

Interview with Ramón Jaffé, April 9th 2024

Lionel Martin: Thank you very much Ramón Jaffé for agreeing to answer me some questions about Daniil Shafran. You were taught by Shafran. In what period and how often did you have lessons with him?

Ramón Jaffé: Well, I met Shafran the first time in 1985. He was in the jury of the Casals competition in Budapest. And I participated in the competition. And after the competition I went to him and asked him if it's possible to have some lessons with him. And he's even, as far as I know, a far relative of mine. But really far, let's say. And he wasn't teaching regularly in some high school or university. So I was really very often in his master classes in Italy, in Germany, in former Yugoslavia. So it was a very important time for me, a very important teacher for me.

LM: How would you describe his character?

RJ: Well, his character was, in my opinion or my experience, he was a very complicated character. He could be very charming, but he could be really, really nasty. And my task in Germany was that I had to translate the lessons for the other students. He was speaking German not so bad, but let's say the nasty things, all of a sudden he didn't speak German. So it was my task to provide the students with less sympathetic comments, let's say. But he was a kind of a very fine person. For example, he never spoke bad about his colleagues, about the most important colleague. I heard just once, without mentioning names, I heard one critical point.

LM: I'm of course very interested in exactly that, also his relationship to Rostropovich. I already heard a few stories, but nothing really concrete. So feel free to tell me about it, if you know anything.

RJ: Well, as I told, he never spoke about Rostropovich. It was kind of an enigma, their relationship. It was just once, I had a lesson with Rokoko and the transition to the second variation, I liked very much the way Rostropovich is doing this. With the crescendo, without the diminuendo. And when I played in the lesson, Shafran stopped me and said, Well, I know from where it's coming, but it's a very bad taste. That was the only comment I ever heard without mentioning names. Yeah, about Rostropovich. And in a way, he was critical about some pieces which were written for Rostropovich. For example, I had a lesson with Khachaturian Concerto Rhapsody. He hated the piece. He really hated the piece. And he told it very clearly, his attitude.

LM: So was he just strict or did he even lose temper sometimes in the lessons?

RJ: Well, no. No, I never experienced this. Just once, my end with him was very sad. The end of my relationship with him, because it was the last masterclass I made with him. It was in Mainz, in Germany. And before he played in Mainz with the orchestra the Schumann Concerto. I couldn't come to the concert and I came to the beginning of the masterclass. It was not very clever from the organizer, from the masterclass, he made photocopies of the review and it was disastrous, the review. It was really one of the worst reviews I ever read. And this guy, the organizer of the masterclass, he made several copies and he distributed them in the masterclass. And some of them came to me also and I was just sitting with Shafran. And I told, well, it's the review of your concert, 'so please translate it to me'. I read it and my hairs were just standing up and I didn't know what to do because it was a disaster. So I said, no, I'm sorry, I don't translate it. It's so badly written, so I don't translate it. No, no, please translate it, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if it's a bad review. Yes, no, yes, no, but as a student you cannot resist so much the great maestro. So I started translating, but I didn't translate the words. Just, let's say, a relaxed version of the review. And all of a sudden he took all the photocopies of the review, threw it on the floor and went away. And from this moment he started to treat me really bad, really very bad. It was also a side of him. The final concert of the masterclass, he went out when I played. So it was not so nice, it's the not nice side of him. And of course you feel as a student, you feel very bad.

LM: And then he died?

RJ: No, I tried to get get in touch, I met him once later, but he continued to be very nasty to me. Before he was always super friendly, super generous. Well, he was very positive about my playing

and so on, and always very positive reaction. Okay, there were details, but generally about my journey. He was always extremely positive. From this moment on, I met him once more, and in these years I had a moustache. And when we met again, it was in Belgrade.
,Cut off your moustache, I cannot stand it.'
And that was the other side of Shafran.

