

Evgeny Svetlanov
The force of conviction

Repertoire
Interviewed by Pascal Brissaud

As principal conductor of the Russian State Symphony Orchestra for nearly thirty years, Evgeny Svetlanov explored and promoted the Russian repertoire like no other. However, little has been said about his passion for Mahler and his boundless admiration for Debussy and Ravel.

Repertoire: Both your concert and recording repertoires are vast, but remain nonetheless highly specialised in Russian music. How do you explain this paradox?

Admittedly, my entire life was dedicated to music, but that doesn't mean my goal was to play everything. There are composers that I will never perform, for example Berlioz. At the same time, my objective was to create a CD anthology of Russian symphony music, including ballets and symphonic excerpts from operas. It is virtually completed and almost entirely produced. It will have taken me at least twenty-five years, from the era of stereo to digital. This anthology begins with Glinka and ends with Miaskovsky, whose entire works I have already recorded, and does not include Shostakovich or Prokofiev, whom I only record and play on the basis of fragments. Unfortunately I have only very rarely encountered such a precise approach among other conductors. Of course, there are some who feel duty-bound to defend the music of their country; Vaclav Neumann, for instance, recorded nearly the entire Czech repertoire, but this is exceptional. Musicians put an excessive emphasis on their own ego and therefore tend to adopt a superficial approach.

So, you feel no urge to promote contemporary music?

A number of extremely different styles could be included in that category: Bartok, Britten, Villa-Lobos. Bernstein and Martinu are admirable composers who have already become classics. I do not have any particular problem with these composers, but I have no spiritual affinity or inner bond with "avant-garde". That music is simply not for me. I don't play Schnittke, for example. In this respect, the work is perfectly, albeit tacitly, distributed between Gennady Rojdestvensky and me: I play the classics and he plays contemporary music.

What about your own work, since you are also a composer?

My music production is a continuation of the great Russian tradition. In this respect, it may appear conservative by today's standards, but I have faith in posterity: look at the current revival of Miaskovsky and Medtner. Everything leads me to believe that my music will follow a similar destiny. I love broad melodies, clear, rich and sonorous harmonies and their resulting polyphony – or differently, as with Mahler, who has always been my favourite composer. However, my rhythms are simple and governed by the melody. This is an area where I managed to strike a personal note, similar to Miaskovsky, but without the drastic extremes of a Shostakovich, which are immediately recognisable.

With the Russian Symphony Orchestra, don't you feel like the guardian of a special tradition, at a time when the sound of orchestras internationally is being standardised and adopting a static, superficial brilliance?

Indeed. You are correct in saying that most orchestras have a stereotyped sound. My ideal is for an orchestra to have its own personality, like an individual, focusing on a specific sound

rather than a standard sound. Oddly enough, individual personalities have to be silenced in order to obtain an overall sound personality. With the former USSR State Symphony Orchestra, I managed to maintain a special lyrical quality for thirty years: good orchestras are those that can sing. The greatest pit orchestras are particularly expressive due to the balance between the subtle harmonies that they must constantly emphasise as if they sing. This unfortunate standardisation comes from the low degree of personal commitment from the conductors who settle for minimal discipline in order to ensure the dynamics and clarity of execution, but without any concern for the wealth of colours, instrumental groups or the integration of individual nuances. That is why we have this impression of interchangeability. In Moscow, we owe the pursuit of this tradition to a single man, Nikolai Golovanov, who first achieved this deep and lyrical “cantabile” in the sound, phrasing and expression as conductor of the Bolshoi Orchestra and the Radio.

Don't you think it's impossible for Western orchestras to play Russian music with their soul and the very particular sound of Eastern European orchestras?

No. It depends entirely on the conductor. On the basis of my experience, I can say that any Western orchestra can sound and play in “Russian” style.

You have a special seating arrangement for instrumental groups within the orchestra (second violins and violas on the right, cellos and double-bass in the back to the left, etc.). Why?

That is the “old-fashioned” seating arrangement. The Leningrad Philharmonic has never changed it. The USSR State Symphony Orchestra kept it until I decided to opt for a “Western” seating arrangement. Six years ago, I went back to the old way: this set-up, which follows the principles of stereophonic sound, is much more effective for concerts and recordings.

