

## The devil's violin and the smile of an angel

“Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto gives us for the first time the hideous notion that there can be music that stinks to the ear.” Thus the great Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick wrote of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto when hearing it premiered in Vienna on 4 December 1881. In spite of this, the work very quickly went on to become one of the most popular pieces in the repertory, enjoying a degree of public acclaim equal to that accorded to the concertos of Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Brahms.

This turbulent premiere none the less marked the end of the composer's efforts to have the piece performed. He had originally dedicated it to the violinist Leopold Auer, but Auer deemed it unplayable, only later becoming one of the work's most ardent champions. For almost three years the composer laid the work aside before the young Adolf Brodsky agreed to premiere the concerto under the direction of Hans Richter. The efforts involved in getting the piece performed do not in fact reflect the state of mind in which it was written. Its composition was in fact a breath of fresh air for Tchaikovsky who in March 1878, fleeing a failed marriage, met up with his brother Modest at Clarens on the shores of Lake Geneva. Here they were joined by the violinist Iosif Kotek, a former pupil from the Moscow Conservatory, and Tchaikovsky and Kotek took pleasure in sight-reading countless pieces for violin and piano, including a reduction of Édouard Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole* that filled the composer with enthusiasm.

Lacking the inspiration needed to complete his Second Piano Sonata, he abandoned the piece – the first

time he had interrupted work on a composition – and threw himself into a violin concerto that it took him less than a month to complete. On the advice of Kotek and his brother, however, he immediately rewrote the second movement. Classical in its form, the Violin Concerto has earned a place for itself in the repertory not only by dint of its wealth of melodic invention and the lyrical tone of its first two movements but also by virtue of the rhythmic brio of its final Allegro vivacissimo, the mood of which is one of gypsy abandon. Above all, the work offers violinists a chance to display all their virtuosity, an opportunity that explains the concerto's popularity among performers and public alike.

The present programme allows us to hear Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in a performance given by Ivry Gitlis on 13 June 1965. The Orchestre National de l'ORTF is conducted by Francesco Mander.

Among the great violinists of the 20th century, Ivry Gitlis occupies a place apart. To a certain extent he may be said to have followed in the footsteps of the man who first believed in him, Bronislaw Huberman. Huberman was born in Poland in 1882 but, together with his family, he left the country when he was nine to perfect his technique in Berlin. The boy became a pupil of Joseph Joachim in spite of the latter's decision to stop working with child prodigies. This marked the start of a brilliant career that excited the enthusiasm of both Dvorák and Brahms. Even Eduard Hanslick, who had been so dismissive of Tchaikovsky's concerto, was forced to admit that it was impossible to criticize an interpretative genius of Huberman's stature. His larger-than-life playing, his free spirit and the brusqueness of his character soon turned him into a legendary figure on the margins of the traditional concert circuit. It was in

Palestine, some four years after he had been the first violinist to record the Tchaikovsky concerto in 1928, that Huberman – a convinced Zionist – was introduced to the young Ivry Gitlis. Gitlis had been born in 1922 and left an impression on Huberman as profound as that left by Huberman on Joachim thirty years earlier. Huberman accordingly decided to organize a collection and raise the funds necessary to send the youth to study in France. Gitlis was eleven when he enrolled at the Conservatoire de Paris. Then and later his teachers included Marcel Chailley, Jules Boucherit, George Enescu, Jacques Thibaud and Carl Flesch. If he has mixed feelings about Flesch, there is no doubt that Enescu left a permanent mark on him: “I was the boat and Enescu was the sea,” he told Bernard Gavoty in 1962, when some of the pieces included in the present release were first broadcast. He and Thibaud became lasting friends, and it was with Thibaud at Saint-Jean-de-Luz that Gitlis sought refuge from the German troops in 1940 before setting sail for Great Britain. It was really only when Gitlis took part in the Thibaud Competition in 1951 that his career began to take off. In fact, the jury awarded him only the fifth prize in spite of the fact that he succeeded in winning the hearts of both public and press alike. The ensuing scandal ensured his notoriety and allowed him to record Alban Berg’s Violin Concerto, a work that its composer famously dedicated “*to the memory of an angel*”. The record was immediately awarded a Grand Prix du Disque. By the age of thirty, Gitlis was already one of the finest violinists of his generation and regarded as Menuhin’s legitimate successor. He went on to record all the great concertos, including Tchaikovsky’s under Heinrich Hollreiser, and was launched on an international career.

In spite of this, Gitlis – like Huberman – did not follow the path that seemed to have been laid out for him. As passionate as he was impassioned, Gitlis fascinated, disturbed and annoyed his audiences, taking pleasure in going to places where they did not expect to see him: to the cinema and the films of Truffaut and Schlöndorff, to rock concerts with the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton and John Lennon, to jazz concerts with Stéphane Grappelli and Dizzy Gillespie and to the studios of French television, where he made frequent appearances. His aim was to convey his passion for music while expanding the unduly narrow world of classical music. To this end he played in Africa, for example, and created his own festival, Les Rencontres de Vence, which redefined the relationship between public and artist.

