

# COMEBACK KID

This month Maxim Vengerov returns to the London stage after four years away. He explains his absence in conversation with luthier ROGER HARGRAVE

**RH** The first time I saw you, back in 1989, I thought, 'Who is this young guy everyone is going crazy about?' And then you started playing! I bought most of the CDs that you brought out then, including one with the Schubert Fantasia.

**MV** That was my first ever CD in the West, although I had already made one recording in Japan, and five in Russia before that, so I had some experience.

**RH** Everybody was talking about it in the business. You were quite a whizz-kid. You were being courted by lots of dealers, but you bought the 1727 'Kreutzer' Stradivari from Christie's. Was there a reason you went after that particular one?

**MV** It fitted me and I liked the colours, although I wasn't sure that it was the one I would play all the time. The experts told me it was a wonderful chance to buy my own instrument. I had a sponsor up to a limited amount and on the date of the auction, 1 April 1998, I was shaking. I had a concert date in Japan and I was on the phone. It started at £415,000 and went up to £950,000 - my limit was supposed to be £900,000.

**RH** I was surprised you bought a Strad. I thought you'd buy a Guarneri 'del Gesu' -although Stradivaris of that period are very like those of 'del Gesu'. It's quite possible that 'del Gesu' was working in Stradivari's workshop at that point anyway. From 1722 to 1732 he and his father produced about ten instruments between them and they were almost certainly working in Stradivari's workshop at that time, so it might have been the work of 'del Gesu' anyway. It has the full arching that you get later.

**MV** It's a sensitive instrument that reacts a lot to the weather conditions because it's cut quite thin. But that's why the sound is so special. You can't have your cake and eat it. On good days, the instrument is the best.

**RH** What do you look for in a violin when you're trying them out? Have you tried many new violins?

**MV** I've tried a lot of violins in my life -about 25 by 'del Gesu', whose instruments I have played for quite a while. My favourite was Rabin's, the 1735 'Kubelik', which was bought by KyungWha Chung. It has a sweet sound. At different times and different periods of life, musicians have different sound expectations. My sound changed from a very light, true violin sound, to a deep sound with the deepest low overtones. I think that has to do with the different activities I have taken up during my career. I studied Baroque violin and my violin sound modified. I found some other colours. Then I played viola and that dramatically changed my sound. Thanks to this I have a whole range of colours which can be applied to different music. If I need a very high-tuned sound I can do that, but I can also connect with the viola and cello. When you play with an orchestra, the fun of playing is to make connections

through your instrument. It creates a richer musical experience, but you need lots of time and understanding for that.

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**RH** You won the Carl Flesch competition at the age of 15 in 1990. It must have made a difference to your career. Do you think that competitions are generally a good thing? Do you think they help musicians develop?

**MV** Some people reject competitions and say that music is not a sport. I agree—we do not score goals in music. But in my experience a competition is a great incentive for musicians. When I was 14 or 15 I was studying with Zakhar Bron in Lübeck and during that time I had interests in life other than music. I would practise two nights before a concert to prepare and then I would go and perform, but my interests lay somewhere else. Bron didn't know what to do with me. I was unmanageable, so he said, 'Okay, you're going to the competition.' It was the only way to tame a wild horse. I had to learn quite a few pieces, including a modern one that took up most of my time. All of this served a great purpose: during three months of preparation for the competition I did the work of three years.

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**RH** I've been judging violin making competitions for 30 years and I see the standard rising consistently. There's one thing I notice that I wonder if you find in playing ones: there's a tendency to make a violin that is a competition instrument. There's less experimentation and individuality and people produce the same kind of instruments for the competition. Do you think that's creeping in with playing competitions? Do you think that the sort of variety that there used to be in playing is disappearing?

**MV** Regardless of competitions, now is the time of globalisation. Rostropovich used to tell me that in the 50s or 60s he would hear someone practise next door and say, 'He must be from the Czech Republic,' or 'He must be French,' or 'He's definitely American.'

