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Reporting by François Lafon and Philippe Venturini

Evgeny Svetlanov
A monumental conductor

Since the death of Mravinsky, Evgeny Svetlanov has been the last symbolic figure in the line of Russian conductors. With the Russian State Symphony Orchestra, which he has turned into one of the most formidable “music-making machines” of our time, he will be conducting Tchaikovsky, Mahler and Scriabin in Rouen, Paris, Toulouse and Metz between January 18th and 25th.

LE MONDE DE LA MUSIQUE – Is there a Russian conducting school?

EVGENY SVETLANOV - Yes. It emerged at the beginning of the century before the Revolution. Originally it was larger, and it was led by an excellent teacher by the name of Alexander Gauk. Evgeny Mravinski and Melik-Pashayev were among his students.

Was Gauk himself upholding a tradition? People still talk of the rivalry between Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

- There are traits or specific features that enable a highly trained ear to distinguish the Moscow school from the Saint Petersburg school. However this is almost like divination.

Is there anyone you consider to be your successor?

- To my great regret, I had little time to teach, and I was not born to be an educator. The best teachers are often average musicians, and successful performers are not gifted at teaching. The problem is that we often expect famous musicians to teach, whether or not they have any ability to convey knowledge.

How did you learn to conduct?

- Officially, I studied at the Moscow Conservatory with Gauk. However, my personal technique is a gift of nature. Gauk taught me how to listen to music, expand my knowledge of the Russian repertory. He also introduced me to Western music, of which he was a leading proponent.

You are a composer and conductor. How did you start out in music? What did you want to be?

- It all happened at the same time. At the age of six I started to play the piano. At ten I was composing short pieces. At the time, I was conducting for myself, in front of the mirror, listening to the radio or a record on my parents' gramophone.

Are you a conductor who talks or do you make the musicians play without giving explanations?

- I try to speak as little as possible. Over the years I have learned to remain silent. Ideally a conductor should be mute but not deaf.

You conducted a lot of operas at the Bolshoi before abandoning this genre.

- I started out as Gauk's assistant at the Radio Symphony Orchestra. It was Gauk who recommended me to the Bolshoi where I stayed for 10 years, first as an assistant and then as principal conductor. It was during this time that I built up a full repertory. I like opera very

much. I have produced and conducted *Otello*, *Kitezh*, etc. I also very much enjoy conducting ballets, especially those by Tchaikovsky.

In the West, with the exception of “The Rite of Spring” and “Daphnis et Chloé”, conducting a ballet would be considered unworthy of a great conductor.

- Not in Russia.

You are said to be particularly fond of the great Russian classics, from Tchaikovsky to Rachmaninov. Do you have a secret passion?

- If it is a secret, I cannot share it with you. Seriously though, I finally have the possibility and the time to play Mahler, whom I have always loved. I set out to reach the end of my anthology of Russian music and this work took me 25 years. I only finished in 1992.

You knew Shostakovich...

- He was an exceptional man with whom I spent some unforgettable moments. He gave complete liberty to those performing his work. If I said to him that had doubts over such and such a passage, he would reply, “*ignore the score. I may have made a mistake in the composition. Play as you feel. Do not follow it note for note*”. There are not many composers who place so much trust in the performers. He was also very gentle in his criticism. “*Excuse me*”, he would say, “*it is a little bit too quick*”, or “*too loud*”, or “*slightly too much rubato*”, etc. “*But*” he would add, “*that is just my impression. I may be wrong*”.

Were you also a liberal composer?

- Yes, I am so happy to hear musicians play my music with all their heart and soul that, for a moment, I become a performer once again. I understand their problems and look for solutions from the musicians’ point of view, rather than the composer’s, who suffers from not hearing his work played as he dreamed.

You also knew Prokofiev well.

- He was the complete opposite of Shostakovich. He knew exactly what he wanted and wouldn’t let the musicians leave until he had it. Nevertheless he was very gentle and most respectful.

Are there any interesting composers in Russia these days?