The present recording of the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto allows us to appreciate the profound nobility of Gitlis’s playing. He maintains an upright posture, his eyes closed, his face for the most part impassive, while expressing intense concentration. Only during some of the most inspired moments in the score, such as the second movement, are his features lit by a smile not unlike the one on the face of the angel in Reims Cathedral. Close-ups also reveal the technical assurance of his playing and the way in which he emerges victorious from all the pitfalls in which the score abounds.

The rest of the programme is made up of excerpts from a television broadcast that Bernard Gavoty devoted to Gitlis in 1962 in the series *Les Grands Interprètes*. The pianist is Tasso Janopoulo, who in the course of his career also accompanied Jacques Thibaud, Fritz Kreisler, Yehudi Menuhin, Henryk Szeryng, Nathan Milstein and Eugène Ysaÿe. According to Janopoulo, it was Ysaÿe whom Gitlis

most resembled. The first of the excerpts is the opening movement of Brahms's Third Violin Sonata, after which Gitlis offers a deeply moving reading of the third movement – *Melodia* – of Bartók's *Sonata for Solo Violin*, a work written for Menuhin and completed in March 1944. Together with the Third Piano Concerto, it constitutes the artistic testament of a composer struggling to come to terms with his final fatal illness. The *Sonata for Solo Violin* is one of Gitlis's favourite works, a piece that he has always gone out of his way to promote ever since he first heard it played in a revelatory performance by Menuhin. So moved was he by the experience that he learnt it in less than three weeks and in 1954 recorded it in what remains a benchmark performance. "I have lived for this piece and worked on it so much that it is now a part of me," Gitlis was fond of saying. In the conversation with Bernard Gavoty that follows his performance, Gitlis admitted that he saw in this movement the image of "a mountain lake in the far distance, very calm".

The programme is completed by Elgar's *La Capricieuse* and Wieniawski's First Polonaise, both of which allow us to appreciate Gitlis's talents in a different kind of repertory. Even so, the violinist draws no distinction between music said to be serious and works that are regarded as more lightweight. In every case we find the same degree of concentration, as is clear from the way in which Gitlis emerges unscathed from *La capricieuse* and from the perils associated with its fiendish staccato writing. For Gitlis, technique is both everything and a self-contained whole: it is impossible, he believes, to distinguish between the way one thinks about a work and the way in which it is played.

Wieniawski was a composer close to Gitlis's heart,

and he spent much of his career championing the Polish composer's works, recording his first two concertos. It makes sense, therefore, to hear him in Wieniawski's *Capriccio-valse* of 1852 in a performance broadcast on 12 April 1968 as part of the programme *Bienvenue chez Guy Béart*. His accompanist is again Tasso Janopoulo. It is worth recalling the circumstances in which these performances were recorded, as Gitlis had to take part in an informal interview before confronting some of the most demanding works in the repertory. Here, too, it is impossible not to be struck by the casual nature of his interpretation, with its subtle blend of extreme concentration and childlike mischief. Another programme in the same series was broadcast five years later in 1973 and shows Gitlis performing transcriptions of works by Albéniz and Moszkowski. In both these excerpts as well as in Saint-Saëns's *Introduction et Rondo capriccioso* from a 1971 broadcast, *La Rose des vents*, the pianist is the young Georges Pludermacher. Throughout his long career Gitlis has always sought to work with young and promising performers such as Pludermacher in an attempt to makthem better known. By way of a bonus, Gitlis plays the final movement of Paganini's Second Violin Concerto, a performance recorded in 1966 as part of the programme *Discorama*, a weekly slot that dealt with new releases. Gitlis is seen miming to the Philips recording made that same year with the National Philharmonic of Warsaw under the direction of Stanislaw Wislocki. As mischievous and as concentrated as ever, Gitlis is now the devil's violinist incarnate – not that this prevents him from smiling like an angel. It is perhaps in this union of opposites that Gitlis's true nature is to be found, that of an elusive musician who, full of paradoxes and contradictions and the object of both

adulation and criticism, has succeeded in achieving perhaps the most difficult goal of any artist: that of remaining free.

Laurent Muraro – January 2007

*Translation: Stewart Spencer*

We have the privilege today of witnessing both ourselves and many great artists from the past, performing and immersing themselves and us in a “live” performance, a unique moment of a whole world within a world.

Needless to say that, were it possible to hear what Beethoven himself could not hear, what an incredible revelation that would be!

When I see films of myself over the last three or four decades, I have a strange, somewhat schizophrenic feeling and am almost in awe at times – because when you play, you don’t think of “how it looks or sounds”, you just play, with your whole being. For those of us who are always full of doubts, it can be quite surprising and often comforting!

These are recordings of a period between one childhood and another – an age of innocence! What is being “adult” in music? Feelings do not have any age because what you feel at six, you feel at sixty. Surrounding elements may change, not the essence. Phrasing can, with time, gain more or less density and intensity or become stripped down to the bare essentials. So do timings and tempi, but not temperament and “temperature”!

Pity those who lose their sense of childhood and the ability to feel and allow those feelings to be expressed.

I hope you enjoy these films and will watch them with your own vision and imagination.

Ivry Gitlis

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