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**RH** You used to be able to see that in violin making, and it's very much disappearing.

**MV** We used to have individual schools, and out of those, great talents rose. Now a Czech person goes to America and becomes American and inherits those values, almost forgetting their own roots. It's good and it's bad. It's good because this person is able to learn so much from everybody. I'm probably the luckiest person on the planet because I inherited the deepest Russian traditions, but I came out of the Soviet Union at the right time. In England I met wonderful musicians—Trevor Pinnock, Simon Rattle, Colin Davis, and then I went to the US and Germany. I preserved my roots and I never separated from them. In our time of globalisation we have to go back and see where it all comes from and then let ourselves grow. People can be naturally talented, but when you abandon your roots you grow into something that doesn't have anything to do with the past.

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**RH** You've managed to balance different roles as a musician. What benefit do you get from that?

**MV** There's a big market for violinists alone, and for conductors, but there are people who are more curious to become more well-rounded musicians, who are interested in music in all its aspects. It's a

great luxury if you can afford to study all your life, like me. I'm very lucky. I now enjoy three professions in equal measure playing, conducting and teaching. For me everything is good, though sometimes I must make sacrifices. I had to stop for a while to make space in my life to study.

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**RH** Let me ask you about the stresses of modern players. I think about artists such as Kreisler slowly going around America doing a concert tour, and then I remember Thomas Zehetmair a few years ago. He was quite young and was about to do an American tour. He came to see me and showed me his itinerary. I thought he would fly to New York, then go to Boston, and continue from town to town. But it was nothing of the sort - it was a zigzag across the country. I thought, 'You don't have to be a great musician - you have to be physically fit!' It's insane what people expect of musicians now. Do you find that a problem?

**MV** I'll tell you something surprising. Four years ago, when I interrupted my violin career, I thought, 'I love music,' but I decided to start new things, like conducting and teaching. Now when I come back to playing, I can say that I really love music. Looking back, I was totally exhausted and worn out. Not because I was tired, but because there was not enough passion left in me. It's no wonder: since the age of five I had been travelling. In order to cope with this life, and with today's demands, you have to have almost inhuman passion for what you do. As long as you have this you're OK-you can do anything.

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**RH** On the other hand, you can kill that feeling if you overdo things. Burnout is easy to get.

**MV** Four years ago, it was difficult for me even to get on a plane. I remember how it started, back in 2001 when security increased after 9/11. I felt I couldn't go to America - it made me nervous. Every time I had to go, there was some revolution within me. I hated it all. That happened in my music, too. Now, I go to the airport and I'm happy I'm going again.

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**RH** I talked to Ruggiero Ricci once and asked him, 'Tell me about your childhood.' He said, 'What childhood? My childhood was spent looking out of the window watching other children playing football while I was practising.' He didn't call it burnout but he said there came points when he didn't know how he was going to continue because he felt so finished, but he overcame it. Zehetmair also took a break. MV Paganini stopped for five years, and look at Horowitz - for many years he refused to perform in public. Glenn Gould and Murray Perahia, too. Everyone has to have a rest.

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**RH** You can decide to become a lawyer or a doctor when you're 16 or even 18, and even a violin maker. What's often forgotten is that you can't decide to become a musician when you're 18-you have to start when you're a child. It's the same with sports, but with sport at some point they can't do it anyway, so they stop. With musicians, they not only start early, but they also continue late, so the stress is with them the whole time, their entire lives. It gives us the great musicians we have, but it has a price. People think of playing as quite a physical activity, but it doesn't cover the whole body. Do you do much sport?

**MV** I used to, when I was younger - up to a couple of hours a day. It's good

to be fit, but it's more important to be mentally healthy, to be content with what you have, to have positive emotions and to know how to handle any negative ones.

Maxim Vengerov was speaking to Roger Hargrave at the Wieniawski Violin Competition in November 2011. He performs a programme of Handel, Bach and Beethoven at Wigmore Hall on 5 April