

Interview with Leonid Gorokhov, Jan. 16th 2024

Lionel Martin: I believe you grew up and studied in Leningrad. If I may ask, how was your musical childhood affected by the Soviet regime?

Leonid Gorokhov: Goodness, you start with the politics.

Well, I mean, when I was a child, I wasn't so much aware that there was a Soviet regime, because I was thankfully focused on learning music, and musical education was really fabulous. I have to say that our school, I can only say really great things about our school. We had an incredible quality of teaching for harmony, for all the musical subjects, for solfège, and of course for piano, for cello, we had really great teachers, great musicians above all. People who really cared and were probably quite severely underpaid, but nevertheless were extremely true to their profession. So I still carry an enormous debt of gratitude.

My childhood, my youth, of course, my great dream was always to see the world, and we weren't allowed to travel so easily. Of course, nobody could actually travel except for special reasons. My goal was always to win a competition or two and then to be able to travel abroad, so thankfully it was possible, and then soon I was able to start my new life in Great Britain. Due to some great guiding hand of fate and so on, some very kind people who helped me. But I had, you know, Shafran was a great presence and of course an enormous inspiration. And as a child, I was aware of Shafran.

LM: And then when did you start having lessons with him?

LG: Well, I haven't had regular lessons with Shafran. If anyone says that they studied with Shafran, I'm not sure how much true it is. Because he never taught on a regular basis. I was very fortunate to have had some encounters with him when I was already living in England. As you know, he had twice come to London. The first time, Steven was instrumental in inviting him.

And that's when I met him after some while not seeing him, but I was in touch with him. I was talking to him on the phone, you know, I was quite fortunate. We exchanged, I was allowed to call him in Moscow before that. So it was an enormous, enormous joy when I was allowed to meet him again when he came to England. And then I tried to combine it with a visit to the Menuhin School. So he came to Menuhin School, he taught all the pupils at the Menuhin School. And then the next time he came, I was instrumental in arranging that. We were together with some friends, with Andy Lim. And with my friend in London who was, who put him up and he was rehearsing at our house.

And so then he did again an amazing masterclass. And then I played, I went to Moscow to play the Elgar Concerto. And I asked him for a lesson for the Elgar Concerto.

In order to teach me the Elgar Concerto, he learned it himself.

LM: Oh, really? Wow.

LG: Yeah, yeah, he never played it because, oh, he said, I don't need to play it because, you know, you have your Jacqueline du Pré, and she plays it so wonderfully and so forth. And of course, I mean, I'm not sure how much he meant it. But I mean, he spoke of it with great respect. In order to be able to tell me what he wanted to tell me about this concerto, he learned it.

And the most amazing thing is that he had, he booked a hall for me to play for him, you know, because he was Shafran because he could do it.

And he told me a lot of things which have been very different to what I did before, including fingerings and bowings and things like that. And he did it in his full confidence because he knew that his solutions were so much better than mine. And he knew how much I trusted him. You know, he really knew that I would be able to change, you know, basically overnight because his stuff was so much better than mine.

And he never offered anything that he hadn't tried himself 20,000 times, you know. So I got back to the hotel after this, I don't know, three or four hour session, you know, where he took everything apart. Basically, everything was taken apart and everything was analyzed. Everything he gave me, the reason and the solution for everything he wanted to give me. And I had a really much, much, much fresher and deeper view onto the piece. And I got back to the hotel and he phoned me every 15 minutes afterwards in the hotel room because when he went back home, he started practicing and checking things that he told me. He wanted to make sure that he hadn't told me anything he would regret or he would find not good enough afterwards. So he'd find a better solution. He said ,no, I tried this again. That is exactly what you should do.' And then he'd call me and said ,Have you had food? How was the food? Have you had enough? Are you sleeping well?'

So there we are. Do you know what? I'm sorry, am I talking too much?

LM: It's great! We are here so you can talk - It's just perfect.

