


Has cello, will travel

Absorbing culture from around the world is second nature to Alexander Ivashkin. Now he's working with Polynesian choruses – he tells **Julian Haylock** why



Alexander Ivashkin is no ordinary cellist. The briefest of glances at his extensive concerto repertoire (over 60 works at the last count) suggests a heightened taste for the unusual and exotic. In among the inevitable Dvořák, Saint-Saëns and Tchaikovsky warhorses one not only discovers the likes of Tishchenko, Kancheli, Mosolov and Bortkiewicz but also such evocative names as Vielgorski, Korndorf, Tarnopolski, Vustin and Raskatov.

Of the nearly 50 recordings Ivashkin has made so far, the Rachmaninoff Sonata, Schnittke's complete works for cello and piano and the complete cello works of Shostakovich and Prokofiev are about as 'central' as his discography gets. Otherwise it features a bracingly eclectic mix of Grechaninov, Gubaidulina, Tcherpnin, Roslavets, Smirnov, Ives, Rubinstein, Martinů and Medtner, alongside an outstanding collection of Australasian music entitled *Under the Southern Cross* (reviewed in *The Strad*, April 1999).

No less original and arresting is Ivashkin's playing style. While there is no mistaking the technical impregnability of his Russian training, he projects his ideas with an almost improvisatory freedom. A typical Ivashkin performance takes nothing for granted, so that even the most familiar works emerge with a revitalising freshness that fuses the boldest of gestures with a moving poetic intimacy.

But then nothing about Ivashkin is conventional. He entered the Gnessin School for gifted students at the age of five, and for a while it seemed as though he would make his way in the world as a pianist. A chance meeting with Rostropovich soon changed that, and within no time the cello had become the focal point of his studies. Yet Rostropovich's impact went much deeper. Inspired by the great man's all-embracing approach to music, Ivashkin began branching out into ►

conducting, musicology, music journalism and criticism. 'It's very important not just to play but also to experiment with all forms of expression and experience,' he insists. 'A conservatory training can only take you so far. We need something else. It is no longer sufficient to spend one's entire career playing the standard repertoire over and over again. It is important to travel and try to absorb as much as you can from different environments, cultures and experiences.'

Directing the contemporary music group Bolshoi Soloists for many years brought Ivashkin into contact with Cage, Crumb, Kagel, Nono, Stockhausen, Penderecki, Pärt, Denisov, Shchedrin and Schnittke. It was Schnittke who persuaded him to give more solo concerts, and composed Hymn no.3 (1979) and *Klingende Buchstaben* (1988) especially for him. Meanwhile, Ivashkin became intimate with the opera and ballet repertoire during ten years as principal cellist of the Bolshoi Orchestra.

All these experiences helped shape his musical philosophy both as a player and as a teacher. His enthusiasm is infectious, his insights probing: 'I think we have to remember that culture itself is a collective memory of mankind. So in a way whatever music you play, you are dealing with the same essence but in a different shape. Music is not just a text. The notating of music is merely a technical convenience. In a sense what makes a great performer is their close proximity to the essence of music – that which goes beyond the written text.'

One of Ivashkin's latest recording projects, for Ode Records, is designed specifically to bring him closer to the essence of a bygone age. 'I spent eight years living in New Zealand,' he explains, 'and found that its elemental, almost prehistoric, pre-Christian landscapes and weather patterns were reflected in the music. Meeting the Polynesian people on Cook Island was one of the most extraordinary

experiences of my life. Their singing takes you back to a bygone era of innocence and purity – it reminds me of my favourite Georgian male choruses. It does not belong to a culture or history or religion. It sounds like a primary source of music, and so I thought it would be extremely effective to combine the expressive, subjective, emotional voice of a cello (representing "culture", if you like) with this magical, but essentially objective music, which flows through you yet never really speaks about any particular feelings.

