

## **How I was driven out of Russia at the time of democracy and glasnost**

It has been six months since I was “excommunicated” from the Russian State Symphony Orchestra. When the Minister of Culture, Mikhail Efimovich Shvydkoi, signed the order for my dismissal, he knew full well that this order would not only deprive me of my job with the orchestra but would quite simply prevent me from working as a conductor in Russia. Not long before, during a private conversation, Mikhail Efimovich had warned me, “Do not be surprised if all the orchestras in Moscow refuse to work with you. You see, orchestra musicians have rather unusual ideas about solidarity”.

I am absolutely convinced that before signing the order for my dismissal (I still do not know the content of this document!), Mr Shvydkoi was given a go-ahead at a very senior level. Given his extreme cautiousness attitude, I am sure that he would not have dared to take such a decision alone. He would unquestionably have sought assurances of total impunity before acting.

I gave 45 years of my life to the USSR State Symphony Orchestra. This orchestra was created on October 5th 1936 on the decision of the Soviet government. At the time, it was written in Pravda, in particular, that the USSR State Symphony Orchestra was to establish itself as the leading orchestra, by promoting the best classical and contemporary music and, above all, favouring the works of Soviet composers. Through the efforts of Gauk, Rakhlin and Ivanova, the three principal conductors who have all since died, the orchestra soon achieved number one status in the country. When I was appointed, I inherited a real “Stradivarius” of an orchestra – admittedly slightly damaged but a Stradivarius all the same! Through a colossal amount of daily work to assimilate the repertoire – a truly gigantic repertoire – and research into the ideal acoustic balance, I was able within a few years to transform this group into one of the best orchestras in the world. This view is shared by the critics of every country in which the orchestra played. The orchestra has remained at the top over all these long years and our colossal efforts have been rewarded with acclaim from Russian and foreign music lovers alike. I have no wish to speculate about the real reasons for my dismissal as I think these have far greater implications than many might imagine. However, the reaction to my dismissal has been unanimous. The most damning criticism came from the great mezzo, Irina Arkhipova: “But this is a crime against the State”. The press, which had until then been divided because it had been widely misinformed on the situation within the orchestra, was this time unanimous in its open criticism of Shvydkoi’s decision. I myself would like to add that Shvydkoi took full advantage of the situation to settle a personal score with me, as two

members of his family were also musicians in the orchestra, and it is fair to say that they were not my greatest fans.

As a final point, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to those who worked with me on the “Anthology of Russian Symphony Music”, on the recording of the complete symphonic collection of our great composer, Nikolai Miaskovski, and the symphonies of Gustav Mahler, which were recorded by Russian musicians for the first time, and for many, many other things. After all we completed nearly 2000 recordings! This deserves an entry in the famous Guinness Book of Records. And the concerts! There were a countless number of concerts every year across the world. For me, the last page of this beautiful book has now been turned. I can only hope that others will now bear the torch. The task is far from easy. All that remains for me is to pass on my best wishes for the new era of this famous orchestra.

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I am working a lot, as usual. Interestingly, the order for my dismissal (officially on the grounds of my alleged indolence) was signed at the very moment when I had “rolled up my sleeves” and was working in the Great Hall of the Conservatory, preparing the first Russian performance of *Christus*, the stunning Liszt oratorio.

I was happy with the previous season (which in my case is a rare occurrence). First of all, my wildest dream had come true: in December 1999, *The Maid of Pskov* by Rimsky-Korsakov had been performed at the Bolshoi, following in the theatre’s great tradition and in the footsteps of Gauk and Golovanov. The public had given a very warm welcome to the première and the production was highly praised by the critics. It cost me six months of extraordinarily hard work but that is normal, I have always worked like that. I do not know any other way. For the first time in my life, I had the opportunity to conduct Tchaikovsky’s immortal *Queen of Spades* at the Bolshoi. We even played Rachmaninov’s *The Bells* in Sweden – the first performance of the work over there. And of course, there was Liszt’s *Christus*.