LM: Interesting. That's probably the first time anyone says anything a bit critical about his character. And for me it's very interesting, because of course he was also human. And this seems to be kind of an irrational side of him maybe.

RJ: Yeah, yeah. From some friends, which had very much closer and longer relationship to him than me, I heard that in his last 20 years, he was really addicted to drugs. Not drugs, but medicine. He couldn't live without of his drugs for over 20 years. And maybe that's the explanation.

RJ: Another very funny story, we were at the masterclass in Grozny, I think it's Croatia today or Slovenia, I'm not sure to which country it's belonging now, former Yugoslavia. It was in summer and it was incredibly hot. But always he's clothed very officially. And there were some girls, some students, but not from our masterclass, some girls taking the sun. And they had, well, some bikinis or whatever. And we were walking, both of us were walking, and he has forgotten me completely. And he had sunglasses, he put them up. ,Oh my God, that but. I cannot resist, we're getting crazy.' It was a funny moment, funny situation. He was really crazy about women.

LM: Very interesting. I saw your recording of the viola sonata. Yes. Which was also arranged by him. Did you study it with him also?

RJ: No, I didn't work it with him. The arrangement is not his arrangement, it's my own arrangement. Let's say, the octaves which I have chosen are different than him.

RJ: But of course the idea is coming from him, because I listen to many recordings. I don't know any other recording which is coming close to his recording. It's so phenomenal. So inspiring.

LM: So what did you want to change in your arrangement? Only the octaves or did you change something else?

RJ: No, just some octaves. Because to change the music of people is absolutely impossible. And it everything is playable. I just had the feeling that some octaves in my opinion, sound better in the way which I decided.

LM: Where you have to play the thumb on the D and then go up there. It's crazy.

RJ: Yeah.

LM: Yeah, I study it right now. It's interesting, because I have never played it before. And I was thinking about, because I play it also in my bachelor's project, because in Zurich there is also a performance part. So I thought about playing it with his fingerings, just out of interest. But it's really crazy.

RJ: You know, his hand proportion was a little bit different. His pinky was slightly longer than usual. And also the thumb was slightly longer. So this made his fingerings possible. He wanted me to play the Schumann Volkstonstücke, the doublestops in the third piece. (*singing) Well, I could play it, but it didn't sound well. But when he's playing, it sounded well, of course.

LM: But in general, he was not dogmatic about this in lessons. Did he try to force his fingerings on you somehow?

RJ: No, no. Absolutely not. He showed his fingerings sometimes. And I have some copy of his scores. And it was everything written in flat black above every note. Every note. I have the Debussy sonata, I have the Brahms E minor sonata, and something else I don't remember. And

also when he's written into my scores, it was always very thick, big. But he was not dogmatic with this. But what he really hated was when people made a slight glissando too much. Exactly the opposite. He hated when somebody played a little bit easy. So once he played a Bach recital, solo recital, and he asked me to accompany him in the encores. And he played Bach's Air, and I played the bass line. And then he played the slow movement of Vivaldi's B minor cello concerto. And the accompaniment is the whole time... (*singing) It's super simple. And when we rehearsed, he asked to do this or that in some passages. But then when he played, he's done something completely different. So I think he didn't really realise what he has done. He was somehow such a double personality. What he was teaching was he was super... not one glissando too much. He could kill you for this. And when we played this concert, where I accompanied him. I had already some chamber music experience in these years. And so somehow I tried to do my best to follow him and not to listen too much to what he said. Because it was senseless. And after the concert, I don't remember, I think it was okay in the end. But after the concert, he told me, Well, the accompaniment seems to be so easy in this piece, but was so difficult to play them.

LM: My next question that still troubles me is: Why didn't he earn so much recognition in the West, although he would certainly deserve it.

