

The Svetlanov we lost

Yuri Kovalienko, "Novye Izvestia", Paris, 8th June 2002

Evgeny Fyodorovich Svetlanov and I met in Paris the day after his triumphant concert at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées with the Orchestre National de France. Today, Svetlanov brings to mind King Lear. Solitary, lost, far from his homeland which, in his opinion, "brings him nothing but suffering".

Tell me about your "excommunication" from the Russian State Symphony Orchestra with which you worked for thirty-five years. Has this wound healed or is it still painful?

The wound cannot heal in such a short time, even with every effort in the world. It will take time and therapy. Quite frankly, I wasn't expecting this outcome.

Was your dismissal decided by the Minister of Culture himself? Or, in your opinion, was the Minister acting on the orders of someone else?

I don't know Shvydkoy well, although I have one of his books on Western European theatre with a very warm dedication. That does not mean that we were friends, but the fact remains that I have the book. I cannot say that Shvydkoy is a firm man who makes decisions independently of any source or authority. I may be wrong, but he seems to be the type of man who only acts on instructions from above. He certainly wouldn't have gone so far as to dismiss Russia's leading conductor on his own initiative.

My recollection is that you met the Minister of Culture prior to your dismissal.

During our discussion, when I complained about trying to work with other orchestras, only to be turned down, Shvydkoy retorted that I shouldn't be surprised if not a single orchestra was prepared to perform with me. I then asked why, had I become so bad and worthless? Should I be thrown out? He replied, "That was not the problem at all... How can I explain it?... There is a kind of solidarity among orchestra musicians." And by "assuming" that no one would ever work with me, Shvydkoy dismissed me, practically signing my exile from Russia and leaving me jobless in my own country.

Do you consider yourself in exile?

For the next season as a conductor, there will not be any work for me in Russia. Of course, I could compose music in my dacha. But who would be interested in my music right now? Yet another needless question. So, what do you want me to do? Force my way in? Pray? Beg? That's not my style. And accepting a refusal would be twice as difficult.

You were extraordinarily successful in the West. You are invited by the world's best orchestras: you will never be without work.

You are right. I even think that my dismissal will be difficult for the State Symphony Orchestra, which I believe will be totally "devalued" as an artistic institution. It will join the ranks of the thirty other orchestras in Moscow. Name one other capital with so many orchestras. It will be the musicians who will suffer, and they will not realise it until later. My pain is entirely different. In the West, I have work and can work as long as I am able. But, you know, I gave seventy-two years of my life to my country, I published the anthology of Russian music and made nearly two thousand recordings. They deprived me of everything, without reason. I was dismissed, not on artistic grounds, but under the labour code for absence from the workplace!

Would you be prepared to consider a reconciliation?

If you are referring to the State Symphony Orchestra, under no circumstances. The orchestra as it exists today is the discredit all of my work. It was recognised by international critics as one of the best in the world, and has now all but ceased to exist. There can be no reconciliation. I did not fall out with anyone. I am an extremely pacific person, but defenceless, fragile and deeply vulnerable when confronted with this kind of behaviour.

So, all ties have been cut, and you will never perform again in Russia?

I feel helpless here and that nobody cares. The musicians who still hold me in esteem are frightened. Today, the small clan in power has created a total reign of terror. Only one musician was bold enough to express an opinion, and he was sacked.

Is it really possible that none of our most committed musicians is prepared to express support for you in public?

I don't know. Apparently several personalities have written and signed a letter that they then sent to the President of Russia. There was no answer. Then, I sent a letter to Putin myself: it was published in three newspapers, but I never received a reply. No reaction, not even from the President's office.

All I can do now is work outside Russia. I must sincerely say that this is not what I aspired to or what I dreamt of, and if I am forced to live and make a living in the West in my twilight years, it will be extremely painful for me.

Let's suppose that one fine day an unknown sponsor introduces himself and says, "Evgeny Fyodorovich, I have the means to support you and create an orchestra for you, on the condition that you come back to Russia"...

If such a sponsor existed and a new orchestra were created, of course I wouldn't refuse. But first of all, unlike many other musicians, I did not leave Russia and do not consider myself gone. Let's not come to any hasty conclusions. Yes, I often come to the West, but no more than my fellow Russian conductors. Whereas in Russia, I always worked to the brink of exhaustion. With the Bolshoi, I produced "The Maid of Pskov", I directed "The Queen of Spades" for Irina Arkhipova at her request and at Easter, for the first time in Russia, I directed an oratorio by Liszt, "Christus". I worked at home all these past years for free. I was not paid one kopeck. I hate talking about that, but it has to be said.

Did your friends and colleagues support you during this difficult time?

The only one who supported me, wrote to me and called me, was Vladimir Spivakov. He gave me carte blanche with his orchestra, and I am therefore very grateful to him. I deliberately told him about my conversation with Shvydkoy, who had told me that not a single orchestra would play with me. Spivakov had to know about that; otherwise, just imagine, I might have arrived and...there would have been no orchestra! Or there would have been a strike or the artistic council would have told me, "No, we don't want to perform with him"!

Surely you could have performed at the Bolshoi?

The evening of the premiere of "The Maid of Pskov", Kokonin, the assistant director of the Bolshoi, went on the stage to announce that, following a decision from the management of the Bolshoi National Theatre, Svetlanov was the "honorary" conductor, the first such appointment in the history of the theatre. But when I asked to produce Puccini's "Madame Butterfly", Vladimir Victorovich Vassiliev (whom I respect very much), answered that it would not be possible. The calendar was already full. Maybe the next season. So, what do I gain in being the "honorary" conductor if I can't do anything?

And if no offer comes from Russia, will you remain an emigrant?

I will in no way be an emigrant, in the way it is understood in Russia. I will be buried in the Vagankovo cemetery, in my homeland. As far as artistic creation is concerned, it is now out of my hands. Many people could have improved things, and they could have done so very easily. It could have been Shvydkoy, the government, the president, his administration. Just a sign was all that was needed, and everything would have fallen into place. But no one is concerned, no one cares. It's awful. Does anything matter to them? Of course, I, Svetlanov, am just a man like any other. But do they not care about the threat to the country's leading orchestra?

The West immediately took advantage of the dismissal of Evgeny Svetlanov, considering this decision an unexpected gift from Moscow. That is what the maestro's French impresario told me after our interview. Many prestigious orchestras, which were previously unable to invite the famous conductor, because of his busy schedule, were able to include him in their programmes until 2003. Svetlanov will tour in North America and Germany (negotiations with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and another German orchestra are underway). He has received several offers from the British and will perform in Covent Garden, conduct the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Philharmonia Orchestra. Moreover, he will continue to give concerts with the orchestras of Radio France, which hope to put together cycles over the next five years. Lastly, Svetlanov will conduct an opera: a new production of "Madame Butterfly" in 2002 at the Opéra National de Montpellier is underway, to be followed perhaps by the Opéra National de Paris.