

Still playing the rebel: Nigel Kennedy is back and he's showing no signs of mellowing

Nigel Kennedy returns for a gig at London's Tower Festival as his seminal Vivaldi album gets a 20th anniversary re-release. He still has the haircut, the attitude, and he's still angry – about conductors, the price of CDs, Palestine, country music, Margaret Thatcher, and much more. Jessica Duchon met him, and then partied...

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Sunset over the Brandenburg Gate, Berlin, and Nigel Kennedy is giving a special performance with his jazz quintet to mark the conclusion of the World Athletics Championships. "Berlin – nummer eins!" the mohican-crested renegade fiddler shouts to the crowd from a stage opposite the landmark. He takes a spoof bow, flapping his hands while pony-galloping forward and back, telling the crowd that this is "Shakespearean". "Oh, Nigel," his manager sighs, "what are you doing?"

Later, after his trademark greeting, "monster!", we settle in his dressing-room tent, Kennedy nursing an outsize tumbler of neat vodka, to discuss what he really is doing. At 52, outwardly the bad boy of the violin hasn't changed much since his ever-controversial recording of Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* 20 years ago, when it got into *The Guinness Book of Records* as the highest-selling classical album ever and caused near-apoplexy in the classical world.

The record industry is marking the anniversary with a special re-release, but Kennedy has long since moved on. He works hard, plays hard – the night before he'd been partying until 9am – and never stops dreaming up new projects. Some have been more successful than others; we don't hear much today about the re-branding experiment in which he tried abandoning his first name. But now the classical sphere is looming larger in his activities than it has for a while; it's perhaps telling that he has chosen a manager, Terri Robson, who worked with Pavarotti.

He wouldn't perform classical concertos in London for years, citing the orchestras' lack of adequate rehearsal time, but last year he played the Elgar

Violin Concerto at the Proms in a concert that sold out within a day. And even his detractors had to admit that in terms of violin playing he's one of the best in the business.

How does he feel now about that Four Seasons recording? Kennedy has a surprisingly sweet face – there's a childlike air about him – but he abruptly looks daggers over his vodka. "I thought we weren't going to talk about that shit," he protests. Maybe he's being deliberately provocative here, but the recording he used to call "Viv" does keep coming back to haunt him. "The record industry's got to be more interested in that anniversary than in the music that's happening now," he grumbles. "And back then I think they were ripping off the fans, charging about £15 for that disc. The excuse is always that classical recordings don't sell much, right? But that one sold two fucking million and they still charged £15."

The nutcase rock-star persona is there in force – but it's just one side of him, and there are many. He may be up all night, but most mornings he goes jogging and practises rigorously. Watch him play – whether on one of his five-stringed electric violins in Aston Villa colours, or on his Guarneri del Gesu of 1735, officially called the Lafont but which he has named Kylie – and he's as much Jascha Heifetz as Jimi Hendrix: the intense concentration, the bow straight and strong as a laser, the fingering a flash of quicksilver exactitude. Violin buffs have been known to liken his sheer technical security to that of the great Russian violinist Nathan Milstein. Talk to him about his early days, about those classical violin gods like Milstein, Yehudi Menuhin and Isaac Stern, and a fiddle boffin shines out through the vodka and smoke. Even the mockney accent gently fades.

"I was born at a very young age," he quips. His background was steeped in music. His grandfather, Lauri Kennedy, was principal cello in the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Nigel's father, John Kennedy, became principal cello in the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Sir Thomas Beecham, but then moved to Australia, possibly not knowing that Nigel had been conceived; Kennedy did not meet him until he was 11. His mother, Scylla Stoner, was a piano teacher. As a baby he lay in a cot under the piano while she gave lessons. Maybe that's why he has such a passion for loud bass.

He even loves loud bass on the violin – he can produce astonishing Hendrix-like sounds from the electric fiddles, and in the classical direction he's pondering the idea of having a five-stringed violin made for him, the extra string a fifth below the instrument's bottom G. "I love the deep sounds on the violin," he remarks. "All those high frequencies can do your head in. Maybe I should have been a viola player!"

Aged seven he won a place at the Yehudi Menuhin School, the UK's most elite training institution for gifted young musicians; Menuhin's family sponsored his education. "They fabricated a scholarship for me," Kennedy says, "because my

mother was not in a situation of having a lot of money. That's the great thing about that school: they never turn anybody away just because they can't afford fees."

Was his schooling a good experience? "Next question!" Why? "Well, like, the only sport we were allowed to play against other schools was table tennis, because otherwise we might damage our hands. And there was this guru who taught yoga." Menuhin was passionate about yoga and insisted on its inclusion in the curriculum. "He used our table-tennis table to give demonstrations – maybe he was trying to levitate or something – and he completely wrecked it! I took up running to get away from the yoga."