Which figures had the most influence on your artistic personality?

Among conductors, Golovanov, although I didn't study with him, but with Gauk, the founder of the USSR State Symphony Orchestra in 1936. As for composers, without a doubt Miaskovsky. I didn't study with him, but with the remarkable composer Shaporin.

You seem to be fond of the French repertoire...

I have the highest regard for French music, which I have played throughout my career. Its sense of the pictorial depth of the orchestra has fascinated me since I was a student. I conducted all of Debussy, Ravel, Franck, and much of Saint-Saëns early in my career. I also gave the Soviet premiere of *Turangalîla* by Messiaen, the *Second Symphony* and *Concertino* by Honegger, as well as *Pacific*, which I performed very often. Recently, I performed the magnificent *Symphony* by Dukas and I'm preparing *La Péri* and the second suite from *Bacchus et Ariane* by Roussel. These works are in my blood... Regarding conductors, I could never forget Munch: I saw him conduct, he was a real genius, like Cluytens, in a different style. France also has excellent conductors, Casadesus, Baudo. I particularly admire Plasson's work in Toulouse.

Your recent recordings of the Tchaikovsky ballets revolutionised the approach to this music. Is it because you conducted them in the theatre?

Precisely, both in Saint-Petersburg and Moscow. It was one of the highlights of my career to work with exceptional dancers such as Plisetskaya, Maximova, Vassiliev and many others. I love conducting in the theatre and opera. I am currently preparing a production of *The Maid of Pskov* for the Mariinsky theatre for the 150th anniversary of the birth of Rimsky-Korsakov. It

is the piece with which I made my debut at the Bolshoi in 1955, so it is very dear to me: it was a milestone, a sort of link between my past and present career. I had the privilege to record a few operas as well, all by Rimsky-Korsakov: *The Snow Maiden*, *Mlada*, *Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh*, *The Golden Cockerel*.

What were your relations with the Soviet regime throughout all these years?

No one sought to intervene in the artistic path that I had set for myself. When I was at the Bolshoi, I had to play the game of official concerts, ordered by the government, as I was the artistic director. I always strove to maintain a high level of quality, although I wasn't always able to perform the repertoire I wished (when the bureaucrats got involved in the programming...). I was not allowed to perform *Zarathustra*, under the pretext that Nietzsche was a reactionary philosopher: I argued on the basis of the purely musical quality of the work, which bears no relation to the ideas of Nietzsche.... and I won in the end. I also decided to do a Jewish music concert in 1980 for the opening of the Moscow Festival on 24 December. The programme included the *Overture* by Prokofiev, *Jewish Melodies* by Shostakovich, Bloch and my *Second Rhapsody*, written in the spirit of Jewish music. I was put under pressure not to perform this concert. I refused to give in, and we managed to reach a compromise. I had to postpone the concert to the second day after the opening.... But now, it's worse, it's total anarchy. Almost all of the best artists have emigrated to the West. Only the provincial ensembles and theatres have kept excellent musicians, but due to their poor financial conditions, they too will be tempted to emigrate. Imagine, today in Moscow alone, there are over twenty orchestras, most of which are organised as private companies, which spend their time trying to find sponsors. Their working conditions are deplorable and their standard is very low, as they are submerged by these financial problems.

What are the guiding principles of your recording policy at the present time?

To date, I have made 2,000 recordings. I have always emphasised the importance of recordings. I could not imagine an exceptional concert being forgotten just as soon as it's over. Recordings allow the music to be kept for posterity and for a wider audience. I therefore prefer "live" music, with all of its blemishes. Moreover, I conduct in recording studios with the same commitment as in a concert. I abhor "canned", clinical music, which is not gratifying for anyone: it is soulless perfection. Full commitments concerts and recordings is an absolutely necessary ingredient for success.

What quality do you admire in others?

I admire integrity and willingness very much, but kindness is fundamental.

How do you spend your time when you are not making music?

I love fishing. It's both a sport and an intellectual distraction. But it's increasingly difficult for me. I work more now than I did 30 years ago. The constraints are greater, and at 66, my capacity to work and assimilate is diminishing.