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Confession of a weary soul

Interviewed by Christophe Capacci, Colmar 1996

You have been the chief conductor of the Russian State Symphony Orchestra (the former USSR State Symphony Orchestra) for over thirty years. What analogy would you use to describe these three decades?

Evgeny Svetlanov: May I be more specific? Four decades! You are quite right in mentioning the official date, which was 1965. However I was a guest conductor from 1954, so that is almost forty-two years. Let me tell you that this was and remains a task akin to hard labour. The image that comes to mind is that of chained galley slaves driving the ship forward through sheer physical strength: this is by no means an exaggeration.

And yet you continue to accomplish this task?

E.S.: Yes I do.

Alexander Gauk, the great Moscow conductor, taught you conducting. How did he influence your development?

E.S.: I am delighted to hear you speak about him. This exceptional musician has been overshadowed by other names that have emerged more recently and who are for the most part his best pupils. I am currently reading a fascinating book by Andronnikov, one of our great art and literary connoisseurs, who devotes several moving pages to Gauk, whose reputation in his lifetime extended well beyond musical circles in Moscow. Don't forget that in 1936 he established the orchestra that I now conduct. I devoted all my time to composing well before becoming a conductor and Gauk sometimes performed my music. When I enrolled in his class at the Conservatory in 1951 he was extremely surprised: "Why do you need to attend my classes? Conducting an orchestra is a hellish, dreadful profession. Be a composer. I will be the performer." However I had set myself a goal: to record the entire Russian symphonic repertoire.

Do you think that Gauk paved the way for a whole new generation of conductors?

E.S.: Yes without a doubt. Although there were some excellent conductors before the Revolution, such as Balakirev and Rubinstein, there was no genuine Russian conducting school: Gauk created it and if only for that reason and no other his name should feature prominently in the annals of our musical history. His stature is similar to that of Nikolai Miaskovsky, who was then the leading figure of our composition school. They were close friends and Gauk premiered many of his symphonic works.

As you mentioned earlier, Gauk premiered some of your own works. You also studied composition under Mikhail Gnessin and Yuri Shaporin and attended the piano class of Heinrich Neuhaus. So who is Evgeny Svetlanov a composer, a conductor or a pianist? Or is he quite simply a musician?

E.S.: I trained initially as a pianist and had the privilege to be taught by Neuhaus who was a genius. However at the early age of three I dreamed of becoming a conductor. When I wrote my Memoirs which were published in Russia, I viewed myself first and foremost as a composer, which is probably a highly subjective impression: of course this is just my own personal opinion. This may well be completely wrong, as I was known almost exclusively as a conductor! I probably devoted less time to composition than I would have wished... However I have remained master of my own destiny.

Yours was a romantic destiny, judging by your recent statements. Do you really accept this definition of « the last of the romantics »?

E.S.: I used this phrase one year ago at the end of an interview and suggested it as the title of an article on me. God forbid that I should be the last of the romantics. However as one grows older these feelings tend to be exacerbated.

What title would you give to our conversation today?

E.S.: (Long pause) ... « The confession of a weary soul ».

Would you like to make a comment on this?

(Evgeny Svetlanov does not answer.)

Let's go back to your destiny. Your parents were members of the Bolshoi Theatre company. You subsequently became one of its first conductors in 1955. I have a very clear recollection of an unforgettable performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's The Golden Cockerel in 1990!

E.S.: I am delighted to hear you say so. I was thinking about that production again this morning. In actual fact, my debut at the Bolshoi was planned as part of my qualification before leaving the Conservatory. This was in 1954 and the opera was *The Maid of Pskov*. When I was invited to conduct a new production of the opera in 1989, I wanted to go back to my youth and I chose another work by Rimsky-Korsakov. My life started at the Bolshoi and that is where I learned everything. As a child I sang in the choir, then I became an extra during the war and finally principal trainee.

How would you assess the crisis that the theatre is currently going through?

E.S.: The crisis is the same as before, except that is being « managed » by different people.

Perhaps you would prefer to discuss your work with the Russian State Symphony Orchestra... Could you for example define the sense of urgency that is conveyed by all of your recordings and concert performances of Tchaikovsky's work?

E.S.: Unquestionably, my duty first and foremost is to uphold a unique Russian tradition, which draws its inspiration from Glinka. Evgeny Mravinsky, one of his oldest friends, also endeavoured throughout his life to preserve a sense of power and urgency in Tchaikovsky's symphonies. All too often the main emphasis is misdirected. Tchaikovsky was the boldest Russian composer. His changing mood and even his tenderness bear no relation to so-called sentimentality.