'Then there are the instruments: the *moa* (bone flute), *koauau* (gourd nose-flute), Matai flute, shells, wooden drums and slit-gongs. Flutes of different varieties are particularly fascinating – the tone is almost alien, magical. It will be fantastic to combine them with the cello. I intend to travel to Rarotonga to record with them, as well as using existing recordings of Cook Island and Maori choruses, which are very similar in sound and approach. The intention is to find a way of extemporising freely on the cello with their singing and playing. I discover more colours when playing music of this kind, more possibilities as to where the music can take me, so I'm also hoping to commission some new music from Australian and New Zealand composers Peter Sculthorpe, Gillian Whitehead and Chris Cree Brown, all of whom I've collaborated with in the past.'

In Ivashkin's opinion, New Zealand and Australia are the places to be in the 21st century. 'They may not have the cultural history of Europe, but they offer something special. Their music is minimalist in a sense, but also possesses a special organic naturalness quite different from European-American sophistication. My hope is that the cello can realise something elemental in this.'

It was the hypnotic individuality of Australasia – the sensation of being on a different world in another epoch – that inspired Ivashkin and his cellist wife,

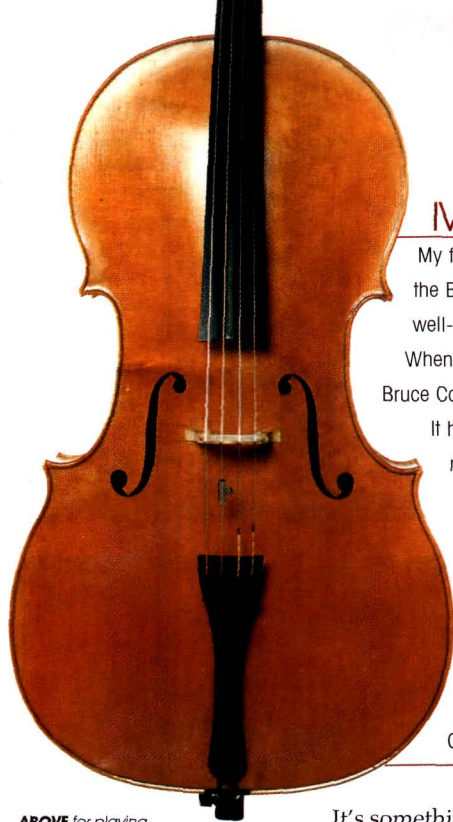


Natalia Pavlutskaya, to establish the Adam International Cello Festival & Competition in New Zealand in 1995. 'It's important not just to compete but to work together as well, so we combined the competition with masterclasses, conversations, workshops and concerts. In this respect it is unique. It's a long way to travel for most people, but exposure to the special world of New Zealand is all part of the experience. We are holding a concert at the Wigmore Hall in the autumn of 2005 which will feature all the competition's winners over the last ten years, many of whom are now leading cellists here in Europe. I'm also looking into the possibility of expanding the festival to incorporate special events in Britain and North America.

'I am always struck by how different the various players sound at the competition; during my training in Russia we all sounded very much alike. Masterclasses make sense because you enjoy exposure to a range of playing styles. ▶

TOP Ivashkin (centre) with the late Russian cellist Danil Shafran and his wife at their home in Moscow

ABOVE the opening of the 2003 Adam International Cello Festival & Competition, which Ivashkin established with his cellist wife, Natalia Pavlutskaya



ABOVE for playing modern music, especially Shostakovich, Ivashkin loves the bold, strong sound of his Stradivari copy, made by Bruce Carlson in 1993

IVASHKIN'S INSTRUMENTS

My first professional instrument was an unlabelled early-19th-century French cello that I bought when I joined the Bolshoi. I used it a lot when I played solos with the orchestra. It's a very fine instrument with a clear, well-projected sound. It also works extremely well in the contemporary repertory and for recital programmes.

When I started playing abroad, I bought a Stradivari copy cello made in 1993 by the great American maker Bruce Carlson, who is based in Cremona. He modelled my instrument on a late Stradivari pattern, the 'B' form.

