

How Yuri fought out of Bash-street



Photo Sasha Gusov

Yuri Bashmet may be the world's finest viola player. But, as Ismene Brown discovered, there has been a personal price to pay for his success

THE man in my passenger seat, hitching a ride to his hotel in my rusty Uno, is the only man ever to be allowed to pay Mozart's viola. He has a huge silver Mercedes of God knows what horsepower back in Moscow, only he's never home to drive it. What keeps him away is in the case on the back seat - two violas, one dated 1758, five bows, and a stack of family photographs. If I crash now, I wonder, will my £88 third-party-fire-and-theft compensate the world for its finest viola-player?

Yuri Bashmet is one of the highest and most glamorous flyers of all the superlative ex-Soviet musicians of the last three decades. At 41 he is blessed with talent, looks, brains and, I suspect, money in equal measure. To those blessings should be added amazing modesty (he could have taken a much more seemly taxi-ride to the hotel) and a dedication to music that, he has told me earlier, seems to his eight-year-old son like ruthlessness.

You can see young Sasha's point. His father didn't even realise it was Saturday. "I never know day, only *date*." In that deep Russian voice this somehow sounded tragic - which indeed it nearly is. In the previous four months Bashmet had been home for just five days.

But tragedy is not the word to describe Bashmet's highly unusual career. A hirsute pop-star at 14, he was by 27 acclaimed in London as "the world's greatest viola-player". The USSR was slower to acknowledge it, but now Moscow TV has honoured him with a prime-time arts talk-show. It is all as heady and head-turning as a soap-opera.

Bashmet is definitely head-turning. Slender, not tall, that uncut black hair, black clothes (down to the socks and shoes), off which he frequently swipes cigarette ash, as if irritated at his own untidiness. Not by any means the smoothie-chops he sometimes looks in his photos.

He has an appealing way of crediting all gifts and talents to God and "the cosmos". The cosmos was certainly smiling at the birth of their second son to Mr and Mrs Bashmet, an engineer and a literature teacher in Rostov. When the family moved to rough, dangerous Lvov - the Detroit of Ukraine, Bashmet calls it - Mrs Bashmet sent the two boys to music lessons to keep them off Mean Street, the elder to study the accordion, the younger to the violin.

The ruse failed. Yuri stayed loyal to street-culture, achieved local celebrity grinding out Beatles numbers on his electric guitar, and took his brilliance on the violin with bad grace. "It was war between me and my mother," he says.

The cosmos intervened again, this time in the shape of an inspired skive. Yuri realised that continuing with the violin would mean hours of technical work and Paganini caprices - hours much better spent perfecting guitar riffs. So he switched to the humble viola, the butt of endless violinists' jokes ("all short ones - you know they have to be, for violinists to remember them"). The joke was to rebound on them when Bashmet swept into the Moscow Conservatoire with his violin-based virtuosity and pop-star assurance.

I imagine even Lvov's hoodlums might have quailed, confronted by someone who so perfectly balances toughness and refinement. But under this there is a generous nature. He used his kudos to set up the tremendous Moscow Soloists chamber orchestra and runs a demanding career as conductor with them alongside his solo career. He sees himself as "a positive parasite", at the service of composers, preferably living ones. Last month John Tavener added *The Myrrh-Bearer* to the viola canon for Bashmet; Alfred Shnittke has provided his massive viola concerto and the *Monologue*.

Perhaps most striking of all, Bashmet seems to exercise a healing influence on the most tragic period in musical history, the long, divisive Cold War between the USSR and its musicians. Next Sunday Bashmet, cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and violinist Gidon Kremer give the British premiere of a new triple concerto by Shnittke. It will be a remarkable gathering, not solely for musical reasons.

All four dealt with "the system" in quite different ways. Shnittke suffered at home, his music unperformed for years. Rostropovich was forcibly exiled in 1978. And Kremer defected. Not long ago he was remarking bitterly on the musicians who stayed and prospered within the USSR. One of these was Yuri

Bashmet.

YOU would think such rifts could never heal, yet all four men remain close friends. Bashmet's explanation is revealing. Firstly, he said, the Soviet system was dying when he made his name. He did not have to take on Stalin or Brezhnev, as Richter and Rostropovich had to.

"I was lucky guy, I was born later. I had problems, sure, but I could manage them. Just think a little bit, and you can manage.

"It is a matter for the individuals. When Gidon went I agreed with him - he *must* go. But look at names. Gidon went. Rostropovich went. Richter stayed. Gilels stayed. Go or stay, these people are still the greatest talents. Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Shnittke, perhaps they accumulated power in their music from the difficulties they had. In history 70 years of Soviet system is nothing - the big talents will outlive it."

But what about Kremer's implication, I asked Bashmet. Did he never behave in ways that were not true to himself in order to get by?

"I am not sure that all your life you can be true to yourself. All people in children, sometimes they don't want to tell their parents a bad things they did, so they lie about some small thing, and already they are not themselves true. And then sometimes later in life you have problems and you go like this... " and he wove his hand around a bend... "you don't go straight *through* if you see someone standing there. You're not stupid."

Nothing weaving or ducking about that answer.

He takes an equally honest view of the music industry and its much attacked cult of image. His image needs less work than most, obviously.

"Well, I think the business around music can of course drive the audience a little bit. But publicity like this cannot drive *talent*, if it is not there.

"All things together give pleasure to the audience. If somebody comes to see Anne-Sophie Mutter and her beauty is more important to them than her fantastic violin-playing, it's their problem. She can't throw up her hands and say, 'Don't write about my sexy image', because maybe she understands herself that she is pretty, maybe she likes it, why not?

"In France people told me I am like Napoleon, other people say I'm like Paganini. If they say that just because of my long hair it's not interesting. But if somebody wrote that I'm like Paganini because of my performance then I get pleasure. Paganini, Napoleon, these are powerful men."

It's not a lack of self-doubt that comes over in Bashmet so much as an awesome self-awareness, which sees doubt standing in the way and then, well, goes *around* it. Bashmet's rational intelligence is a kind of force-field. You feel rather like an iron filing being helplessly magnetised.

But we end with something that defeats even Yuri Bashmet. Eleven months a year on the road leaves a poor kind of family life for his wife of 19 years, Natasha, his 14-year-old daughter, Xenia, and son Sasha.

"It is a problem. Of course they are sad. Daughter understands. Son has bigger problem. He always asks me, 'Next time how many days will you stay?' I love them very much and I am always honest with them. But I don't think children of musicians with life like mine are happy children.

"Maybe they will learn that sometimes there exists something that is important, even if it is not pleasant. That there may be something you *must* do even if you don't want to."

Then, characteristically, he goes the last painful mile for honesty: "No, that's wrong. Because *I like* to do concerts. It's my *choice*... It's difficult. Maybe they will understand that I would like to stay with them but I have to play concerts. You have to make your first choice."

Shnittke's triple concerto is premiered next Sunday and Tuesday Nov 15 with the LSO at the Barbican