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BORIS KUSCHNIR

THE RUSSIAN TEACHER DISCUSSES THE
ART OF PEDAGOGY WITH ONE OF HIS
FORMER PUPILS, NIKOLAJ ZNAIDER



The Russian violinist has combined a playing career with a passionate commitment to teaching. As he celebrates his 60th birthday, one of his former students, **NIKOLAJ ZNAIDER**, asks him what defines great teachers and great players



Nikolaj Zinoviev: Just the mention of such names as Leopold Auer, Carl Flesch, Ivan Galamian or Yuri Yankelovich evokes a certain awe in violinists. Each of these teachers defined a school and contributed to the history of violin playing in their own way. You are part of this lineage. How do you see the role of a great violin pedagogue?

Boris Kuschnir: First of all, good teachers must have a great pedagogical talent. They should have an eclectic education and, of course, be good psychologists. They should be able to recognise and nurture talent, and to see where their students' problems lie and how to solve them quickly and in the right order.

NZ: What were your most important influences during your childhood and youth?

BK: My father was leader of the Radio Symphony Orchestra in Kiev, and played for years in a string quartet and a piano trio. He was my first teacher, and from him I learnt the importance of tone quality. He would always say: 'Even the shortest note must sing, and music must breathe.' My mother was also a violinist, and whenever I performed she would always tell me the unadorned truth about my playing afterwards. Thus I learnt how important professional and honest criticism is.

Until I was 17 I lived in Kiev, where I had very good teachers in Veniamin Seldis and later Leonid Benderski. Then I went to Moscow, with the intention of joining Yuri Yankelovich's class. He accepted me, but I had to wait a year, and the interruption would have meant doing military service. So I went to another teacher, Boris Belenky, who changed my life.

Belenky wasn't as famous as Yankelovich then, but David Oistrakh was a good friend of his and used to play for him and ask for his opinion. Belenky could tell within a tenth of an inch what



An early photograph shows (left to right) Kuschnir, violinist Igor Salka and composers Mikhail Ovskin and Dmitri Shostakovich.

To be a great violinist, you should also be a good person and think positively. Why go around envying somebody else who has a better career?

a student should do to solve a certain problem, whether it was holding the instrument or the bow, or something to do with vibrato or position changes. Of course he had a method, but he applied it individually to each student. I had to practise lots of scales and double-stops, including tenths and fingered octaves, plus a whole series of études, Baroque sonatas and easier pieces. Only after two years did Belenky allow me to give more time to my soloistic and chamber music activities. After each lesson I wrote a letter to my parents describing what Belenky had said and how he'd said it. These letters are a violin school in themselves, as I tried to analyse what he taught me - hundreds of things that I had never thought about before.

NZ: Those 'good old times' in Moscow must have been very special in terms of the mutual inspiration that came from such a concentration of talent.

BK: I was at the Tchaikovsky Conservatoire from 1966 to 1975. There I met great musicians like Oistrakh, Kogan,

Shostakovich, Richter, Gilels or Rostropovich on a daily basis. I even had the privilege of working on Shostakovich's String Quartet no. 13 with the composer himself, in his flat. I often sat in on other teachers' lessons, listening to fellow students - Gidon Kremer, Vladimir Spivakov, Viktor Tretyakov, Mischa Maisky, Natalia Gutman and many others. Every few months students were selected to take part in one international competition or another. This was considered very important in political terms, and Soviet musicians were expected to win. Every teacher wanted to have a prize-winning student. Many careers were launched in this way, but often a student would not be allowed to take part because the teacher wasn't strong enough to push him, or even for racial reasons, when a player was of Jewish extraction.

NZ: You were lucky to be in contact with such great artists, who must have influenced your musical development.

BK: There was a decisive moment, which happened almost by chance. ...

KUSCHNIR



Yekutieli and his former student Znaider share memories and playing tips

work. It is not just about violin playing or interpretation. For many young students I play almost a fatherly role, for others I am a friend, and for others a doctor or counsellor. They will tell me about their lives, their feelings, problems or happiness, and I would never betray their confidence. This friendly relationship often lives on after they leave. I also learn a lot from it, and it keeps me young!

