

Soviet-Trained Musicians Reunited by Roots in Brussels

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Violinist Gidon Kremer

BRUSSELS — There was a distinct Russian feel at the Brussels Center for Fine Arts (Bozar) auditorium at the premiere of a Concerto for Violin and Orchestra by the Russian-Belgian composer Victor Kissine.

The evening earlier this month was in fact doubly Russian. The National Orchestra of Belgium was led by its new principal conductor, Andrei Boreyko, a graduate of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, who has made a name for himself in Germany as musical director of symphony orchestras in Dusseldorf and Stuttgart. And in another nod to the former Soviet Union, the soloist was Gidon Kremer, who grew up in Riga, Latvia and studied with the legendary Soviet violinist David Oistrakh.

Kremer is considered one of the finest violinists of his generation and has been at the top of his profession for more than 40 years. He first came to the attention of Belgian audiences

when he was a 1967 finalist in the country's prestigious Queen Elisabeth International Music Competition. In 1970, he won the first prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. In 1997 he founded the Kremerata Baltica orchestra that performs all over the world, playing primarily contemporary music, including Alfred Schnittke, Sofia Gubaidulina, Philip Glass and John Adams.

Kissine has been collaborating closely with Kremer for some time, preparing arrangements of old masters for him, as well as writing original works. It therefore came as a surprise to few when Kissine dedicated his new concerto to his friend and it was announced that all the upcoming performances of the work will feature Kremer as soloist.

On the eve of the premiere of his violin concerto at Bozar, Kissine talked to The St. Petersburg Times about how the new piece came to be commissioned and performed there.

"I have had a longstanding desire to write a proper violin concerto," said the composer. "In reality, this piece is not the first, not even the second, but the third attempt. I just didn't call the previous two works concertos. The first premiered in Florida with the New World Symphony at the beginning of 2003. The second, entitled 'Barcarole,' was created for Gidon Kremer in 2007. I borrowed the title from Joseph Brodsky's 'Venetian Notebooks.' But the ambition to create a classical concerto for violin and orchestra remained. I wanted to present a piece for a full-scale orchestra that would last 30 minutes, and now my dream has come true."

Kissine completed his musical education in St. Petersburg. During the Russian period of his career, he was known as the composer of soundtracks for movies and theater productions. His music sets the scene for more than 50 films created by the city's Lenfilm studios, and the composer worked with many outstanding directors, including Ilya Averbakh, Vitaly Melnikov, Konstantin Lopushansky and Dinara Asanova, whose film "Patsany" (Bad Boys, 1984) was a smash hit with audiences and was awarded a number of international prizes.

Kissine left Russia in 1990. After settling in Belgium, he established contacts with local orchestras and musicians and received a number of commissions. Over time his reputation grew and his works came to be performed in Western Europe and the U.S. Kissine's compositions are now a permanent feature of festivals of contemporary music.

In May this year, Kissine's "Caprice" was the new musical composition required of all participants in the final rounds of the Queen Elisabeth competition, including, of course, Andrei Baranov, another alumnus of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, who was awarded this year's first prize. Kissine said after the awards ceremony that he considered Baranov's performance to be a profound penetration into his creation that fully corresponded to his intent.

"The Belgian Symphony Orchestra is very well suited to string works," said Kissine. "It has accumulated a lot of experience as the house orchestra of the Queen Elisabeth Musical Competition, where they accompany the participants. An important consideration in my decision to do the concerto here was the fact that Andrei Boreyko now heads the orchestra. I know his methods, how he works and I like it. As soon as he invited me to create a violin concerto for them, I did not hesitate."

Kissine compared the structure of his new concerto to that of a novel.

"I imagined the piece as a classic concerto, though in contrast to the classic model of three movements, mine consists of one uninterrupted movement. The concerto is built around one dominant idea and I did not want to break it," he said.

"It opens with a short recitative played by the violin. This recitative is the embryo of the whole concerto. Usually this is the most difficult task for a composer — to find the germ on the basis of which the whole concerto will grow.

"In fact, I composed this concerto like a novel. In a novel the reader turns pages back and forth and in the concerto as well. One can go forward and then come back, stop, listen and continue. The concerto is monothematic but it has three big chapters, which represent the shadow of the classic concerto construction.

"The first chapter is the double exposition, the second is the development and the third is the coda, where the soloist concludes the narrative and tells listeners what is going on after the cadenza."

After the world premiere in Brussels, the concerto will be performed in Berlin next May.

In the spring of 2013, the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra will perform Kissine's "Postscriptum," which was written in 2010 for the Symphony Orchestra of San Francisco. The event will take place in the main hall of the Philharmonic, and will mark Kissine's return to his native city. The composer said he was excited about the prospect of seeing the city again and of acquainting Russian music lovers with his symphonic works.

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