Menuhin was undoubtedly a father-figure, but Kennedy's favourite classical violinist was, in fact, Isaac Stern. "I used to drive everyone nuts at school listening to his recordings all the time. I love the purity of his sound. What other violinist made so many of the best recordings of so many concertos?"

Kennedy started improvising aged 12; at just 16 he played with his jazz hero, Stephane Grappelli, at Carnegie Hall. By then he was studying at New York's Juilliard School with the renowned Dorothy DeLay. The college advised him not to do the Grappelli concert in case it ruined his classical credibility. After soul-searching over a bottle of whisky, he went right ahead.

His recording of the Elgar Violin Concerto in 1984 won a prestigious Gramophone Award; it seemed to signal a bright and traditional future. But Kennedy soon had other ideas. His passions extended to Hendrix and punk, and he'd come to loathe the stuffy, snobbish element of the classical music world. He signed with pop manager John Stanley, spiked up his hair, and donned a football scarf. Out came the Vivaldi. And sure enough, the classical world judged the image ahead of the playing. Perhaps Kennedy told us more about our prejudices than he did about himself.

He stopped performing for five years in the 1990s; his return in 1997 hit the headlines alongside the general election. Like a foul-mouthed phoenix he has kept on rising in new incarnations ever since. And he has never seen the need to restrict himself to one genre. "There's nothing out there musically that I wouldn't like to try," he declares, "except country. I hate it."

"Playing classical music, you have to think constantly about the ebb and flow of the architecture of a piece," he suggests. "Jazz is more about spontaneity. They're completely different disciplines. But music-making's always about the excitement of communicating with the people you're working with on stage in whatever way that discipline needs." When he opens the Tower Festival in London next week, classical meets jazz head on: with the Philharmonia Orchestra he presents a programme of Bach and Duke Ellington, having transcribing the latter's big-band music for orchestra himself.

He's happy to perform concertos in London again, he says, "as long as certain conditions are in place, like rehearsals...". But for baroque or classical concertos, he prefers to play with no conductor. "A conductor just waves a stick around! They all have little-Hitler complexes. Why would you want to stand there waving a stick if you could be having the experience of physically producing the sound?" So he won't be trying his hand at that? "I'd earn a lot more," he snipes. "I can't see any other reason to do it." Back in 2002 he became artistic director of the excellent Polish Chamber Orchestra, but he leaves the conducting to others. And he's currently forming a new ensemble called The Orchestra of Life; it will work, of course, largely without a conductor. Most of its members will be young Polish players.

Kennedy's love affair with Poland began when he met his second wife, Agnieszka, in a Malvern pub where he was jamming; she was a language student and had been sent to Malvern because her parents considered it a safe, staid town, little dreaming that the most iconoclastic fiddler in Britain lived up the road. They married just over ten years ago and Agnieszka, though inevitably she spends much time being Mrs Nigel Kennedy, has recently completed a law degree. The pair now split their time between Poland and England – the latter in north London and Malvern, where Kennedy's 13-year-old son, Sark, from his first marriage, still lives.

They have a home in the centre of Krakow, and here Kennedy quickly became Poland's musical champion, enchanted with the city's relaxed atmosphere, the cellar bars and jazz clubs and the place's bohemian, open-minded artistic spirit. The musicians of the Nigel Kennedy Quintet and Kroke, his klezmer-fusion band, are all Polish; his album *Polish Spirit*, with the Polish Chamber Orchestra, featured gorgeous violin concertos by the Polish composers Mlynarski and Karłowicz, little-known works that more than deserved the extra exposure the recording brought them.

Next May he's heading a three-day festival of Polish culture at Southbank Centre: it will include numerous different genres of music, with appearances by two of the country's leading violinists alongside Kennedy himself, plus choirs, the Nigel Kennedy Quintet and the first UK appearance of the Orchestra of Life. In the foyers Polish violin-makers will have the chance to exhibit their craft, and in the food outlets we can expect the likes of borscht, pierogi and, to hazard a guess, maybe even some good Polish vodka. "The Poles are meant to be able to drink," Kennedy declares, "but I was out drinking vodka with some local farmers and I could drink them all under the table, I literally had them under the table in the hotel lobby, puking!" That might be a tad less welcome in the Royal Festival Hall, of course.

"Most of what I love about Poland is pre-EU," he goes on. "We're building a house in the mountains near the Slovakian border – it'll be a wonderful place to

go and write. But in the cities now there's McDonald's and Starbucks everywhere, the result of the policies of Margaret Thatcher and her cronies. Poland was always occupied by one outside power or another and now it should have been time for it to belong to the Poles."