Teachers must also know where their boundaries are. Just how much should you 'interfere' with an interpretation, especially if you are dealing with a gifted, brilliant student? Of course, it would be easy to use my authority to influence the student, who would then probably give in and say, 'OK, I'll do as you say.' That would be a big mistake on the teacher's part, because a talent is being repressed. A teacher must always leave talent the freedom to develop.

NZ: I've often been impressed by the way in which you avoid imposing your interpretation on a student. You would always ask critical questions instead, thus helping the student to work things out.

What would you say are the most important qualities a violinist needs?

BK: Why do we have so many good violinists but so few great ones? And what is the difference between both? I had the good fortune to hear such great players as Milstein, David Oistrakh, Kogan, Szeryng and Francescatti, and I can't forget those concerts. Of course, their phenomenal technique impressed me, but nowadays there are many technically gifted violinists. What fascinated me is something that has almost vanished today — their tonal quality. Those violinists really 'sang'! They could express their souls with their own individual voices. A concert is worthless for me if I don't hear that. A violinist must be able to fascinate their audience.

NZ: Which objectives would you recommend to young violinists?

BK: They must develop not just instrumental abilities, but also play chamber music and the piano, read scores, go to the theatre and the opera, educate themselves eclectically. They should not just be healthy, but learn to play naturally and healthily. It's no use if you ache after every concert — after a while you might not be able to go on playing. In those cases I believe that the teacher hasn't worked properly to prevent those problems. To be a great violinist, you should also be a good person and think positively. Why go around envying somebody else who has a better career? That wastes a lot of time and energy. If you are conscious of having a good teacher, a good education — and talent — then just keep going, and a happy time will come your way. That's what I've always told my students, and many of them — when the time was ripe for it — have won competitions, for example Julian Rachlin, Lidia Baich, Dalibor Kuryav, Alexandra Soumm (all first prize at the Eurovision competition) or you, Nikolaj, winner of the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels.

NZ: Patience is also a necessary virtue.

BK: Yes, it is a very important quality. And young people must learn to develop self-confidence. It is also very important, and not just for the young, to have someone you can trust to tell you the truth. Many celebrated artists have chosen me as a sort of confidante, for whom they play before important concerts or recording dates. I am not afraid of telling the truth. It happens often enough that young players win competitions and suddenly start playing 200 concerts a year, and don't notice that after a while things are no longer in order. If there is no one to tell them, it might be too late when it finally dawns on them. Once a famous violinist asked for my opinion after a concert. »

Only students can say how good a teacher is. I just want to help violinists on their way





A young Kuschner in Moscow with his teacher Boris Belyayev



Kuschner with his first star pupil, Julian Rachlin (right), and conductor Lorin Maazel

I gave a recital in the Small Hall of the Conservatoire — I played two caprices by Paganini and the first movement of a Mozart concerto. David Oistrakh, who didn't know me then, was in the audience. Afterwards he said to my teacher: 'Who is that boy? I like him very much. We must help him somehow — he must go to a competition.' I was then sent to the All-Union Competition in Leningrad, where I won the third prize — there were just three prizes for the whole Soviet Union. In the final I played the Beethoven Concerto with the Leningrad Symphony Orchestra under Yuri Temirkanov, and that was the start of my career as a soloist.

NZ: What were the first years of your professional life in Moscow like?

BK: I gave many concerts both as a soloist and with a string quartet in Moscow, of which I had been a founder in 1970. With the quartet I won many international competitions, and also learnt a great deal. Among our teachers were the members of the legendary Borodin Quartet. I learnt to read a score, and occupied myself with matters of sound and balance. All this was useful in my later work as a teacher. I learnt to appreciate small details, which are what make the interpretation of music even more interesting and fine. When I listen to young violinists or ensembles, I often miss this love of detail, a deficiency that can often be traced back to the teachers.

NZ: How did you come to leave the Soviet Union?

