

Highly strung maestro



Interview

by Helena de Bertodano

At 70, Mstislav Rostropovich, whose every day is booked up until the year 2000, remains as passionate about human rights as he is about the cello

WHEN A drunken man lurched into the doorway of Mstislav Rostropovich's palace in St Petersburg the other day, brandishing a spade, the Russian cellist's reaction was unusual. It was two o'clock in the morning and the porter had called the police, who were about to arrest the man. Rostropovich describes the incident in his stilted English: "I asked him: 'Why do you do this?' He very honestly looked at me with his drunken eyes and said: 'Because I am envious.' So I go to the policemen and I say: 'Stop this, do not make a case against him. This man gives to me the truth. The truth.'" He bangs his fist on the table to emphasise the importance of these words. "I told the man to go to sleep, and if he drinks more, not to break into another house. I understand that he must have a very difficult life. He is probably out of work and maybe his wife and children suffer enormously because of that. Must I make him suffer even more with the criminal process? No. Never. Never."

The scene, albeit minor, none the less throws light on the shaping influence of Rostropovich's life. If he feels a principle is at stake, he is the first to step in — regardless of the consequences. He has a passion for dramatic gestures — although they are often far more than simply gestures. He risked his life to defend Alexander Solzhenitsyn and was eventually exiled from his homeland in 1978. In August 1991, during the attempted coup against Boris Yeltsin, he rushed from Paris — without a visa and without telling his wife — to the side of the beleaguered President: "Frankly speaking, I thought I would be killed," he says, sounding almost disappointed that this was not the outcome. I meet him during his visit to London, part of the worldwide tour to celebrate his 70th birthday. To commemorate it, EMI has just released a 13-CD collection entitled *Rostropovich — the Russian Years, 1950-1974*. It is a collection of very rare recordings, many of them works composed for him by Benjamin Britten, Sergei Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich.

We meet at his luxurious Maida Vale home, one of Rostropovich's sprinkling of beautiful houses around the world. For a man who embodies a slice of history, his flat is very modern: abstract paintings line the walls, with pride of place given to a multi-coloured nude. A piano with a glass lid through which you can see its inner workings stands in the middle of the floor. Black furniture domi-

nates the room and black slatted blinds afford a glimpse of a cherry tree in full blossom in his garden outside.

His broken English is made comprehensible by his expansive hand signals. The only real misunderstanding we have is when he keeps referring to what I hear as "warts". He compares the musician to a priest, conveying warts from God. "Warts?" I ask, pausing with my pen in mid-air. "Yes, warts," he says impatiently. Belatedly, it dawns on me that he is saying "words". The priest conveys the words of God to the people just as the musician conveys the notes of the composer. He is being self-deprecatory, saying that he is only an intermediary in the process. The composer is God in the musical hierarchy.

After half an hour of conversation like this, Maria, his interpreter, appears and, conversely, he becomes less comprehensible. Much of his passion and emphasis is lost in the dry translation and, realising this, he frequently corrects her interpretation of his words.

Although I have never met him before, he greets me with a huge hug and three kisses. He is a man of great exuberance, bearing everyone along on the tide of his own intense response to life. Less than 12 hours before, I had seen him at the Barbican with the London Symphony Orchestra, playing Strauss's *Don Quixote* with such emotion that he looked as if he might weep.

His conversation is often equally intense. As the translator speaks his words, he holds his hand to his heart, clutching a white handkerchief, and nods or shakes his head — there is real grief etched on his face, particularly when he speaks of life in Communist Russia and the persecution suffered by Shostakovich and Prokofiev, to whom he was very close. He was taught by Shostakovich at the Moscow Conservatory and, in a typical gesture of solidarity, moved into the home of Prokofiev in 1948 after both composers were denounced.

"Stalin's musical intellect and art intellect was very low," says Rostropovich, overruling the interpreter and speaking for himself. "He wanted everyone to compose music or make paintings that he could understand. If not, he would immediately make court process. I never compare between my suffering and the suffering of Shostakovich, Prokofiev, because if I suffer, although I understand I am a very good performer, I am not a creator. "If they torture me that's not so great a tragedy for the world as if they torture poets, composers, creative people — that is really criminal. These



STEVE PYKE

Rostropovich 'Interpretatively, he is the best,' says the composer Colin Matthews. 'His tremendously extrovert personality still comes across in his music'

are geniuses who enrich not just Russian culture, but world culture, too. It would be better to commit suicide than to witness such suffering again. That is why I went back to Russia during that difficult moment in 1991."