Is this why you emphasise the final coda of Symphony No.4, as if poised on the brink of a void. This section often conveys a fleeting impression of the end of the world. Is this what you feel yourself?

E.S.: At an unconscious level, that is very likely. After all, according to the prophets the end of the world is imminent. I am a Christian and I read the Bible. However when I am on the rostrum, the end of a symphony, such as Tchaikovsky No.4 or Scriabin No.3, does not conjure up the image of the end of the world for me. It represents a possible end, each time, at every concert, and perhaps indeed my own end.

Surely recording these works in a studio is incompatible with the powerful emotion that you share during a concert? Your best recordings of the two works you just cited are live!

E.S.: I do not draw any distinction... I always try to communicate with the gods.

Should our discussion now adopt a philosophical tone?

E.S.: This is my state of mind at this particular moment! However I am quite prepared to change the subject and talk about composers who are dear to my heart... For example, Arensky, who is buried in Paris, or Miaskovsky, whose *Symphony No. 25* I performed recently with the Orchestre National de France. During the anthology of Russian music – the work of my lifetime – I recorded thirty-nine symphonic works by this composer, including his twenty-seven symphonies and twelve scores for a large orchestra. Miaskovsky was a musician of the turn of the century, relegated to obscurity by Prokofiev and Shostakovich. And yet his symphonies were performed during his lifetime in the West, especially in the United States: his death in 1950 marked the beginning of his purgatory. All conductors have been reluctant to support his work, which they probably feel is, of secondary importance: I think it frightens them. Unlike Prokofiev, instant appeal to the audience cannot be guaranteed!

Now that the Russian anthology has been completed, your next major recording project covers the complete works of Mahler, another cherished dream of yours I believe?

E.S.: I feel that the fate of some of the Russian composers, namely Miaskovsky and Medtner, is very similar to that of Mahler who suffered from a lack of recognition for his efforts as a composer. I have always been acutely aware of this sadness and disappointment. I do not carry any new message, nor do I have any specific contribution to this music, which gained recognition several decades ago. I only have one excuse: love, combined perhaps with the possessiveness, akin to creative selfishness or the irrepressible urge of the performer that sometimes accompanies love. Perhaps I embarked on this project more for myself than for others. Apart from some attempts by Kondrashin or Barshai, few Russians have risen to the challenge of Mahler's symphonies. I merely hope to have introduced an

element of freshness and naivety. All the indications are in the scores, so precision, study and analysis are all that is required. The spiritual dimension that I would like to produce is dependent on observance of the composer's annotations. However this dimension must be expressed in order to justify conducting these works. The inner struggle between man and artist in my view represents the dominant feature of Mahler's short, fragile life. The mind is in a state of constant alertness; the broad appeal to humanity in *Symphony No. 8* is the most powerful spiritual message since Beethoven. No other composer in recent history has attained such a cosmic dimension. Mahler takes this dimension to a sublime level in the *9th Symphony* through powerful contrasts: a tired, sick man seems to find new hope, then this hope is dashed by a feeling of helplessness. Still everything seems to be resolved through divine goodness.

Do you never dissociate the composer's fate from his suffering as a human being when you perform his work?

E.S.: This is quite likely. But you should not conclude that I have a pessimistic view on life, that Mahler represents nothing but despair for me. Joy is present and is equally powerful. I never tire of contemplating nature, even human nature!

If you were to summarise your recording legacy, how would you now describe it?

E.S.: I could list so many names that are dear to my heart! All the composers in the Russian anthology, from Arensky to Miaskovsky...Although many recordings are still scattered, I think the underlying pattern is clear. I uphold all of my recordings, including those made live.

The American company Russian Disc published some of your concerts as a pianist, conductor and composer. Mstislav Rostropovich was rather dissatisfied with his own records in this collection of which he disapproves. What is your own view on this matter?

E.S.: Well, Rostropovich tends to sue the producers of his live recordings and this is his personal prerogative. I am happy that several records of my own works were released. Others will follow. I will also continue to record the works of the Group of Five and Mahler's symphonies...There comes a time for many performers when one limits one's public appearances. Vladimir Horowitz did not make any public statement, but at the end of his life he wearied of giving concerts and appearing in public. Whatever happens to me, I would like to continue devoting a lot of time to recording.

One last question: what is the little red fan that hums on your stand during concerts?

E.S.: I have had it for many years. I spend so much energy during concerts and I recoup so little that I could speak of self-destruction. We need air to continue to live, don't we?

Our thanks to Marina Bower, who interpreted this interview.