

Interview: Semyon Bychkov

He was a professional sportsman in his native Soviet Union. But he fled oppression to become one of the world's best conductors.

By Jessica Duchon, March 25, 2010

Semyon Bychkov says he left for New York when he could no longer stand the antisemitism of the Moscow regime

The Russian conductor Semyon Bychkov, who makes his debut with the London Symphony Orchestra at the Barbican on Sunday, has built his career so steadily that to many music lovers he has become a familiar figure almost by default.

Born into a Russian-Jewish family in what was then Leningrad in 1952, he was a student of the legendary conducting professor Ilya Musin (the teacher of the Valery Gergiev, among others). Bychkov's style is very different from that of the jet-propelled Gergiev, but he brings special qualities of his own to the music he conducts - warmth, intelligence, attention to detail and, when appropriate, humour.

His worldwide reputation rests strongly on the Viennese and German classics; he is also acclaimed for his interpretations of Russian music, and divides his time and energies between opera and the concert platform. His wife is the pianist Marielle Labèque (one half of the acclaimed Labèque Sisters piano duo); the pair live in Paris, in a beautiful apartment where their family treasures include a leather briefcase that once belonged to Rachmaninov.

Growing up Jewish in the Soviet Union, Bychkov says, was not a straightforward matter. "I had no religious Jewish upbringing or education because it was very much discouraged at the time," he recalls. "Even though my maternal grandfather was a deeply religious person, it was an element of his character that had to remain private. I was aware of my cultural heritage, without a doubt, and I was always brought up to believe it was very important because these were my roots. So it was part of my consciousness, but without the religious aspect or the customs."

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The musical education he received was second to none - and there cannot be many conductors who have also played professional volleyball. "I grew up in

the most amazing cultural environment, studying in the school of great tradition with the teachers who influenced me for the rest of my life, and playing volleyball in the Leningrad Dynamo team for eight years. I had an extremely interesting and challenging life and I can only be grateful for that."

Nevertheless, these were the years of the Cold War. Bychkov says: "The ideological aspects of life were stifling. My father suffered very much from official antisemitism and his suffering touched me deeply, psychologically. That in the end precipitated my desire to leave because I simply had to be free."

Bychkov left the Soviet Union for New York in 1975 when he was 22, enrolling as a student at the Mannes College of Music. "By that time I was pretty much excluded from open doors in the Soviet Union; that was the price to pay for wanting to leave, but I was happy to pay it."

Arriving in America, he knew nobody, but had been given one phone number to call - that of Kyriena Siloti, the daughter of Alexander Siloti, Rachmaninov's cousin and teacher. She shared an apartment with her sister Oxana, who was Tchaikovsky's god-daughter. The elderly sisters invited Bychkov to visit them in their Manhattan home. "I found myself in the astonishing atmosphere of Russian intelligentsia who had emigrated just as the revolution took place."

The Siloti sisters were born in Moscow and grew up there: "There was the connection to the culture that was so important to me, especially given that Rachmaninov was one of my first loves in music. It was somehow providential to meet them and they really accepted me with open arms - I was treated like a grandson and, as a result, I inherited the briefcase of Rachmaninov himself and some scores of his which are very dear to me."

Bychkov's early reputation was built in the US, and since the late 1980s he has become an increasingly loved figure in Europe, a frequent visitor to the Berlin Philharmonic, Vienna Philharmonic and opera houses in Paris, Germany and the Royal Opera House in London. Since 1997 he has been chief conductor of the WDR Symphony Orchestra Cologne, building his partnership with them into one of the strongest and longest in the musical world. Together they have released a series of much-praised recordings, most recently Richard Strauss's Alpine Symphony.

But Bychkov will be leaving Cologne this summer, after 13 years. "It's a very happy association, always has been and remains so to this day," he says. "It is really my orchestra, one which over the years I've formed and which has formed me as well." Still, he recognises that it is "the end of a cycle", time to move on.

Leaving Cologne will mark a significant change in his life: "For the first time in my life I will be free - it has never happened before. I have always been responsible for an institution - even when I was 17-year-old I had my first choir in one of the universities in Leningrad - and it never stopped. Now I will only

have responsibility to myself, my art and my work. This feels terribly good to contemplate!"

Next season he will be back in London as a guest conductor for the BBC Symphony Orchestra and will also wield the baton over a brand new production of Wagner's Tannhäuser at the Royal Opera House. "Of course I have ideological objections to Wagner, but not artistic ones," he says. "There's a tremendous difference. There are people who can't bear listening to his music, either because of the nature of the music itself or because of the politics associated with it, and that has to be respected. But it should not prevent other people from worshipping his art."

And how is he looking forward to his visit to the LSO? "It's one of the great orchestras, and it will be exciting to meet them," he says. The programme is an enticing one, featuring Dvorak's Carnival Overture, Shostakovich's Second Piano Concerto, and Brahms's Fourth Symphony.

All are works of great warmth and generosity of spirit. They should fit Bychkov perfectly.

Barbican, London EC3, Sunday 28 March. Tel: 020 7638 8891

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