Rostropovich lived with Prokofiev until the composer's death in 1953. By that stage Rostropovich himself was recognised as a musical genius. He came from a very musical family: his grandfather and mother were both pianists and his father was a distinguished cellist, a one-time pupil of Casals. The young Mstislav seemed destined for music from the moment he was born, in Azerbaijan in 1927: the first photograph of him, at just a few weeks old, shows him snuggled inside a cello case.

In 1931, the family moved to Moscow: Rostropovich taught himself the piano at the age of four, and made his cello debut when he was eight. During the war, he played his cello for the troops, and after Stalin's death in 1953 he began teaching at the Moscow Conservatory. By the mid-1960s, he was a world-class master of the cello and is now universally hailed as the best cellist in the world.

"Interpretatively, he is still the best," says Colin Matthews, who has composed concertos for him. "But technically, he is probably no longer at his peak. Age has taken its toll. His tremendously extrovert personality still comes across in his music but he can also be very introverted."

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Matthews has been a friend of Rostropovich for more than 20 years. He says that, despite the emotional high on which Rostropovich lives, he does not wear his heart on his sleeve. "I have had few conversations with him of real meaning — partly because of his crazy English and partly because you immediately join him in his game of enthusiasm; he raises people up to his level."

Rostropovich — who is known to everyone as "Slava" — knows his limitations and suffers, surprisingly, from nerves. Matthews remembers seeing him with his hands shaking so much that he did not do justice to a Prokofiev fugue. "In a way it is comforting. He is not mechanical — he is very human. I have heard him say: 'I played that like shit.'"

His career as a conductor has been more chequered: orchestras find him hard to work with, and his enthusiasm often gets the better of any sense of accuracy. "Players sometimes say his beat is difficult to follow," says Matthews.

Although he is a man of great goodwill and generosity, there is an underlying streak of impatience. Friends describe him as tough and stubborn when defending what he believes to be right. He can also be rather abrupt. When the phone rings during the interview, he answers it tersely: "Allo. 'Allo." The caller, obviously startled, hangs up on him. "Right, I disconnect," he says, yanking the phone out of the wall.

His taste for spontaneity is epitomised by his meeting with his wife. In 1955, he was judging a cello competition in Prague and met Galina Vishnevskaya, a soprano with the Bolshoi Opera Company. Four days later they were married; they have two daughters, Olga and Yelena, both musicians themselves.

In the late 1960s, he invited Solzhenitsyn to move into his dacha. The author was then under attack for publishing his anti-Soviet novels in the West. After Solzhenitsyn won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1970, Rostropovich and his wife had a letter published in the Western media attacking the Soviet censorship; the Kremlin instantly cancelled the couple's foreign tours and erased their names from all reference books, stranding them in musical limbo. "I was

asked to drive Solzhenitsyn out of my home, but I said I will never turn him out on to the street. This is not a political attitude, it is a human attitude."

Did you worry about the effect it might have on your family? "I was very worried for Solzhenitsyn," he says. What about your wife and children? "I was very worried for her because I was afraid he would be murdered in my home — I understood there would be this blood on my family for ever."

Rostropovich left the country in 1974 after Edward Kennedy asked Brezhnev to allow him to perform in the United States. In 1978, he and his wife were stripped of Soviet citizenship for "unpatriotic activity" and "acts harmful to the Soviet Union". By then Rostropovich had become

fond of describing himself as "an ambassador of the Russian people — not their rotten Government — and Russian music".

Despite his actions, Rostropovich is riled by any suggestion that he is a political figure. "People inevitably have to live in countries governed and driven by politicians. I simply respond. For example, I give you an absolute nightmare. If English communists get power here, and make some system in London, I tell you honestly, if [the leader] stay in Downing Street then I come here exactly like I come in August '91 to Moscow — because my friends are here. I don't like it if this country suffer like my country suffer, because I know how it hurts."

He says he is prouder of the three days when he helped Yeltsin face off the rebel tanks than he is of all the rest of his life put together. Why? "You know that you are very happy if your friends are happy? Well, if I see that millions of people in the country become happy, that for me is the greatest time. Among those 200 million, there might be another Shostakovich, another Tchaikovsky." He speaks in Russian to his interpreter. She translates. "I thought if I was killed my death would mean that people all over the world would know why my concerts were cancelled."

Rostropovich intervenes to explain his words better. "I must be killed to open the eyes of the world to what happens to my country."