LG: Well, I'll tell you what I found very special about Shafran is that he was a great colleague. You know, obviously he was an amazing, amazing cellist and he knew it. You know, he knew that he's, as a musician, as an entertainer, if I may say this word, entertainer is someone who doesn't just make people laugh. You know, for me, it's an artist, an entertainer, someone who cleanses people's souls, basically. And he knew that he was definitely one of the, he was the world, the world's oldest, probably greatest...But nevertheless, he was an incredibly good colleague. He was extremely supportive. He could not stand negligence. You know, he could be quite upset in a masterclass if somebody was clearly just careless, disrespectful to his piece or to the composer, to the instrument. So he could get upset, you know, but he was enormously helpful and very respectful and very supportive. And he'd never, you know, make you look sort of stupid or he'd never try to make himself look clever or good on your expense, you know, by demeaning someone. He would never, ever do that.

LM: Did he encourage his students to try his fingerings, although being very unique?

LG: You know, a lot of people misunderstand his fingerings. I've thought about this a lot. I mean, I spent the last 40 years playing Grützmacher's studies. And so what I find about Shafran's fingering, I find that if you are familiar with studies, which I'm sure you are, you play Popper's studies first, probably Dupont, Popper, then you probably try Grützmacher and Dotzauer and things like that. Popper's studies are sort of bread and butter, right? And Grützmacher, I don't know if you've played from the second book of Grützmacher. It's Popper times 10. It's also got patterns. Every cellist, every really good cellist presents patterns to their students. So, also the patterns that they use themselves. Popper uses very simple patterns, right? Grützmacher uses much more complex patterns, but they're still recognizable as patterns. Shafran is Grützmacher times 60. There are extremely clear patterns, which are anatomically and logically very, very, very grounded. They're extremely logical for me. You know, he makes use of fourth finger because fourth finger used after second finger is much stronger, because they are connected by a tendon. So, third finger in a lot of situations is weaker than the fourth finger. He uses the thumb in every preposition, because basically his idea of phrasing and thinking is to make sure that it sounds like the voice, that there are no ugly shifts or interruptions in the wrong moment.

When his idea of using the thumbs started, he didn't know that it was allowed. But the whole thing that triggered his idea of, you know, expanding the patterns of fingering was his teacher's comment. His teacher was called Shtrimer. And I was fortunate to study in the same room as Shafran did. And that room bore his name, bore the name of Shtrimer. It was in the old building of the Conservatoire. And it was number 24 in the second floor. And it was a huge, huge room. Really, very impressive. And actually very, nice wooden, you know, very classy.

Yeah, so his teacher was called Shtrimer.

Shafran was playing some piece which was, I don't know if it was Saint-Saëns concerto or something. And then there was something to do with the fingerings in lower positions. And Shtrimer said, oh, you just use the thumb on this note, right? And then Shafran said, oh, is it allowed? And Shtrimer said, of course it's allowed. And Shafran then kind of tweaked, you know, and then he started to think that basically everything is allowed as long as it sounds good. And that opened his mind to a lot of things.

Do you know that Shafran's father was a cellist?

He also taught in the beginning. Have you heard any recordings?

LM: Of his father? Actually, no. Are there some on YouTube?

LG: There is something that once Alexander Rudin sent me. I have to... I don't know. If I find it, I'll send it to you.

LM: Oh, that would be great, thank you.

LG: It's a very, very nice, very nice playing. But his father, of course, was very, very, you know, traditional. So, if you compare this, if you listen to it and you compare it, of course, it's great. It's very nice playing, but it's very, very traditional.

And Shafran needed these triggers. Shafran had this incredible mind and he had this incredible attitude to quality, but he needed these triggers, which were provided by several events, I think, to make him what he was.

LM: Was he strict about how to interpret certain composers?

