

## The quiet riot

Mikhail Pletnev has a passion for fast cars and playing his piano so loudly that audiences fear the instrument will fall apart. Yet in person he refuses to play the superstar. Jessica Duchen reports

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There are so many stories about Mikhail Pletnev that I half expect to meet a colossus, an arrogant New Russian who will stop at nothing to achieve his artistic ends. It is something of a surprise to encounter a tired little fellow in a crumpled tweed jacket who greets me, rather disconcertingly, in perfect German. His manager prompts him gently: "Misha, I think it's in English..."

Pletnev is a living legend of the piano; in person, however, he seems not larger than life, but smaller. He is short, slight, inscrutable, and so softly spoken that I have to strain to hear his words in the hotel bar in Helsinki, where I have caught up with him a few days before he comes to the UK. He looks more like an English schoolmaster than a Russian superstar; his self-deprecation too seems echt-English. "All I do is play the piano, and enjoy life," he says. Then a tell-tale vestige of Russian gloom invades: "I hope I survive some more time to continue enjoying it."

Gradually, as he relaxes, a laconic charm begins to emerge, subtle and ironic. Yet between questions he seems beset by a nervous tic, lips working backwards and forwards. It is impossible to tell what he is thinking.

At the piano, Pletnev is a powerful force. Tempos and volume can reach every extreme known to the instrument, and his interpretations often polarise listeners. Critics eulogise him wildly, but a Chopin recital I attended seemed to have very little to do with Chopin and a great deal to do with Pletnev himself. At his best - his own transcription of Tchaikovsky's Sleeping Beauty ballet music, or his Hommage to Rachmaninov, on the composer's own piano - Pletnev can be stunning: glittering, passionate and gut-wrenchingly compelling. At other times, the music feels icy, distorted and self-willed, the tone so violent that you almost expect the piano to fall apart. To some musicians, every mark on the composer's page is sacrosanct. For Pletnev, "It is a starting point..."

"You've touched a delicate question," he acknowledges, "but it is quite complicated. Often musicians have played differently from the composer's indications, even Liszt himself. At other times, people have said that we should only play what is written down - but then this is not enough by itself." He laughs. "So everything is wrong!"

How does he account for the extreme reactions he seems to inspire? Pletnev shrugs. "Sometimes I play well," he says, "and sometimes I do not. I always try to do my best."

Pletnev is the only child of two musicians: his mother was a *répétiteuse* and his father played and taught the bayan (a Russian accordion). He underwent the classic Soviet hothouse musical training - the Central Music School in Moscow from the age of 13 followed by the Moscow Conservatory - and he still lives partly in Russia. "I live in the field, beside the river," he declares poetically. His mother used to travel everywhere with him, and a rarified, protected aura around him is maintained by his manager and friends, who tend to mother him too.

Maybe he needs protecting - he seems to enjoy certain types of danger. If a musician's inner life shows in his playing, then Pletnev's mind must have some very unorthodox corners indeed. More definably, he has a passion for fast cars. "There aren't many roads left in Russia where you can drive like this," he says regretfully. "You cannot go faster than 120km. They fine you!"

Speed notwithstanding, he is not tempted to leave Russia permanently and is relatively optimistic about the country's future. On the day of our interview, Vladimir Putin was inaugurated as Russia's first elected president, something Pletnev regards as a very positive step. "The first election has been accomplished without any bloodshed, without any shootings. And it is good for Russia to have a leader now who can be strong but not extreme and who can think clearly and coldly about what is going on. Russia needs some organisation."

What are his feelings about the war in Chechnya? "I think if there are people there who are trying to solve problems with their guns, or taking children hostage, they must be stopped - but eventually there should be some political solution. Perhaps the way to achieve this is with education, gradually." He believes that western claims of human rights violations by the Russians may be exaggerated. "There has been a similar situation in Northern Ireland for years," he announces, continuing whimsically: "Imagine that in the US, the state of New England declares that it is against the president and wants to destroy all Americans who are not from New England. I am not sure that the US would give it independence so quickly."

Pletnev is like a musical, slightly out-to-lunch version of Putin - he has that determination, that cleverness and something of that steely gaze. He launched his career in 1974, aged 21, by winning the Tchaikovsky competition in Moscow, one of the world's most important musical prizes. By all accounts, he set about winning quite deliberately and with absolute conviction. "I decided I wanted to win the Tchaikovsky competition because I knew it would open many doors for my career," he says. True, but not the language of the surprised-and-delighted winner more common on the concert scene.

In 1991, with equal determination, Pletnev founded the Russian National Orchestra - the first Russian arts organisation independent of the state since 1917. Mikhail Gorbachev encouraged Pletnev in his plans; much has been made of this, but Pletnev explains that "I founded this orchestra in November 1991, and by then Gorbachev's position was doubtful. There had already been this putsch, and Yeltsin took power two or three months later. I told Gorbachev about this idea and he was very supportive. I respect him very much: he enjoys classical music, especially Tchaikovsky, which is not a common thing among Russian politicians. But the orchestra had more enemies than friends. And the enemies were the powerful ones."

The creation of the orchestra rubbed people up the wrong way throughout the Russian musical system. Several other conductors were incandescent with fury as their best players decamped for the RNO's higher salaries. Nearly a decade later, however, the RNO is a well established international presence and Pletnev is leaving his position as music director and principal conductor. Isn't it a wrench to leave an organisation to which he has devoted so much time and effort? No, he says. He will still work with the RNO as its conductor laureate, but he is glad to be free of certain administrative responsibilities that he felt were falling too heavily on his shoulders.

Steely and determined he may be, but Pletnev can seem impossibly laid-back about his music-making. Conducting? "It's a nice thing to do. You do not have to practise. But it is difficult because the orchestra never plays the way you want it." Or try this: apparently he once recorded three and a half CDs of piano music in one week flat, sleeping in until nearly noon each day and usually giving up well before 4pm. Few musicians would dare to work this way. But he has that kind of brain: highly absorbent, super-charged, mercurial. He composes too: he has written "a big, romantic viola concerto" for Yuri Bashmet and reworked the Beethoven Violin Concerto for his friend Michael Collins to play on the clarinet. And he speaks at least five languages fluently, including Japanese.

Pletnev's forthcoming Tchaikovsky concerts are sure to be crowd-pullers - everyone loves Tchaikovsky. Is he an easy composer to identify with? Pletnev doesn't think so. "He was a very complicated person. There are very few musicians who play Tchaikovsky properly - there are many one-sided performances. Most of the time Tchaikovsky is taken as an emotionally

exaggerated composer. But his music ranges from the big, powerful things to some which are small and very delicate. As well as the Russian character of his music, there are influences from German and French music; as well as emotion there is intellect and philosophy."

There is pride in his tone, even possessiveness. Maybe the restrained demeanour is misleading, for there is no false modesty about Pletnev.

At some point after his manager returns, Pletnev disappears so quietly that I do not notice him go. When he returns, he drifts over like a shadow wreathed in smoke. But just wait until he gets to the piano.

- Mikhail Pletnev and the Philharmonia Orchestra perform Tchaikovsky's three piano concertos at the Royal Festival Hall, London SE1 (020-7960 4242), tonight and Saturday.