BK: My career in Russia had become minotomous. I gave concerts both as a soloist and with the quartet, and I even travelled abroad now and then. But there was no possibility of realising big projects,

As a teacher, I try to free talent from everything that stands in its way. That can be a lot of work

or of really seeing the world. Musical life in Russia had changed very much for the worse, too, with many great artists having emigrated or died. Art was no longer of interest for the general population. So I resolved to emigrate. Being a Jew, I could do it officially, and I filed an application in 1980. A year later I flew with my family to Vienna, which was the first stop for most Russian emigrants. Then came a happy turn of events: I played for Zubin Mehta — the Brahms concerto; I was appointed leader of the Bruckner Orchestra in Linz; and I started to teach at the Bruckner Conservatoire in Linz, and a year later at the Vienna Conservatoire.

NZ: Was that your express wish — to teach? Did your early analytical impulses now come to the fore? Or was it just a matter of chance?

BK: Everything in life is a matter of chance, but it had always been my wish to play and to teach. The first thing I did in Vienna was to start a piano trio, the Vienna Schubert Trio. Then something happened that had great significance for my pedagogical career. An eight-year-old boy by the name of Julian Rachlin came to play for me, and from the first note I heard in him something very special. His family begged me to take him on, and very slowly I began to crystallise his talent. When Julian was 13, he won the Eurovision Young Musician of the Year competition in Amsterdam and became world-famous almost overnight. Today, 20 years later,

he is one of the best violinists in the world. And I am very proud of that.

NZ: Does this mean that you didn't have the ambition to become a great teacher when you came to Austria?

BK: I never had that ambition. I believe that only students can say how good a teacher is. I just wanted to help young violinists on their way, and I am very happy to be able to do this as a professor at the Vienna Conservatoire and at the Music University in Graz.

NZ: What qualities do you look for in a student?

BK: I look for talent, a gift, something special. I recognise it within a few seconds.

NZ: But sometimes technical or other deficiencies obstruct the artistic development that the student could achieve through hard work if given the chance. Do you take this potential into account?

BK: That is something else. I can tell how gifted a violinist is, even if the intonation or the violin hold aren't right, or even if the interpretation isn't interesting. I maintain that teachers should also be talented, in a pedagogical way. I hope that I have this kind of talent, and with my experience I can identify the problems affecting young musicians, and more often than not I also have the remedy. In my work as a teacher, I try to free talent from everything that stands in its way. That can be a lot of >



A violinist must be able
to fascinate their audience

I made some critical observations and he asked me whether I really heard all those details. When I said yes, he replied: 'I'm off to practise!'

NZ: How do you see the present development of violin playing? How would you wish it to be?

BK: Nowadays, winning a competition seems to be the only way of starting a career. The result is that there are many good violinists around with the wherewithal to play a Paganini concerto, but only very few great musicians with intellect and an individual sound. Audiences get used to mediocrity. It is like Andersen's fairytale *The Emperor's New Clothes*. The emperor was naked, but no one dared say so, praising his beautiful new clothes instead. Somebody comes and plays, and is neither a great violinist nor a great musician — he has 'no clothes', no talent. Listeners come once, twice, maybe three times, and then no more. We are losing audiences for classical music, and the reason is often mediocrity.

NZ: How important is your own playing for your activity as a teacher?

BK: It is very important that my students see and hear me play. Of course, I try to show the things I teach when I play. I play in the Vienna Brahms Trio and the Kopelman Quartet, and my playing has a strong influence on my teaching. For the last 15 years I have been fortunate that the Austrian National Bank has lent me a wonderful Stradivari, from c.1698. With it I can not only make beautiful music, but I can also show my students infinite tonal shades.

NZ: Professor Kuschner, I admire the passion you bring to your work, and I wish you the very best in your struggle against mediocrity. On your 60th birthday I wish you many happy returns and thank you for everything you have done for me and my fellow pupils. We wish to carry out into the world what you have given us.

BK: And I wish to thank my students for having chosen me as a teacher. I have learnt much from them and still do so. Without them my life would have been much less interesting. ■

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