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INTERESTED IN HIS SIZZLE  
AND HIS WHUH THAN ALL  
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**PINCHAS  
ZUKERMAN**

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The violinist, violist and conductor turns 60 this year – although he's reluctant to celebrate his birthday in public. As he admits to JESSICA DUCHEN, he's more interested in making sure his playing goes *sszz, whuh* and *pa-pa-PUM*

**P**inchas Zukerman points over the top of the coffee pot, taps the side of my right forefinger and says: 'I've learnt to tell my students, "This is your bank account."' He explains that this is essentially where a violinist's tone is produced. And the better the sound, the better the player's chances of earning a living. Simple.

Or is it? To discuss with Zukerman the elements that make up life and music – and for him the two are clearly inseparable – is to open up layer upon layer of thought and insight. It is more a stream of consciousness than a conventional interview, and ranges from a refreshing pragmatism to an overwhelming sense of wonder at the miracle of great art and its making. That wonder, as well as the

intense, character-laden tone that makes Zukerman's playing instantly recognisable, hasn't diminished with the decades.

This month Zukerman turns 60. But he says he isn't taking much notice of this big round number: it's business as usual. 'I don't know why 60 is such a big deal,' he remarks. 'I certainly don't feel close to it.' There will be no birthday concert: 'I turned down a whole bunch of stuff. It's nice that people like to celebrate, but if I'm going to celebrate my birthday, it'll be on the beach!'

When we meet in London he's fresh off the plane from Ottawa, but seems not remotely jet lagged. He's been living in Ottawa for a decade as music director of the National Arts Centre (NAC) Orchestra – a base not only for conducting but also for chamber music and some



FRED GATTROLL

Zukerman in performance with the NAC Orchestra

PINCHAS

ZUKERMAN





ground-breaking education work. With seemingly tireless energy, he's launched, among other things, the NAC Young Artists Programme, Conductors Programme and Institute for Orchestral Studies. He declares himself well settled and happy in this flourishing Canadian city, and his wife, Amanda Forsyth, is the orchestra's principal cellist.

He's rehearsing in London before flying to Spain with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra to play Beethoven as both conductor and soloist, including the Violin Concerto and the Fifth Symphony. Previously he's held posts as music director of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra (1980–7) and artistic director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's Summer MusicFest (1996–9), to name but two. So how much of his work these days is conducting? He responds: 'I don't know – and anyway it doesn't matter, because tomorrow morning I have to go *pa-pa-pa-PUM*, and if it doesn't sound right, we have to work out why not, get it right, and play it properly.' Violin, viola or baton, in the end the aim is the same.

Zukerman's beginnings are well chronicled. He was born in Israel in 1948, to parents who had moved to Tel Aviv from Poland after surviving concentration camps. His father, Yehuda, was a klezmer violinist and all-round musician. 'He was a tremendous influence,' says Zukerman. 'I heard him playing right from the very start, and he taught me the clarinet and the recorder. He played the accordion as well as the violin and brought music towards me. It didn't matter what it was: Monti's *Csárdás* or Bach and Mozart. He was one of those well-rounded, good klezmers who had to earn a living. So that's my basic, real foundation.'

From the age of eight, Zukerman studied with the renowned Hungarian violinist Ilona Feher, who, like Zukerman's parents, had arrived in Israel after the war. Under her tutelage, his status as prodigy progressed at an impressive rate until Isaac Stern and Pablo Casals heard him play in 1961 and recommended that he should go to study in New York.

It wasn't easy at first. On arrival at the Juilliard School the young 'Pinky', as he was known, didn't speak much English, and although he was a student of one of the world's great violin pedagogues, >



Ivan Galamian, as well as coming under the continuing influence of Stern and his colleagues, the story goes that he rebelled against his teacher's insistence on rigorous discipline and learning the basics of violin technique, was none too pleased to find he was just one of many prodigies, and used to play truant frequently. He must have learnt his lesson, though, because discipline is now his watchword.

Zukerman explains: 'Students always ask me: "What's the secret of great playing?" And I say: "A lot of hours." They say: "No, really, there must be a secret." And I say: "Yes: a lot of hours." Then they ask: "What do you mean?" I say: "Play this 50 times. If you can play it 50 times, you can play it 5,000 times. It's that simple."

'I always open up my masterclasses to questions, and usually I get asked about how that sound is created. It's fascinating. There's so much intellectual blah blah about music, but, in the end, what you really want to know is how you create that sound. Sound is an element of connection. It's more important, maybe, than seeing and feeling. And when it sounds right, it hits you exactly where it should. I play a D major chord on the fiddle and then pluck the D minor chord – it's about intonation, the F sharp and the F natural. If you play the D major chord properly, the instrument has what I call a sizzle – a *szzz*. When you play the F in the D minor chord properly it has a *whuh* to it. It's amazing. And the colours are astronomical. It's that simple.'

A player's sound, Zukerman says, is something as inborn and unchangeable as their voice. 'It's about DNA. Each of the great masters – the great singers, pianists, dancers, choreographers, violinists and so on – has their own DNA, which comes out in their sound. The choreographer's sound is on stage – I see sound as well as hearing it.' Zukerman has synaesthesia. On planes he often takes refuge behind noise-cancelling headphones to protect himself from the plethora of associations that the constant ambient rumpus sets up.