LG: You know, he never ever proposed having an authority. I think he had very strong views about quality. He never mentioned the word rhetoric, but he was using the rules of rhetoric as I am. Now I discover the rules of rhetoric more, you know, sort of try to at least. And I just see that Shafran is incredibly, incredibly correct in many things and many styles. Even if he plays Bach, a lot of people would, you know, grimace and not accept him playing Bach.

But if you actually analyze what he does, you know, he is very, very logical. I mean, his view and his interpretation actually doesn't contradict at all any rules of baroque playing rhetoric. It just uses different sound, it uses different methods of sound production, but actually the whole structure, the whole rhythmical structure, harmonic structure, it's all very, very logical.

So he wouldn't be bossy about any particular piece of music. He would just try to make sure that you always are aware of interpretation, that you actually interpret it, that you always have something to say, that you don't neglect expression and emotion in any note or at any point.

LM: This next question, I already asked Steven Isserlis and it still troubles me. Why didn't Shafran earn the recognition in the West that he would have certainly deserved?

LG: Shafran was extremely unaccepting of any compromise. Shafran was difficult. Shafran was not commercial, you know. And Shafran would, if something was not to his liking, you know, he would cancel something. He would cancel a tour, you know, but so did, of course, Michelangeli. Shafran was just completely lacking any compromise in terms of quality. So that was one thing that made him, I think at times, probably difficult.

Another thing is that Shafran was, I think there were people who probably didn't help him to have a career in the West. And I wouldn't say their names, but it's one of those people who have, you know, the ones with the huge bent spikes and reputation as if they were playing great when they were young, which is actually also not true.

LM: By the way, do you know about the relationship between him and Rostropovich? I mean, I'm naming him now..

LG: I know that Shafran, he had an incredible sense of humor. And I entirely admire his skill of not being embittered, you know, because a person who has palaces around the world and jewels and fame and kings and whatnot, you know, an adoration of a lot of, like, you know, stadiums full of really, really negligent and not very intelligent people, as I can see it, you know. Of course, that's quite bitter, you know, and who actually cannot play reasonably well in the cello... But this is, sorry, that's my opinion. You can happily tell it's not. And of course, but Shafran was not bitter about it. He was just taking the piss, but so deliciously, you know. He would just say one or two words, but in his intonation, I mean, I would never like to hear that about myself. Never. He would not say anything bad. He once imitated, I was once driving my car and he was sitting next to me. And he was once telling me the story because, you know, I kept, I bombarded him with questions all the time. I was very annoying because I wanted to know everything. And I was asking him about what happened to Shostakovich's sonata. You know, and that was a question that Piatigorsky asked Shafran (Shostakovich?) when he came. What have you done with your wonderful Shostakovich Sonata? You know, and Shafran had imitated his idea of the cause of events with the encounter of Rostropovich and Shostakovich, you know. And he did it so well. He did the gestures, you know. And I almost crashed my car. It was just so fantastic. And I didn't expect it from him. But it was so funny and it was just so, I don't know, wonderful.

And I called him once and he said, oh, you know, we have a great cultural event in Moscow. And I said, what's happening? Oh, we have, you know, an opera by Tchaikovsky being put on, Eugene Onegin. And then he paused a little bit and then he said, conducting is *maestro*. And I just wouldn't want to be called maestro like that by anyone.

LM: It seems like he was, because not being so famous, he could stay more true to himself, maybe.

LG: He would never become a commercial entity. I mean, there were a few artists probably who managed to have a career, but not so many. I don't think so.

LM: Did you ever visit his home?

LG: No, unfortunately not. But I know he was, I mean, he was not in the suburbs. He was in a good place, but he was still quite a small flat.

LM: And he never had a teaching position, right?

LG: Yeah, I think he wasn't, I don't think it would have been his place, this place. No, because it was still entirely, I think, sort of permeated with the ghost of certain people. And I don't think he would, I don't think it would suited him. No, I don't think so.

LM: You don't think his lack of career in the West was due to government stuff and his relationship to the government? Because I couldn't find anything.