- There always have been, but it is very difficult to work at the moment. Total anarchy does not lend itself to creativity. Great suffering may inspire artists but only after the event. At the moment, the main issue is survival.

Are orchestras threatened?

- Yes, a lot of them are. Mine and a few others only survive as a result of sponsors and tours. State-backed orchestras that are too insignificant to attract sponsors and tour promoters have disappeared.

The average age in your orchestra seems rather high. Has there been a lot of turnover?

- Only five musicians remain from my first concert in 1954. The current economic and political situation is difficult. Also, musicians look for the best jobs. Mikhail Pletnev has attracted a lot of people to his new Russian National Orchestra: tours, hard currency, recordings have all been promised. A number of musicians from the Bolshoi and Moscow Philharmonic have left. I have personally lost 12 musicians and our first flute left the

orchestra for a Moscow ensemble financed by the Japanese sect, Aoum. There are endless examples.

Do you ever change the seating of the orchestra according to the repertory?

- We have kept the same seating plan for a very long time: first violins and cellos on the left, violas and second violins on the right. This gives a natural stereophony.

How is the orchestra funded?

- By the Popular Bank of Moscow, a private company. However, the orchestra remains under the supervision of the state, even though its contribution is minimal, as it is to the arts in general. This has not prevented the government from financing the construction of an extremely expensive monument celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the victory over Nazism.

Mediocre orchestras are often exported under the “Russian” label. Are impresarios not largely responsible for this?

- Yes. Some orchestras, most of which emerged following the collapse of communism, are exploiting the situation. Like anywhere else, a bad orchestra is cheaper than a good one. These agents take advantage of the situation to pull the wool over the public’s eyes and make money. I am optimistic though, and quality will always prevail.

How are western artists received in Russia?

- A lot agree to work for very little pay as they can enjoy enormous success. The Iron Curtain prevented them from coming for years, and this gave them mythical status. In this way, not only is quality guaranteed but the public is able to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Do you look to the future with optimism?

- I have no choice. Maybe we will not live to see the improvement but perhaps our children will. As Edgar Allen Poe wrote: *“After the days of trouble comes the rebirth”*.

Is making an anthology of Russian music a political act?

- Yes, it is a way of ensuring continuity, of showing that any revolution must feed on the past and, above all, not deny it or kill it as has so often happened.

“Your” Tchaikovsky is considered a model.

- You can thank my teacher, Alexander Gauk. He was unique in his ability to communicate the essence of this music that he conducted so marvellously himself. Tchaikovsky was his favourite composer. He said that Tchaikovsky should never be played in a sentimental manner, that the greatest betrayal would be to treat him as a dilettante, sophisticated, effeminate musician when his music was valiant, tragic and heroic. “Tchaikovsky is an innovator, not a westernising aesthete,” he would say.

Is it not in the West that this music is played more sentimentally, to make it more Russian?

- Maybe. Though perhaps we ourselves would also have performed it in the same way if Gauk had not been there to teach us otherwise.

Why do you have a fan on your stand when you conduct?

- Because I expend so much energy and because I’m hot. I have always had it.

Apparently a film has been made about you.

- Not one but two. No, three in fact, as a new film was made two years ago for my 65th birthday. The first was made 20 years ago and is called *The Conductor*. It gives a good idea of the in-depth work between a conductor and his musicians, and dispels the notion that he is only there to wave his arms while the others play. The second was filmed in colour ten years ago. I was very flattered to be treated like a television star. As for the third, well, it was becoming a habit! But no, seriously, these documents are marvellous and I am very happy that they exist.

French audiences are surprised by your performances of French music, particularly Debussy and Ravel, which are unusually powerful and clear.

- Do they seem exotic to you? I have never tried to imitate Munch or Inghelbrecht, and I have my own ideas about this music. It is more as a composer than a conductor that I like it. Moszkowski said that *La Mer* was the most beautiful score ever composed; the extraordinarily skilful use of colours, instrumental combinations and nuances takes my breath away. My involvement with French music began when I was at the Conservatory, and I have conducted it throughout my career. I was the first Russian to conduct some of the most important pieces in French music, such as *Jeanne au bûcher* by Honegger and *Turangalîla-Symphonie* by Messiaen. In 1992, I performed Dukas' *Symphonie* for the first time in Moscow.

