

VIKTORIA MULLOVA

Settled in the West,
a violinist in cool
command of her career

by Christopher Breunig

Viktoria Mullova's courageous bid to escape the manipulated life for practising Soviet musicians (now it has changed, and 'there's no-one left in Russia') was the subject of a television documentary, tracing her arrival in the States in 1983. Had she and her colleague been caught, the offence would have meant prison and the end of a career. Except that Mullova is adamant that she *had* no career until coming to the West.

After two years she won her first recording contract with Philips – the Sibelius and Tchaikovsky Violin Concertos. 'My first record with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. I had just one session on each concerto. I didn't know anything about recording.'

Nowadays she enjoys the recording process and the way in which you can listen to the sound production. Whereas concert hall acoustics can obscure subtle nuances, lost even with a supportive orchestra, 'In the recording studio you can do even crazy things!'

This month, Philips release a coupling of the Mendelssohn E-minor concerto – 'It's a very hard piece, because it is all so clear and light' – with the early D-minor. She didn't much like that work at first, then found that it seemed to please audiences. 'It's nice. It seems that people do enjoy it'. But having recorded it, Viktoria Mullova is not sure that she'll be performing it again.

Similarly, she's dropped the Paganini First, which she also did for Philips – and had mastered at 12. She took that up because it presented a technical challenge.

With maturity, she finds the technical problems more, rather than less easily solved. Even so, adding a new piece to her repertoire means careful study, setting the music aside, then resuming work on it. Only after testing herself in concert performances does Mullova think it appropriate to record.

'It is important not to rush. You have to make recordings when you feel the pieces are ready. I can run anything through in two weeks, if I really need it. But...'

Her most impressive concerto coupling was released in 1989. That too was made in London: Shostakovich's First Concerto and Prokofiev's Second, with the RPO under Previn. 'It [the Shostakovich] is very deep and *inside*. There are very strong feelings but they are all hidden. It's very expressive – the music is not like the Prokofiev, where a lot more is happening. It's got lots of pain, deep pain.'

Today, Shostakovich's writing is seen as very political, concerned with repressive forces. 'Yes, you can hear this in his music, in the first movement: the tragedy.' But, personal to him? 'You can take it any way. For him it was a great tragedy.' What was going on around him? 'Exactly.'



In an earlier interview you were critical of David Oistrakh's later recording. You found it 'rather feeble'?

'You know, I have discovered another recording, with Mitropoulos, which I had not heard. It was made when Oistrakh was younger. It depends on *which* record – the same with Kogan's Brahms.' [She was a pupil of Leonid Kogan at the Moscow Conservatory when she won the 1980 Sibelius Competition at Helsinki. At the time of our interview Viktoria Mullova had been rehearsing the Brahms concerto, and we had touched upon Kogan's admirable 1960 EMI recording under Kondrashin.]

Viktoria Mullova does not play the Shostakovich Second, though she acknowledges it as 'a good work'. She does play both Prokofiev Concertos, but prefers the G-minor for its intimacy – 'Especially the second movement. Wonderful!'

Exploration of 20th-century work stops for the present at the Schoenberg Concerto, which she is learning – no fashionable Schnittke. The Alban Berg is also in preparation. 'That doesn't mean I can go on stage and play it. It is quite easy technically, compared to the Schoenberg. No comparison really.' The Schoenberg Violin Concerto is difficult for audiences, too. 'Because it is not played well. If someone is struggling...'. It cannot be done, Mullova argues, with limited rehearsals and it is very hard for the orchestra.

She rejects the suggestion that agents exert pressure to perform more popular repertoire.

'No, no. I decide it. Nobody pressures me, actually. Sometimes it is difficult [but] now I can afford to say no, and to choose which concertos to play. Not to play too much.' Even so, her schedule of 70 concertos a year she thinks *is* too much.

Viktoria Mullova would rather play five or six different concertos in the year, even though it would be easier to repeat just one. First performances she finds tense then it eases up. Would she vary her interpretation according to the accompanist? For example, playing with the Berlin Philharmonic then

the Philharmonia? She says no, her view of the music would be constant.

You look very relaxed on the platform, very calm. 'Do I? How should I look? Should I shake?' Yes, tremble and make lots of mistakes! 'I do make mistakes and I am very nervous, too. If it doesn't show... but what did you mean *calm*?' Just your manner. 'Yes. I don't move much.'

It is in England, or the 'cold countries,' she says, where her playing is considered by some critics to be cold. 'Strangely enough, never would they say this is Italy, or in France or in Germany.'

I think we like to put names to people – to say, oh, she's the *ice-maiden*.

'Yes, I scream at this.' [But she concedes that this negative tag may even work in her favour.] 'Then, I have always sold-out concerts in England, so who cares!'

As a child she learned violin because the family apartment was too small to accommodate a piano; anyway, a violin was cheaper. For the 1982 Tchaikovsky Competition which she won, Mullova was able to borrow an instrument from the State Collection; now she has a 1723 Strad purchased at a London auction. She had hated the competition system, yet it was the only choice for a Soviet artist.

After her debut record, Philips released the *Four Seasons*. Last year's outstanding recital programme with Bruno Canino was of 20th-century music, but her first solo disc offered JS Bach, Bartok, and Paganini – odd bed-fellows. The range, apparently, was deliberate: three big pieces written for unaccompanied violin. In time, Viktoria Mullova would like to record a complete Bach edition. Nothing immediate seems to be planned but one might hope for the Bartok 2 and Stravinsky Concerto.

She would not use other recordings as a means to study a new work, but admits if she heard something effective 'I might steal that!' ↵

PHILIPS DISCOGRAPHY

SIBELIUS: Violin Concerto/TCHAIKOVSKY: Violin Concerto (*Boston SO/Ozawa*) 416 821-2

VIVALDI: The Four Seasons (*COE/Abbado*) 420 216-2

Recital – JS BACH: Partita in B, BWV1002/ BARTOK: Sonata/PAGANINI: Introduction & Variations (*unacc.*) 420 948-2

PROKOFIEV: Violin Concerto 2/ SHOSTAKOVICH: Violin Concerto 1 (*RPO/Previn*) 422 364-2

Recital – PROKOFIEV: Sonata in D, Op.9/4a/ RAVEL: Sonata/STRAVINSKY:

Divertimento (from the 'Fairy's Kiss') (*w. Bruno Canino, pno*) 426 254-2

MENDELSSOHN: Violin Concertos see 'Record of the Month'