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The Siberian Violinist Wowing the World

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When the Russian violinist Maxim Vengerov gave his first public recital at the age of five, he reportedly became so excited playing a Paganini showpiece that he began turning in circles, and wound up taking his final bows from the wrong direction, facing the piano.

Fortunately, he's been on the right track ever since. The 21-year-old former prodigy, who is performing with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra at Meyerson Symphony Hall in Dallas on Feb. 21 and here at Carnegie Hall on Feb. 23, is one of the most magnetic young violinists around. He has a strong technique coupled with a singing tone and an ability to connect with the emotional underpinnings of a score that evokes the legendary virtuosos Jascha Heifetz and David Oistrakh.

Yet Mr. Vengerov's artistic evolution is just beginning. Having survived the perilous transition from prodigy's instinct to a more cerebral performance mode, he faced a new challenge at the age of 17, when he cut his umbilical cord to the eminent Russian violin pedagogue Zakhar Bron. At that point, the musical score became his primary instructor, and collaborations with conductors became vital opportunities for continuing education. "Without these colleagues," he acknowledges in his accented English, "I could not continue to go upward."

Mr. Vengerov tells how Daniel Barenboim, music director of the Chicago Symphony, challenged him to rethink the Sibelius Violin Concerto on a deeper level two years ago. After a preliminary run-through with piano accompaniment, the maestro, in typically blunt fashion, reportedly said, "So what? There is everything but what Sibelius means." Embarrassed, the violinist asked for his advice, and Mr. Barenboim provided suggestions on dynamics and other details, leaving the rest to his younger colleague. That night in his hotel room, Mr. Vengerov says, he "read the score like a book," changing his interpretation completely, a concept that Mr. Barenboim helped refine in subsequent rehearsals.

Another insightful collaboration, with compatriot Mstislav Rostropovich and the London Symphony Orchestra, has been preserved for posterity on a superb Teldec disk of Prokofiev and Shostakovich concertos, which won Gramophone magazine's 1995 Recording of the Year award. Mr. Vengerov's contribution to the Shostakovich A-Minor Concerto is particularly compelling: This is a performance in

which every note tells. Again, part of the credit goes to Mr. Rostropovich, who knew both composers and introduced works they had written for him. "Slava completely changed my approach to this piece," says Mr. Vengerov. "The passacaglia movement, for example, has such beautiful music. But he showed me the events behind this curtain of beauty. He brings the ghosts of the composer to his performances."

The Shostakovich concerto, which Mr. Vengerov performed here recently with Kurt Masur and the New York Philharmonic, is a piece haunted by demons as well as ghosts. The violinist aptly describes the biting scherzo, with its jagged rhythms and frenzied tempo, as "death dancing on the graves of those killed during the Second World War," and the third movement is commonly viewed as a lament for victims of Stalinist repression.

If Mr. Masur's interpretation had less urgency than Mr. Rostropovich's, he led a thoughtful and stirring performance nonetheless. The darkly somber opening nocturne was melancholy and wistful. Mr. Vengerov, who reveals his gifts most strikingly in lyrical passages displaying his sweetly toned, seamless legato, did not hesitate to make his sound harsh and driven to convey the flavor of the jeering scherzo. And the dirge-like passacaglia had a searing intensity.

Although Shostakovich wrote the piece in 1947-48 for David Oistrakh, he withheld it from public performance until after Stalin's death in 1953. The composer had been stung in 1936 by the banning of his opera "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" and by a 1948 edict condemning prominent Soviet composers for "formalist deviations" and other alleged musical misdeeds.

Life in the former Soviet Union was much kinder to Mr. Vengerov. A scheduled tour of the U.S. in 1984 that was to have included a meeting with Jascha Heifetz was canceled for political reasons. Yet the violinist was otherwise spared the KGB escorts and baffling restrictions that plagued so many Russian artists prior to *glasnost*. "I am Jewish and it didn't affect me in any way," explains Mr. Vengerov. "I was one of the first to be traveling abroad. . . . But I'm sad that [by then] it was too late to see Heifetz because he died in 1985." (Last year, Mr. Vengerov was given a violin bow belonging to Heifetz by Herbert Axelrod, Heifetz's biographer.)

Young Maxim grew up in Novosibirsk, the industrial center of Siberia, a city whose musical culture includes opera, ballet and orchestra. His father was an oboist with the Novosibirsk Philharmonic; his mother, a well-known conductor of a large children's chorus. From the ages of four to six, his mother supervised his violin practice from 7 p.m. to midnight, after which, he says, he practiced until 4 a.m. "At dawn," he relates, "I went out for a bike ride, and the neighbors saw me and pitied me. But then when all the other kids were working, I was snoring," he adds, pausing to demonstrate.

After three years at the Central Moscow Music School, he returned to Novosibirsk and began studies with Mr. Bron, a prime exponent of the Russian school, which emphasizes a fast vibrato and a full, robust sound. "He forced me to be more disciplined," says Mr. Vengerov.

These days, Mr. Vengerov has a burgeoning international career, an exclusive recording contract with Teldec, and an unusual penchant for playing encores following well-received concerto performances. His upcoming engagements abroad include dates with the Orchestre de Paris in Paris and in London. Wherever he travels, he checks out the city's pool halls; good burgers, a smoky atmosphere and congenial players are his chief criteria. Home base for now is an apartment in Amsterdam overlooking the main canal, but it doesn't sound terribly permanent. "I can't stay in one place; there's the trouble," he says with a mischievous smile. "My home is the concert hall. If the audience loves me, there is where I'd like to live."



Maxim Vengerov