When a conductor is also a composer, does that set him apart from the crowd?

- Yes. Obviously he has a more subjective attitude to the music of others. The works touch him more deeply, he can feel helped or hindered by them. The history of music is full of examples of these conductor-composers with very particular tastes. Bernstein is one of the most recent examples.

What is the reason for your interest in Mahler's music?

- His music appeals to me in its language and human expression. It goes beyond national characteristics. This is true of any great composer.

Did Mahler compose music with the conductor in mind?

- No, not at all. All composers try to conduct but very few make a good job of it. As with Tchaikovsky's music, one must avoid all sentimentalism. Tchaikovsky heard Mahler conduct *Eugene Onegin* in Germany and appreciated his work very much. He mentions this in his correspondence. As a conductor, Mahler was renowned for his respect of the score.

Is there a link between the styles of Mahler and Tchaikovsky?

- I would say definitely not. Tchaikovsky influenced Shostakovich but not Mahler. Shostakovich admitted that he was a great admirer of Mahler and this is reflected in his compositions. However, while there are admittedly some similarities, their worlds were different. Even in his early works, Shostakovich used a distinct language. If you want to make connections, you would have to start with Beethoven, move on to Tchaikovsky and Mahler before finally reaching Shostakovich.

How did popular music influence Mahler's work?

- There is a very close relationship. In the *Funeral March* of the first symphony, which some musicologists describe as a parody, I see the influence of popular Austrian, Hungarian, Gypsy and maybe even Jewish songs. It is also worth mentioning that nobody ever used *Ländler* like he did.

How should one treat episodes tinged with humour?

- Over time, Mahler's humour became increasingly abrupt. Behind "Burleske" in his Ninth symphony lies some of the most scathing sarcasm.

You have said that the Eighth symphony seemed the most complex, but what do you make of the end of the Seventh?

- This movement poses structural problems. Once I took the liberty of cutting some parts out but that is not the right answer. It is up to the conductor to "manage" these lengthy passages and repetitions.

Do you adopt a fast tempo to do this?

- No, I use a very traditional one...

You finished the Third symphony in a very restrained tempo.

- It is more difficult to maintain the internal logic of a work at a slow tempo. One must keep the audience hypnotised by the music through all its developments. I think this is what Mahler wanted. Bernstein was very good at this.

Your admiration for Bernstein might be considered surprising given the difference in your styles!

- Bernstein was fortunate to be able to hear the first great Mahler-inspired conductors, who had known the composer personally. I was not so lucky. You could say that Mahler's spirit lived on in Bernstein. I am a Russian musician; I have to try to convey my love for this music in my own way.

Were you pampered by the Soviet regime?

No, and yet I enjoyed freedom in my work. I have always maintained my integrity and this has not prevented me from being awarded all the decorations that the Soviet Union could offer! That said, I have never had a high opinion of our leaders. Only Stalin – either himself or his advisers – understood that culture must be supported and kept at a high level. As strange as this may seem, this period was highly favourable for cultural development. Gorbachev also did a lot for culture.

Stalin's musical tastes must be debatable though. Shostakovich often came under great pressure.

- The people really in charge were the government's musical advisers. Stalin would often go to the Bolshoi and loved Russian opera. Unfortunately he was surrounded by people who gave very bad advice. It is a highly complicated issue.

You have conducted Khrennikov's music. Was this for artistic or political reasons?

- Both.

Do you conduct Sibelius or Bruckner?

- I conduct, and have only ever recorded, one symphony by Bruckner: his Eighth, which is my favourite. The Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra asked me to conduct the Seventh. As for Sibelius, I only conduct his First symphony. He is one of those composers, like Berlioz and Prokofiev, that I like to listen to but do not like conducting. My friend, Gennady Rozhdestvensky, conducts this repertory very well, so we don't get in each other's way.

You don't like speaking a lot...

No, I prefer to let my music do the talking.