It has a very bold, strong sound, so whenever I play anything modern I always use this cello. I like it so much that I subsequently bought several more instruments from Bruce for my pupils and those of my wife.

Some years ago Chris Marshall, a devoted supporter of the arts, offered to buy an instrument that I could have on permanent loan from New Zealand's Bridgewater Trust. I tried a number of different instruments at J. & A. Beare in London, and the one I fell in love with was a 1710 Giuseppe Guarneri 'Ilius Andrea'.

It is a beautiful, rather small cello, with a table in spruce, and back, scroll and sides in beech. It is unusual, and yet it produces a wonderful, intimate sound. The more you put into it, the more it rewards you.

My Yamaha electric cello is a commercially available instrument suggested to me by a very old friend, the remarkable cellist David Geringas, initially for silent practice. I've decided to use it for performing the Korndorf Cello Concerto in Moscow. The orchestra is huge in this piece, so the extra amplification comes in really handy.

It's something you can't get from a book or a teacher. It's especially encouraging that young cellists are trying to discover things more intuitively, although ideally a player requires a combination of both technical discipline and interpretative freedom.

'Young players are so much more flexible nowadays. I recently took a masterclass in Kiev and heard a young man play Bach, first in the Russian tradition – all big sound, soulful, with lots of vibrato – and then in a more sparing, authentic style. Both were equally convincing.

'I FIND MYSELF LEARNING ALL THE TIME. IT IS NO LONGER ENOUGH JUST TO BECOME A MASTER CRAFTSMAN ON YOUR CHOSEN INSTRUMENT'

It was remarkable. However, there is not the same kind of national identity as before, even if there are still discernable differences between French, German and Russian teaching. It is vital to keep these national identities; without them we are in danger of losing the tradition that gave birth to the classics in the first place.'

Maintaining that difficult balance between tradition and expanding horizons is a constant feature of Ivashkin's work at Goldsmiths College, University of London,

where he was appointed professor of music, head of performance studies and director of the centre for Russian music in 1999. 'I enjoy my teaching because I don't like anything to become a routine exercise and every student brings unique qualities and challenges. Their interests may vary from pop culture to gender studies. As a result I find myself learning all the time, and I encourage aspiring students to do the same. It is no longer enough just to become a master craftsman on your chosen instrument.'

Another vital part of Ivashkin's musical life is his contact with different composers, and his insatiable appetite for the unusual and neglected. Back in January he gave the world premiere in Winnipeg, Canada, of the Cello Concerto by Nikolai Korndorf (1947–2001). 'Much as I love playing Dvořák, Schumann (including the Shostakovich orchestration) and Tchaikovsky, I feel particularly drawn towards less familiar works such as the Korndorf. Nowadays the younger generation of players and listeners want something out of the ordinary, something with special relevance to us today. Korndorf spent the last ten years of his life in Canada, and his Cello Concerto dates from several years before that, yet it was never performed publicly and it's a fantastic piece. The first movement is a mixture

of tonal music, Indian raga and Turkish Maqam improvisation, with an Asian feel. The second is a minimalistic toccata and very hard for the orchestra. It took me a while to learn it!'

Other recent premieres include the Grechaninov Cello Concerto, composed back in 1895, recorded by Ivashkin for Chandos in 1997, but never before performed in public, and a new, partly theatrical piece *Terminus* for cello and orchestra by Russian–Azerbaijani composer Faradz Karayev. Ivashkin also hopes to work more closely with amplification, electronics and computers in the future.

For Ivashkin it is not enough to view life only through the f-holes of a cello. Whether he is playing, conducting, writing, composing, teaching, collaborating or administrating, he brings to his endeavours the same sense of adventure, of excited exploration. His love of travel extends to languages, semiotics, philosophy, cuisine, even fashion. 'In the modern world, to give an audience the fullest range of experience you have to draw down on the widest possible background. The world is bigger than some performers will admit to! I enjoy being a vital part of what is happening around me. It is not enough for me to be merely an observer – I want to be a part of everything.' ■