

Interview with Steven Isserlis, Dec. 5th 2023

Lionel Martin: You have met Daniil Shafran three times throughout your life. How would you describe his personality?

Steven Isserlis: Very charming, very reserved. Maybe more like what I hear from his teaching than his playing. A person you should really talk to, who is in Hannover, is Leonid Gorokhov. He knew him quite well. He invited Shafran to stay with him when he came to play in London for the second time.

I was thinking about him (Shafran) yesterday, he had quite a few gold teeth, that slightly surprised me. He was very well dressed (in ?), very neat. So not as wild as his playing by a long way. We didn't speak the same language, my Russian is very basic. But I could hear when he was talking Russian with friends that he was very funny, people laughed a lot. And Gorokhov says he was hilarious.

LM: The last time you got together with him was in 1996, not long before his death I believe (SI: ,nine months or something'). Was there any change in his personality?

SI: No. He seemed fine, he seemed very well.

LM: I couldn't find any information on his cause of death.

SI: I can tell you. He was with his granddaughter, Nastia, and he said ,Do you want to go to the violin shop with me, I've got to get some rosin (or something, or strings, I don't know)' and she said yes and she went to put on her coat; and she heard him cuaghing in the other room. She came in and he had a heart attack.

LM: So it was very sudden?

SI: Yes, it was very sudden. He was absolutely fine I think. His last concert, which I kind of arranged with my friend Richard Tognetti, was in Australia. I do have a video of it.

LM: Is there any way you could send it?

SI: I'd have to have it digitalised, I don't know where it is. Unfortunately the soundtrack is ruined by another stupid younger cellist laughing all the way through. Killing...

LM: The question that probably bothers me the most: Why didn't he earn his well deserved recognition in the West? What are your thoughts on that?

SI: It's only assumptions...A lot of people said that Rostropovich killed his career. And he certainly did not talk fondly of Rostropovich nor did his daughter. But I don't know any details. The Rostropovich diciples say it's not true, that Rostropovich tried to help Shafran. I don't know, it depends who you believe. But he (Rostropovich) used to refer very sarcastically to ,our dear colleague'.

LM: Do you think it bothered him?

SI: Oh yes. Hugely I think. I went to his place in Moscow after he died and it was a tiny flat out in the suburbs. The contrast to Rostropovich's lifestyle is huge. Yes, I'm sure it bothered him. Having said that, he is controversial, and still a lot of cellists hate his playing - but a lot of cellists *love* it.

LM: In general, do you think he was a happy person?

SI: I wouldn't have known him well enough. I think he was quite tortured probably. He certainly lived in difficult times. I wouldn't say straight forward happy. I would say he was quite fearful probably, not surprisingly. It's impossible to tell. His wife seemed lovely, Svetlana, his second wife. His daughter was lovely, his granddaughter was lovely - so he had that. He had family. But I am sure he would have preferred to be more famous, more celebrated.

LM: Thank you very much!