

Take a last look at the violin hero

He's the world's greatest violinist but after 10 years at the top, the 29-year-old Maxim Vengerov is taking a year out to put himself first

By Jessica Duchon

Travelling out of Moscow during his first extended visit to Russia since his childhood, Maxim Vengerov fell asleep in a taxi. He woke up to find he'd been driven to the wrong airport and missed his flight to St Petersburg. Never mind, he thought; he'd take an overnight train instead. 'I went to the station and got the one and only seat available that night on the Nikolayev Express. I loved that train journey so much - I had the most wonderful time!'

When I tracked him down on his mobile phone, Vengerov was again in the back of a taxi in Moscow - this time, fortunately, awake. He is a fabulous raconteur; and that story itself is telling, for Maxim at his maximum has an exceptional gift for turning the most unlikely situations into positive experiences. He's a man with a golden touch: probably the world's greatest living violinist, but also one of music's greatest communicators. On the concert platform his mesmerising charisma and the extraordinary plasticity of his features help to project his musical message to every listener. Besides performing, he loves teaching - he has added to his frazzling schedule a teaching post in Saarbrücken, Germany, and he frequently gives masterclasses. Nor can it be a coincidence that in 1997 UNICEF asked him to become a 'musical envoy', a role which he feels 100 per cent passionate about.

The one thing Vengerov has never done before, however, is to make enough space for his own life. Now he's decided to give himself the luxury of a year-long sabbatical. 'I decided I owe it to myself to take some time to enjoy life unconditionally,' he declares. 'I've been a worker for so many years and I've always said that when I grew up I'd eventually get my childhood back.'

Vengerov has scarcely had a break from the violin for 25 of his 29 years. Like many great violinists before him, he was a child prodigy, internationally acclaimed by his mid teens. But being a prodigy can come at a prodigious price, and Vengerov's childhood in Soviet Russia was more than usually complicated. He was born in Novosibirsk, Siberia, where his parents were both professional musicians. 'My mother was a very successful piano teacher and choral conductor. She was director of a music school and later ran an orphanage. She has such a great heart - she was being a mother to 500 children! My father was an orchestral oboist. So although I didn't have so much experience running around with other kids, because I had to practise, I had a beautiful time with music, going to all the concerts and my parents' rehearsals, seeing all this beauty. But at the same time we were struggling with food shortages.' Rationing coupons were distributed to the Siberian population: 'My parents had to queue to buy food for three or four hours every day. But people in Siberia are so warm-

hearted that they still made life beautiful and fulfilling.'

Aged seven, Maxim moved to Moscow with his grandparents to attend the Central School of Music. 'My mother couldn't leave her job, so my grandparents just decided to move to Moscow for three years without knowing what was going to happen. People from other cities were not permitted to stay in Moscow for more than three months, except for medical reasons. The police could throw us out at any time, so we kind of lived on fire.' Moscow and the music school were exciting nevertheless: 'The education was extraordinary; the atmosphere was fantastic -very inspiring! 'Eventually his grandfather fell ill and they had to return to Siberia; it was not long, however, before Vengerov, aged only 10, entered the Junior Wieniawski Competition in Lublin, Poland, and won it. Two years later, he left Russia for good and moved to Germany where he continued Studies with the celebrated violin professor Zakhar Bron.

Having lived away from Russia for more than half his life, does Vengerov still feel Russian? 'When I came back to Moscow I felt completely Russian. I went to the gym and talked to people - we really connected and it all came back to me. It's a long time since I moved away; since then, Russia is about the only country where I never spent any time. Now Russia is becoming part of my heart again. I'm so proud of my country! It's changed enormously for the better; there are still negative points but I'm sure its fantastic traditions will come back. Moscow is a great city - it's big and chaotic, but the energy is very positive, like New York or London'.

He was staying in an apartment belonging to one of music's most revered figures, the conductor and cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, whom Vengerov describes as his 'musical father'. 'He has given me all his knowledge about the composers he knew personally Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Britten. When I recorded the Britten Violin Concerto with him, he introduced me to the magic of Britten's music; without him it would not have been the same. That was a very special disc for me.'

Vengerov's newest CD for EMI, released in September, features French works for violin and orchestra: Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole* and Saint-Saëns's *Violin Concerto No.3*, plus Ravel's dizzying *Tzigane*. 'I last played the Saint-Saëns concerto when I won the competition in Lublin at the age of 10,' Vengerov says. 'It's great to come back to it, nearly 20 years later. So often tell we appreciate the greatness of concertos like the Beethoven, Brahms and Mendelssohn, but forget the greatness of something like the *Symphonie espagnole*, which was written for Pablo de Sarasate, the finest violinist of his day.

Composers worshipped his playing and he inspired many of them to write for him. These concertos are tailor-made for the violin and the music is a celebration of the instrument. The orchestra takes a supporting role, while the violin is like a prima donna, attracting all the attention while the poor conductor has to follow!' On the recording, Antonio Pappano conducts the Philharmonia Orchestra: 'He's an extraordinary man, one of the greatest accompanists I've ever worked with. He was the perfect choice, especially because this is rather operatic music and he has all that operatic feeling with his work at Covent Garden. I felt like a singer while he followed all my musical ideas.'

Vengerov has tried his own hand at conducting and also the viola - he recorded the Walton Viola Concerto alongside the Britten Violin Concerto. He has decided, however, to reserve these skills for fun. 'Sometimes I play with my students if they need a violist, or conduct for them if they need a conductor. But you can't catch all the rabbits at the same time even if you want to, so I've decided to enjoy my one main rabbit! When I played the viola, it was like saying to my violin, "I'd like to be unfaithful to you just once in 25 years"! But the violin is my dearest friend and always will be.' His violin is one of Stradivari's most famous instruments, known as the 'Kreutzer': 'I particularly love its depth of tone - a vibrant bass is the most important element in the sound for me.'

His 'dearest friend' goes everywhere with him, not least on his UNICEF field trips. 'I make trips for UNICEF all over the world, then come back and tell people about it; I also give charity concerts for them, for instance to raise money towards schooling for girls in Tanzania, which had been banned. This is very important work. When my mother was director of the orphanage, I could see with my own eyes how music saved these kids from being on the streets - it brought for them so much joy. Being an envoy for UNICEF is a natural continuation of this for me. I love children and I love having time to play music for them and helping them in the small way I can - and I hope I'll have my own kids some day.'

His year off, Vengerov says, is 'a time of transition'. So what is he going to do? 'Normal things! I have many interests and I want to learn some languages: I'm studying French now and I'd like to learn Spanish and Italian. And I want to learn cooking, and to dance the tango. One of my dreams is to ride a motorcycle across America -but I'd have to go shopping for two good wheels and get a licence first.'

His fans will undoubtedly miss him, but there can be few sabbaticals as well deserved as this one; and when he comes back, there will be unlimited possibilities for the future. 'There is so much music to play, sighs Vengerov from his Moscow taxi. 'I haven't touched even a quarter of it yet.' This talented man clearly has much more to offer.

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