more ready for the challenge of conducting. ‘I’m taking it up again and trying to build up my activities,’ he says. ‘You can only really call yourself a conductor, though, if you’ve done all the repertoire more than once, and if you’re over 65...’

Understanding the score from a conductor’s viewpoint has much value to him as an instrumentalist, he feels: ‘It’s incredibly important to think of a concerto, for example, as a big chamber piece with a leading voice. I’ve become more passionate about conducting because I’m playing a lot of chamber music and I’ve started to realise there is one common sound that everyone is producing which is making it work. And it’s also very interesting that for the orchestra the aim is to play like one person, and for one person the aim is to play like an orchestra! When I started learning the scores I definitely reconsidered my approach to many aspects of interpretation. I think that before this I was more physical about what I played, rather than working from the head.’

‘Forget about the viola being comfortable’

Rysanov’s viola is a Giuseppe Guaragnini of 1780 – the maker was the second son of Giovanni Battista Guaragnini and was known as ‘il Soldate’. ‘It is a very powerful instrument with a sweet sound and I’ve had it for about ten years,’ Rysanov says. ‘I am very grateful to the Elise Mathilde Foundation in

the Netherlands, which owns it.' Florian Leonhard had found the viola on auction in New York, he says, 'and he brought it to London because he knew I would love it. I did – and I started to look for sponsors. I was incredibly lucky when I found the Elise Mathilde Foundation – we got on very well!'

The instrument's shape is unusual: 'It's quite long – the body itself is a good size, but the neck is about half a centimetre to a centimetre longer than usual. It seems that Guadagnini wanted to experiment with the tension, because the longer the strings are between the bridge and the top nut – the longer the distance for the string to vibrate – the more power the instrument will have. That's why a lot of violas are very big, in the body also. If you don't have large hands, it's not so comfortable. But the viola is not such a comfortable instrument anyway,' he remarks. 'Anyone should forget about the viola being comfortable!'

'The authentic voice of Byron's and Strauss's young hero...'

The power of a gloriously played viola, though, can reach some surprising places. In 2008 the author and commentator Germaine Greer wrote an article for The Guardian singing Rysanov's praises to the skies. She wrote: 'In his performances last week of Britten's *Lachrymae* with the Britten Sinfonia, the alto instrument, so often muffled, was able to display its entire gamut. The audience could at last feel why for so many of our ancestors this hoarse big fiddle made the nearest thing to the music of the spheres. Tall, handsome, dark-eyed, Maxim Rysanov looks Byronic; on stage, he accentuates the look by wearing stove-pipe trousers along with sweeping tails. But it is the thrilling sound he draws from his viola that is the authentic voice of Byron's and Strauss's young hero. '

How did it feel to find himself cast as a pin-up boy for a contemporary feminist icon? Rysanov looks as sheepish as a self-possessed star musician can look: 'I didn't realise she was that famous,' he admits. 'Look, it's always nice to read nice stuff about yourself, for which I can only be completely thankful. But I try to stick to Pushkin: if you're praised, be careful with the

reviews that are praising you; and don't mention those that are completely destroying you. Believe only in the neutral ones.'

Sensible advice – but if Rysanov is prone to receiving praise it is scarcely surprising. At Hagia Eirene that evening, he and Arabella Steinbacher – who had met for the first time only 24 hours before – perform the Mozart Sinfonia Concertante as beautifully as if they have been playing together forever. 'If I had to name one piece to play again and again for the rest of my life, the Sinfonia Concertante would be a good candidate,' Rysanov says. It sounds like it, too. The Istanbul Festival audience takes the soloists to its hearts at once and gives them a standing ovation. Amid the ancient wonders of the Topkapi Palace gardens, it feels like a midsummer night's dream.

Maxim Rysanov performs chamber music with Alexei Ogrintchouk (oboe) and friends at the Wigmore Hall, London, 1pm, 19 October; and with the Scottish Ensemble in Homage to Schubert, also at the Wigmore Hall, 24 October. Box office: 020 7935 2141

Maxim Rysanov and Jessica Duchon had lunch at Boğaziçi Borsa, Istanbul: <http://www.borsarestaurants.com/tr/bogazici/biz/biz.aspx>

MAXIM RYSANOV: IN PERSON

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

Dobrinka Tabakova.

What would be your ideal instrument, whether or not you already have it?

I have a pretty perfect viola. But I think the ideal instrument is actually the voice.

What makes you happiest?

Self balance, and being surrounded by the right people.

How do you like to relax?

The best holiday I ever had was in Ukraine, camping with my family in the forest, where in order to prepare some food you have to get some wood, make a fire and catch the fish. You completely switch off from everything else.

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

This is hypothetical, but I wish that audiences would be better prepared – of course, in some places they are fantastic.

Next, I wish classical music would not go in the direction of pop – but rather, the other way around.

And I wish the educational system would be more tolerant of talented people and more helpful to them. I wish the universities and colleges would be more helpful to talented people wishing to work outside the world of that institution.

You're king for a day: what do you do with your power?

I would stop the war in Ukraine.