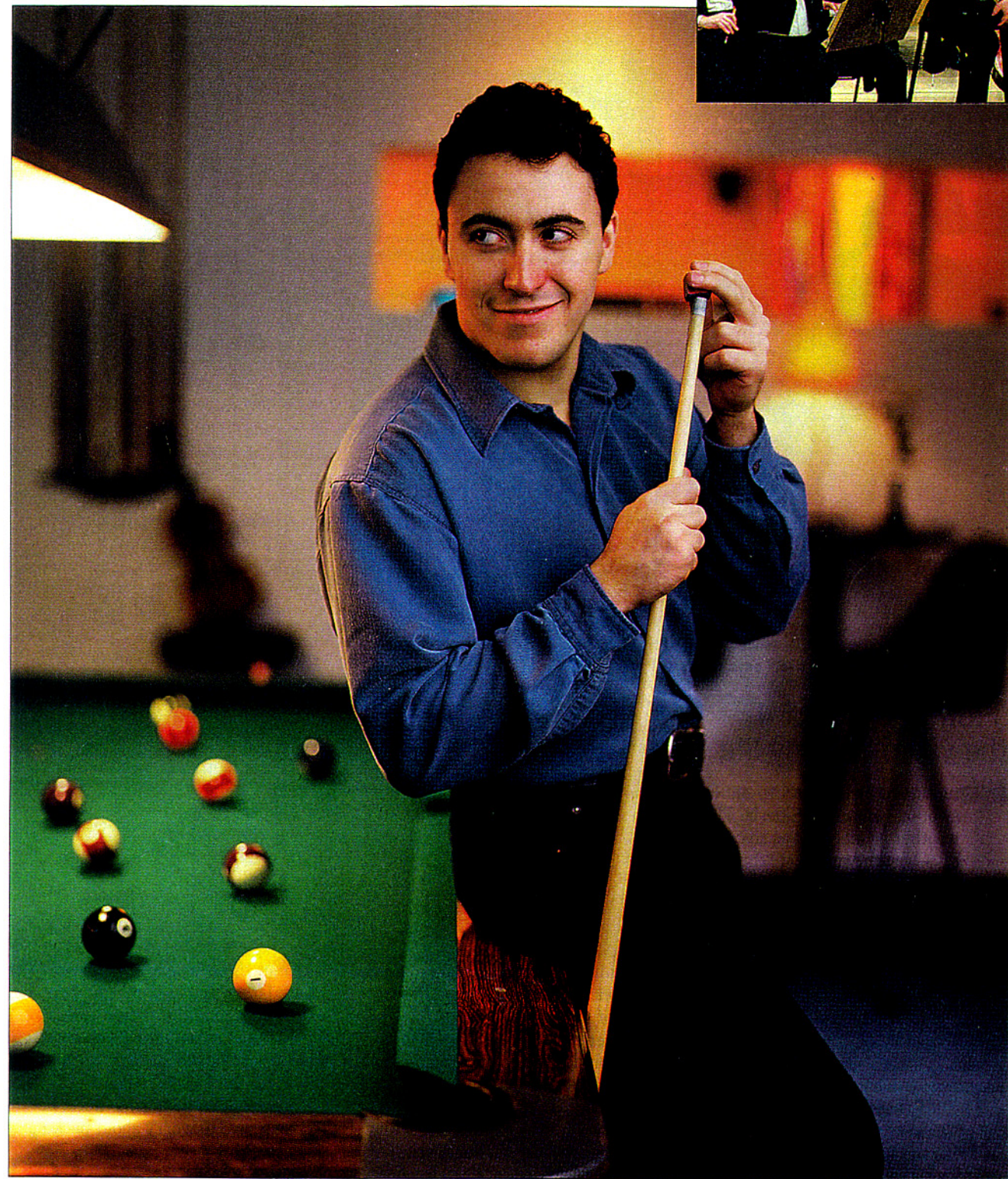


# SIBERIAN EXPRESS

Violinist Maxim Vengerov, classical music's Next Big Thing, hits stardom right on cue



"Sometimes," says Vengerov (performing in January with conductor Daniel Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony, inset), "I get very bad timing playing the violin. Then I go to a pool hall and play a few games, and suddenly all the complexities disappear."

Photographs by Frank Veronsky



JOHN BARTLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE



A "They saved my musical life," says Vengerov of grandparents Boris and Eugenia.

## 'From the age of 4, the violin was my life'

**T**HERE ARE DRAWBACKS TO BEING a young violinist in Siberia. The weather is one. "It was so cold," says Maxim Vengerov, "that sometimes I had to practice in a winter coat and gloves. I had a very good technique, though—and if someone can play with gloves, they can play without."

These days, now that he has taken off the gloves and left Siberia far behind, Vengerov, 22, is playing very well indeed. His 1995 album *Prokofiev & Shostakovich Violin Concertos No. 1* was named *Gramophone* magazine's CD of the year, and his blazing performance of the last movement of the Shostakovich concerto lit up the Grammy Awards ceremony this past February. His October concert at New

York City's Carnegie Hall with the Berlin Philharmonic—one of 130 appearances this year—was sold out.

Vengerov's name is also being mentioned in some very distinguished company—Itzhak Perlman's, for example, and Midori's. "He's made from the same block of wood," says conductor Zubin Mehta, "and he'll go as far as they have." When he was just 19, the *Los Angeles Times*'s Daniel Cariaga called Vengerov "a born virtuoso with a stunning facility, technique to burn, emotional versatility . . . and even a sense of humor."

Vengerov's genius was shaped in Novosibirsk, Siberia, where creature comforts were scarce but music abounded. His father, Alexander, was an oboist with the Novosibirsk Philharmonic, and his mother, Larisa, directed a music school's children's choir. "The first time I heard music," says Vengerov, an only child, "I was in

my mother's belly. David Oistrakh, the violinist, came to Novosibirsk. My mother says I reacted to the music, especially when he played very sensitive. And when he was loud and rhythmic, I was dancing."

Once out of the womb and into the studio, young Maxim quickly began to shine. At 5, he soloed with his father's orchestra. "I don't remember how well I played," he says, "but I remember how big a success it was, and I thought, 'Oh, yeah, it was worth it.'"

His family thought it was worth it too, sacrificing financially to send him to a series of violin teachers—and to buy him a succession of ever-larger violins. After Vengerov won a prestigious competition in Poland when he was 10, Siberia could no longer contain him, and his parents enrolled him at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow. There was just one problem: His parents couldn't leave their careers in Novosibirsk, so his maternal grandparents, Boris and Eugenia Toporksy, accompanied him to Moscow. Lacking official permission to live there, they pretended that Eugenia, now 72, was there for medical reasons. "It was difficult," says Eugenia, "not being musical people, to raise [this] small child. But that was our mission: to raise a good man, a good musician."

With the fall of the Soviet Union, Vengerov was able to move his family out of Siberia just as his career took off. In 1990, the same year he won the esteemed Carl Flesch International Violin Competition in London, his family emigrated to Israel, where he set up his parents in a house in Tiberias, near the Sea of Galilee.

On those rare occasions when he isn't flying to perform somewhere, Vengerov lives in a one-bedroom apartment in Amsterdam, the city he fell in love with when he played there in 1989. Whenever he can, he visits Israel, and then his family is once again reunited. "After seven years of being separated," he says, "they can all live together and have anything they want." And, of course, when Vengerov performs there, he doesn't have to worry about packing his gloves.

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in New York City