I ask Zukerman: 'So how do you create that sound?' He says: 'I'll show you.' He grabs a teaspoon and carefully arranges the handle into a surrogate violin bow hold, balanced against the north-west corner of his right thumbnail. 'Now press down.'

I press the handle; it won't budge. 'You see?' says Zukerman. 'It's a physiological phenomenon. We have this incredible thing, the thumb: it's so important. There's an energy in there. If you do it properly, you can do anything you want with the thumb. But it has to be bent and it has to be in this spot.' He alters the position of the spoon very slightly. 'Push it now.' It drops instantly. 'It has no energy now. When a basketball player picks up the ball, they always pick it up this way, like a bow – it's the same thing. You have an energy here, a support system that will



An early performance with Jacqueline du Pré

There's so much intellectual blah blah about music, but, in the end, what you really want to know is how you create that sound

automatically give you pressure and counterpressure. When you have pressure you must have counterpressure – as in the case of an aeroplane: the wind comes at it and the plane can take off at a certain speed.'

Zukerman's breakthrough came when he won joint first prize (shared with Kyung-Wha Chung) in the Leventritt Memorial Competition in 1967. Not long afterwards he hit the headlines when he stood in for an indisposed Stern. And with Daniel Barenboim, Zubin Mehta, Itzhak Perlman and Jacqueline du Pré, he was soon part of a circle of friends that has come to symbolise the vibrancy, hope and joy of music making in those heady days. Christopher Nupen fortunately preserved some of it on film.

'It was an incredible time,' Zukerman remarks. 'Sometimes I sit back and think: how did it happen? From the outgrowth of the war came a whole new population that brought us all together. Through the arts there was a resurgence of real human values, and so I'm not surprised all those talents were born.'

In 1964 Zukerman met his life partner for the first time: a 1742 Guarneri 'del Gesù' violin that had once been named the 'Plowden' and had previously ▶



Zukerman's life partner: his 1742 Guarneri 'del Gesù' violin





Teaching in action: Zukerman giving a masterclass at the NAC



Conducting the NAC Orchestra

PHOTOS: FRED CATTROU

belonged to Samuel Dushkin. 'There are several Plowdens, and this one hasn't been in circulation very much,' Zukerman explains. 'I think I'm the fifth owner, and each of the previous owners had it for 50–60 years, which is probably one reason why it's still in good shape.' He first encountered the instrument at the Wurlitzer shop in New York, where it lived in a vault. 'Dushkin never really played it – he had another violin, a Stradivari. Somehow it came out of the vault and I started to try it. It took about 30 seconds before I thought, "Wow, this is amazing – old strings, old bridge, but something about the DNA." Then in 1979, three years after Dushkin died, Charlie Beare called and told me that the instrument was for sale and that Mrs Dushkin would really like me to have it. I opened the case: same old strings – and it was amazing. Absolutely amazing.

'It has incredible depth. It doesn't seem to have a bottom at all – it's always singing. It has a wonderful treble – the E string, which has a coating around it, doesn't shriek at you, the G string is fantastic, and the middle is just very smooth and easy to play. It's one of those things: you meet your match. It's been 29 years – that's a long time with a fiddle. What's interesting is that the back and sides of my viola are by Andrea Guarneri, grandfather of "del Gesù", and the front is by "filius Andrea", his father. So that's going back to the period 1640 to 1680, and my fiddle is 1742. That's 102 years of the same DNA.

'I'm still amazed by it. Every morning I get up, open the case and start tuning the violin, and I think: "How lucky am I to have this?" In Ottawa this morning the

sun was shining, we'd had snow and I was just playing around with scales and a couple of pieces and thinking, "Wow, this is incredible."

By this stage of the interview it seems ridiculous even to think of asking Zukerman whether he'll ever retire. However, he ends up revealing his attitude to the idea through a touching story about one of his mentors, Nathan Milstein, to whom he was close for many years. 'I was visiting him one night and he had his violin case open – he usually did, because he would spend his spare time in hotels transcribing Liszt pieces for himself to play. He said: "You know the Bach Chaconne? You know the second chord has a B flat?" He took the violin and plucked the first chord; I could see he was having a problem with the first finger of his left hand. And he said: "You know I've played the Chaconne in hot as well as cold Siberia, maybe 400,000 times? Well last night I played it, and I had to pick up my first finger and put it down again." He had a tendon that had to be operated on – he was about 74 years old. "This is the first time I've had to pick up my first finger." He sat down, despondent, and said: "Maybe this is a signal that Milstein should stop." Shocked by this,

I took hold of his face and exclaimed: "Please don't!"

'What a symbol Milstein was. His clarity of thought and honesty were remarkable. He continued playing for another seven or eight years, then had another operation. By the time he decided he couldn't play any more he was 82 years old. What a miracle. The *Mona Lisa* is a miracle, and so is Milstein, and a hundred years from now people will remember that. He died 16 years ago, yet today he's still here because of the standards and value system that are his legacy and that he embedded in me, among others.

'When I see that coming, when I lose the ability to pick up my fingers properly and don't have the energy to undo the zipper on my violin case, then that's it. It might happen tomorrow – and if it does, that's all right: adios! I've been doing it for over 50 years; I've been playing since I was seven.'

But Zukerman's fans – lining up for the non-birthday concerts he's continuing to give far and wide and enjoying his latest recordings (string quintets with his Zukerman Chamber Players on the Altara label) – will be hoping that there's no adios for a long, long time. There's no doubt about it: Zukerman is still in the pink. ■

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