Despite his 70 years, his energy is inexhaustible. He says that until the year 2000 he can account for what he will be doing on every single day. His schedule from this weekend until the end of July includes concerts in Chicago, Monte Carlo, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Greece, Egypt, Italy, Washington, Russia, Germany, Switzerland, France, Spain and the Lebanon. He scarcely sleeps, his days and nights an endless tumult of travelling, concerts, two hours' cello practice a day, meetings, lunches and friends, friends, friends. Everywhere he goes he has lists of people he must see. Once a month, he makes a point of sleeping for more than four hours a night.

He recently bought a home in Russia — the palace in St Petersburg — but he still feels ambivalent about his homeland, refusing all attempts to have his passport returned to him even after Gorbachev restored his citizenship. He travels the world on a document issued by Monaco, and says that as long as the hammer and the sickle remain on its cover, he will do without a Russian passport.

His heart, he says, is not in Russia — it is in "the earth". Does he consider anywhere his home? "The plane," he chuckles. "Most of my life I spend in the air."

Nothing personal . . . you're just old

NELIA, a 25-year-old friend of ours, married in secret last week after a whirlwind romance. We have never met the suitor in question, so we invited her to present him over some celebratory drinks in our cottage.

John was a dear chap, tubby but handsome and with a reassuring presence. I thought he was wonderful. He and Nelia drank some Cava Napa but, flashing looks at one another, refused the offer to stay to supper. As I showed them out, beaming with approval, John thanked me politely and said: "Well, see you at the party, if not before."

Given that the party to celebrate their marriage is not to take place until next February, I was slightly taken aback. What made him think he wouldn't be seeing us roughly every two weeks? Did he not like us as much as we liked him? As they got into their car outside the cottage, John caught my eye

and quickly his face assumed another rictus of politeness.

Suddenly I realised . . . of course he wouldn't expect to see us again before the party next February: Giles and I are not in his age group. We are roughly 12 years older than him, so seeing us for drinks was, for John, part of a respectful tour of duty.

The mystery was solved: just as people avoid one at parties for a number of reasons, including the fear that they themselves might be suffering from bad breath, so I did not take his slight personally. It was nothing personal, it was just ageism.

Even at a relatively youthful stage of life, it is easy to forget that ageism may be a factor in people's attitudes towards you. Some ageists confine their friends to people within their own peer group, imagining that anyone from outside it could have nothing to say to interest them. But ageism can work both ways. Is it any more praiseworthy to have a preponderance of friends 30 years older than yourself?



Family Life

Mary Killen

Take the case of Nu-nu, for instance, as our girls call 72-year-old Euan, our friend and neighbour. Part of his attraction for us — aside from his 6ft 5in frame, his erect bearing, the huge quantities of drink he can consume without becoming ill and the bran tub of socio-historical material into which he can dip for conversational purposes — is the fact that, as he is old enough to be our father and the children's great-grandfather, he makes us feel younger than we actually are. We are able to relax into

irresponsible mode in his company. It reminds us of when our parents were the grown-ups and not us, and we can enjoy the mental holiday offered by the feeling of not being in charge.

Self-image, of course, can also be boosted by a romantic liaison with a much older person. But, says 57-year-old Beth: "I always far preferred to have a much older boyfriend as it made me feel so glamorous by contrast, but then as I got older myself, the men had to be really ancient if they were to be much older than me. They started being a bit too old — do you know that thing where a man becomes hoary?"

The motive of feeling younger is presumably that which has driven our friend Erica, 35, to date a sequence of youths under the age of 23. The current one is 21, and Erica has cracked the secret of how to conduct the liaison successfully. "I just don't try to meet any of his friends, and I don't introduce him to any of mine. It's the friends who make you feel there's

something odd about it. We are perfectly happy when we are together."

Erica hurried back to her "bubble relationship" the other night, after the 40th birthday party of an old friend of hers. She didn't stay long, although the party was, by all accounts, stupendously good. But as a mutual friend observed: "I don't think Erica feels she has much in common with people from her own age group."

Erica and her boyfriend do look wonderful together (in photographs, as no one else ever sees them), but her sister worries that "she is missing out on being a member of her own generation". "What's wrong with that?" says Nu-nu. "If I consorted exclusively with people of 72, it would be stupefyingly tedious. It is much better to assist the geriatric at the same time as to show off and give avuncular advice to the young."

"As you grow older," he warned, "you will find it all the more necessary to forget precisely how old you are."

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