The Accidental Violist

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Nov. 17, 1996

From the New York Times

PERHAPS STARDOM IS AS much preordained as painstakingly achieved. A few artists are born with the talent and charisma needed to capture the imagination of the public. Only the means by which they will win fame remains to be determined.

Take the 43-year-old violist Yuri Bashmet, who will perform with the Moscow Soloists on Thursday evening at Carnegie Hall and play Alfred Schnittke's Viola Concerto with the New York Philharmonic next month at Avery Fisher Hall. As a young musician growing up in Lvov, Ukraine, Mr. Bashmet clearly possessed stellar gifts. He studied violin at the Lvov Conservatory and was, in his own words, ''the best violin player in the school.'' He was also the lead guitarist of a rock band that played Beatles and Rolling Stones tunes, and the teen-age idol of Lvov.

But why, at 14, did he switch from the violin, an instrument with built-in star potential, to the viola, a self-effacing vehicle perennially relegated to an inner voice?

''When I was given the possibility of changing to viola, I asked the advice of one of my friends,'' Mr. Bashmet said recently from his dacha outside Moscow. ''He told me: 'Listen, if you play the viola, you will spend less time learning technical things, so you will have more time for your guitar.' ''

But three years later his double musical life ground to a halt, in part because of the rising influence of Jimi Hendrix. ''When Hendrix's music arrived in Lvov,'' Mr. Bashmet said, ''I felt that as a guitar player, I couldn't do this abstract, psychedelic improvisation.'' He quit the guitar, and pop music, forever. ''It was almost a tragic moment,'' he said in dead earnest.

There was still the viola, of course, but no instrument would have seemed a less likely solo vehicle. Lost in the shadows between the brilliant violin and the resonant cello, the viola, with its gravelly, melancholy voice, has a skimpy repertory of concertos. And though history has acknowledged a few great violists, none devoted an entire career to solo performance.

Unfazed, Mr. Bashmet pursued the instrument with relentless intensity and boundless self-assurance. He may also have had useful connections, for as the dying Soviet Union staggered toward perestroika, Mr. Bashmet's career took off. He toured with the pianist Sviatoslav Richter and traveled freely to the West.

By the time the Soviet Union collapsed, Mr. Bashmet had achieved the impossible. He was, in the words of the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, the first violist to attain ''a gigantic solo career on an instrument that no one considers the equal of the violin.''

Not that the road wasn't bumpy. Managers, agents and concert promoters all doubted that any violist, however skilled, could have a major career. ''I began to feel like a pioneer,'' Mr. Bashmet said. ''People told me it had never been done before, and they were afraid to book a solo recital, because, after all, they had to sell tickets.''

But he persevered, and today his schedule is crammed with as many bookings as that of any violinist. As soloist with orchestra or in recital, he plays more than 100 concerts a season; as the leader of his own chamber orchestra, the Moscow Soloists, he gives 50 more. In fact, his success has been so great that up-and-coming violists can now contemplate a solo career. ''I'm very happy that younger players now have a better chance.'' he said. But, he added immodestly, ''nobody has the same career as I do.''

He has achieved that career by means of a musicianship so intense that it would have found expression no matter what instrument he had chosen.

''Great artists often seem so outstanding that you don't even ask which instrument they play on,'' said Kurt Masur, the music director of the New York Philharmonic. ''He is a great soloist who happened to land on the viola. The sensibility of this instrument gives him the possibility to whisper, to shout, to love, to be full of poetry. He has the ability to make you believe that he creates the piece at that moment. It's not only passionate playing but almost like improvising.''

Since the Schnittke Viola Concerto (1985) was written for Mr. Bashmet, he identifies with it to an extraordinary degree. The composer is critically ill, and Mr. Bashmet is acutely aware that any performance of this concerto could become a memorial.

''When I play Schnittke's music, I am like a dramatic actor from a Shakespearean tragedy,'' he said. ''I am not only a musician. Because his music tells us about basic human categories, like life and death, good and bad. And for once the viola is a hero. Here Schnittke makes the instrument grow very strong.''

This is one of 36 concertos, mostly by Russian composers, written for Mr. Bashmet. To that astonishing number will be added a concerto by Sofia Gubaidulina, scheduled for next year. Like the violist Kim Kashkashian, Mr. Bashmet commissions new works both because he loves contemporary music and because so few top-notch concertos have been written for the instrument.

''In quantity there is enough music,'' he said. ''Stamitz, Hoffmeister, thousands of names like that. In quality there is not enough. And that is also the reason I founded the chamber orchestra. Because I can't play third-class music all the time. Maybe second-class, but not third.''

IN 1986, MR. BASHMET founded the Moscow Soloists as a vehicle with which to perfect his latest passion, conducting. But in 1992 the entire chamber orchestra emigrated to the West, a decision with which Mr. Bashmet strongly disagreed, and it eventually disbanded. Mr. Bashmet remained in Moscow and soon assembled a new Moscow Soloists.

Of most interest in the group's Carnegie Hall program is Mr. Bashmet's transcription of Brahms's Clarinet Quintet for solo viola and string orchestra. ''I'm jealous of violinists and pianists, because they have concertos by Brahms, and I have not,'' he said. ''The problem is that I perform music I love much better than music I like. So the idea was to prepare for myself this piece, since I love Brahms very much.''

Mr. Bashmet exudes a childlike enthusiasm when he ponders the new horizons offered by conducting. In a surprisingly offhand manner, he admitted that he could conceive of a future in which conducting, not viola playing, would be his primary activity. ''Honestly,'' he added hastily, ''I have not decided yet where I am for real.''

Today, Mr. Bashmet appears to be among Russia's economically privileged elite, earning income not only from performances and recordings but also as a professor at the Moscow Conservatory and the host of a nationally televised cultural talk show. His dacha, 40 minutes from Moscow, is situated in what he calls ''the Russian Beverly Hills,'' the same community where Prokofiev once lived. Not for a moment does he seem to regret his decision to remain in Russia.

The pianist Alexander Slobodyanik, who grew up with Mr. Bashmet in Lvov and moved to the United States seven years ago, believes that the post-emigration demise of the first Moscow Soloists reinforced Mr. Bashmet's determination not to emigrate.

''He saw that it was unsuccessful for his first orchestra to leave the Soviet Union,'' Mr. Slobodyanik said. ''They fell for materialistic things, real garbage. They dropped their holy goal to work for music and for Yuri Bashmet and just became nothing.''

Mr. Bashmet does not speak charitably of those players either. ''Those were the first years of perestroika, so it was a very difficult time in Moscow,'' he said. ''And there was a big, strong virus for musicians to leave the Soviet Union.''

He claims not to have suffered under the Soviet regime. ''Nothing bad happened with me,'' he said. ''I had my life going in the right way. Today I like to be at home, and besides, from whom could I get a better job than the one I have already?''

And indeed, where else could this violist, conductor and talk-show host enjoy the same degree of stardom?