RJ: Well, it's not a historic or concrete thing, which I can tell. But one thing is secure. He had a brother in the US. And that was already a reason that you will be blocked. That was the case. For example, it's another story. My father's family, they had also some relatives. We had some relatives in the US, in New York. My uncle and brother of my mother, he was a sailor. And he was never allowed to leave the Soviet waters because of the relatives of my father in the US, he didn't know them. But they're all relatives. And that was one point. And the other point is, it's just my, as far as I saw, it's a suspicion, let's say. In the Soviet Union, these times, they needed just one international cello soloist. With pianists, violins, it was different. But with cellists, they needed just one. And it was a very simple decision. Either they would take a Russian cellist or a Jewish cellist. And it was clear that the Russian would be preferred. Of course, Rostropovich is the father, maybe, of the king of all cellists. For me, yeah. And Shafran's playing, it was more like a work of a jeweller. He didn't have a big sound. He had quite a small sound. And of course, with orchestras, it's maybe also a reason why he didn't make the career which normally he should have had.

LM: So his relationship with the government was not really good, but he didn't live in fear or anything, did he?

RJ: I don't think so. He was politically, in the Soviet sense, he was very correct. Politically correct. Also, when we were in Germany or so, he never spoke something critical about the Soviet government. We never spoke about this. So he tried to avoid it, in my experience. Because, of course, Shafran was a personality and also an important musical personality, but you cannot compare his importance with Rostropovich or Shostakovich's stand.

LM: Did you ever visit his home in the Soviet Union?

RJ: No, I was just once in my life in Moscow, where he lived. It was only after our last meetings. Yeah, so I never visited. I met his wife, Svetlana. She was a very modest, very calm person.

LM: And what I wanted to ask, those scores you have from Shafran, do you think you could send me maybe just one page to see how his style of writing was? Of course, if it's a private document, I don't want to force it.

RJ: There are no secrets.

LM: Okay, I would be very interested in seeing that.

RJ: Yeah. Another funny story, which comes into my mind, there was another cellist in the master class in Mainz, it was Eva Böcker. We studied together at the same time in Boris Pergamenschikow's class. And we had a very nice relationship. And she was also frequently in Shafran's master classes. And we decided to play for him Thomas Werner Mifune's Beethoven's

Fifth Symphony in Hausmusikfassung. I don't know if you know it. It's a very, very funny thing, where it's a mixture of a thousand different musical pieces. There's a tango, also Rossini, but in tango moments. And we were very, very curious how Shafran would react on this piece. And we were surprised, he was super pleased about the piece. He asked me if he can have my score. Of course he would never play, because he never played chamber music in his life. He played just with piano or with orchestra or solo. Never chamber music or duos with other instruments. I asked him about chamber music. He said no, it's not his cup of tea, and he wouldn't do it. So he liked this funny piece a lot.

LM: Is it for two cellos?

RJ: It's for two cellos, it's really good. If you want, on YouTube there's a live recording with a former student of mine, we played it. You can find it. I think it's on my page, on my YouTube site.

LM: And lastly, do you know any persons I could ask further questions that also knew him? Do you think of anybody?

RJ: Yes. Yes. In Switzerland, there's the cellist Martina Schukan.

LM: Ah, she's next door to Thomas.

RJ: Yeah, Martina, she was also very, very often in masterclasses. We met very often, yeah.

LM: Oh, interesting, okay, I'll ask her.

LM: Yeah. And do you think you have any other documents or letters or anything also from Russia? Because for me, it's really hard to find Russian stuff because I just don't speak any Russian.

RJ: Yeah. I have to think, but at the moment, besides the copies of the scores, I don't. I used to have, he gave me an LP of him, and I lent it to somebody and never got back, unfortunately. It was a dedication to me, and I was really very, very sorry because it was great his playing. I re-bought it, I have the recording on the CD, but his dedication was very personal. He's playing the Schubert violin sonatinas, and I don't remember. It's a transcription LP. So, contact Martina, and I'm sure she will be able to tell you something nice.

LM: I will. That's great advice. I think that's it for now. Thank you so much, that's really helpful.

RJ: My pleasure.