"Writing" means writing music. "The difficult bit was having the guts to show my stuff to other musicians. It was only when people said, 'it's cool, you should do more,' that I started to go for it." He doesn't "do" computers so he writes with pen and ink.

He has already created plenty of pieces for his quintet, including a reflective number called "Father and Son", based on "Veni, veni, Emmanuel" and referring to his relationship with Sark. Maybe because of Kennedy's own childhood experiences, their time together is sacrosanct.

Now there's a jazz violin concerto in the pipeline, as well as a piece called The Price of Freedom, which he says is "mainly a documentary" involving interviews with the public about the cost of "some people's ideas of what 'freedom' is" in terms of the environment, civil liberties and human rights. "I take the speech patterns and use that as melodic material." Similar to Steve Reich's technique? "Sort of," Kennedy says, "only mine won't keep doing the same thing over and over again."

So Kennedy's rebellious side is turning political. He's outspoken about everything from globalisation to the evils of political correctness, and has a hair-raising tale to tell concerning his Polish brother-in-law. "He got beaten up in Peterborough by five Pakistani youths because he's an immigrant. He's a big bloke and put up a fight, but there's not much you can do about five people setting on you. He was really badly bruised all over his face." Kennedy claims that there was a reluctance on the part of the authorities to pursue the culprits, because, he suggests, of a fear of appearing racist.

Another issue that has caused him to speak out extremely strongly is the plight of the Palestinians. When he played the 2007 Jerusalem Festival, presented by a Palestinian promoter in the east of the city, a friend in Ramallah was not allowed to travel to attend his concert. Kennedy was incensed. "I've been there, I've seen the separation walls," he says. "It's shocking. Pregnant women have died giving birth at the checkpoints because they can't get across to the hospitals. And education is denied to people who should have a right to it – sometimes young people are allowed to study in other countries, but sometimes they're not allowed back in afterwards, and often they're not allowed out at all. It's shocking that things so close in spirit to what happened before are being allowed to carry on, and by people who should know better from their own experience." He told the Israeli newspaper Haaretz that in protest he wouldn't play in Israel again.

Kennedy clearly has no time for anybody who'd like to tell today's increasingly politicised solo musicians to shut up and play. He hadn't heard about Krystian Zimerman's speech to a Los Angeles audience earlier this year, in which the great Polish pianist announced his intention not to return to the US and exhorted America to "get your hands off my country", but when I fill him in on the incident he more than approves: he feels an artist shouldn't hesitate to use his public platform to such ends. "Good man, speaking out!" he declares.

But the best influence, the most unifying and civilising force of all, has to be music itself. "Music is the best way to overcome differences," Kennedy suggests. "It brings people together like nothing else. Because music takes place in the "now", it gets you away from all your problems. While you're making music or listening to it, it doesn't leave room for anything else."

On that note he invites the whole crew back to his hotel room to party until dawn. It's one seriously wild party and I'm amazed that the hotel doesn't turf us all out, or at least switch off the deafening music. And somewhere in that smoky chamber there's a 52-year-old fatherless child with mohican hair. It's part of his charm that in some ways Kennedy has never really grown up. Probably he never will.

Nigel Kennedy plays the Tower Festival on 10 September. 'Four Seasons 20th Anniversary Special Edition' is out on EMI Classics on 7 September

Strings to his bow: the best of Nigel Kennedy

Elgar: Violin Concerto

London Philharmonic Orchestra/ Vernon Handley

(EMI)

This was the disc that helped to establish the young violinist as a rising star, winning the Record of the Year Gramophone Award in 1985. The album is now considered to be a real classic.

Vivaldi: The Four Seasons

(EMI)

A special 20th-anniversary re-release, including an award-winning film, previously unseen images and various memorabilia, of Kennedy's smash-hit recording from 1989. "Like it or loathe it, the cobwebs didn't know what had hit them," said the record's producer.

East Meets East

Nigel Kennedy/ Kroke

(EMI)

Klezmer, folk and Kennedy meet and mingle on this album from 2003 that was made with the Polish trio Kroke. The album features songs from Poland, Macedonia and Serbia alongside original material by Kennedy himself.

A Very Nice Album

Nigel Kennedy Quintet

(EMI)

The Nigel Kennedy Quintet let their hair down in a questing album of experimental electric jazz, most of it on original material that was composed by Kennedy – who also sings on the recording.

Polish Spirit

Polish Chamber Orchestra/Jacek Kaspszyk

(EMI)

Kennedy breathes new life into two gorgeous, inexplicably neglected late-Romantic concertos by Polish composers Mlynarski and Karłowicz, accompanied by the Polish Chamber Orchestra, of which he's artistic director.