LG: The Soviet Union government? no, I doubt it.

LM: Do you know about the relationship? Because it was rather important back then, right? What kind of functions you had.

LG: Well, Shafran had a standing in Soviet Union. He was people's artist of Soviet Union. I mean, it's not, it's not nothing. I mean, Shafran was a loyal person, not because he was a communist or anything. I mean, he was just like that. He was disciplined, you know. That was his own. I don't think he strongly believed in the Soviet system or anything. But he was intent, he was far too intent.

But he was a very loyal person, you know. I don't think he would have, he would have been happy leaving anywhere. I mean, he couldn't, I don't think he could imagine. He was offered that. But I don't think, I don't imagine he would have done that. Because he was like this.

LM: Thank you very much. Do you think you may have any documents that could help me in my research? Any letters or articles, also from Russia? Because it's kind of hard for me to find.

LG: Let me give you a name (Maria Yurganova). You can refer to me if you like. This person you can find on Facebook. That's his daughter. And if you write it to her, say that you've heard from me and that you are a great fan, that you're an admirer, and maybe you can ask her.

LM: Is she the one that created this website about him?

LG: No. That's Vera Gusieva. I don't think she's actually the daughter. She's the Stepdaughter. I would proceed with caution.

But I mean, if you might have luck there, I don't know.

LG: Another thing you should look at: Andy Lim is a cellist, but he doesn't play so much now. He does mostly kind of bow exhibitions, and he deals in bows. He knew Shafran very, very, very closely. But Andy is a tricky one - write him in the most respectful way. And just say that I've heard of your enormous support of Maestro Shafran and anything you could tell me might help

LM: Thank you so much, that was really great

LG: That's okay, practice on Grützmacher. He's the boss. And if you want to understand how things work, I think that was probably the closest. There are two sonatas published with his fingering. Well, he stopped providing his fingerings, because a lot of people in their wisdom didn't understand what it's about, and ridiculed him for his ideas. There is Shostakovich Viola Sonata and Arapov Sonata. They're both great sonatas.

It's published by Sikorsky. And Shostakovich Viola Sonata, that is one of the most amazing documents. You can have it, it's Sikorsky.

LM: He always talked about this Viola Sonata and kind of promoted it in his interviews.

LG: He didn't promote it, he just went to Shostakovich, because Shostakovich was, I think, rather Disappointed with the premiere. He was presented the recording, he was in the hospital, he was in his deathbed, basically. And Shafran knew that Shostakovich was disappointed. So he went to see him and he said: Am I allowed to play this piece on the cello? And he said ,You, **Danichka**, are allowed anything.' So that was Shostakovich's blessing for him to do it

LM: Great, I'll have a look at it, thank you!

LG: Do you know about his trousers? You know, his father Made him sleep on the concert trousers. The trousers were laid under the mattress

Do you want another story, little story?

LM: Absolutely, as many as you have

LG: He had a little phone call from Prokofiev. And he said He said ,Am I speaking to Daniil Shafran?' Shafran was like a teenager, he was very young. I don't know how old he was. I don't know which year the concerto was written.

LG: Prokofiev, do you know the cello concerto? Not the symphony, the e Minor concerto. The trouble is There are not so many good recordings. In some ways it's a much more logical piece, much more logical form. But it's a very, very awkward cello part. So he had this phone call from Prokofiev and Prokofiev said ,I wrote this cello concerto, do you want to play the premiere?' And Shafran said ,I'm very thrilled but I have to ask my teacher for allowance', so he called Shtrimer and he said ,no no you have to practice your stuff, it's not yet for you to play modern music', thats how it was unfortunately put on ice. So we would have had an interpretation of Shafran if Shtrimer hadn't interfered. Maybe it would have become a total different piece. His sinfonia concertante for me is one of the best recordings of any string instrument. I cannot imagine it more incredible.

LM: Thank you very much, it was a big pleasure to talk to you and it will really help my research.

LG: You are welcome!