



In love with the sound of death

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Viola maestro Yuri Bashmet talks to Ismene Brown about his mastery of this dark and mysterious instrument

• **Video: Yuri Bashmet plays Weber**

A Goth-rocker look suits the viola, the dark, mysterious bigger sibling of the violin, and Yuri Bashmet wears it well. Even at 54, his famous Alice Cooper hair is still thick, black and dishevelled, though he wears glasses now to play, peering at his music score.

His passion for the bass guitar, all-night casinos and good wine has helped win over a wider public to the doubly-rarefied idea of going to a classical concert to hear not some virtuoso violinist, but a player of the instrument that is the butt of all violinists' jokes.

"You know why viola jokes are short?" asks Bashmet. "Because violinists have to be able to remember them." Bashmet's liking for a party has certainly led to complaints inside the profession of his unreliability, but it's arguably part of what has made him the

greatest viola player the world has probably ever heard.

Like the late cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, his close friend, Bashmet treats music as a gathering of friends, relishing the supreme pleasure of music-making with such colleagues as Rostropovich, Sviatoslav Richter, Gidon Kremer, Martha Argerich, Maxim Vengerov and Viktor Tretyakov.

Before Bashmet arrived with his soloist's ego and brilliance, few would have noted a violist's name.

His concerts in Britain are rare and eventful - I caught him two months ago at the Edinburgh Festival, flying through on his way to Salzburg. His viola case contains not only his 1758 Testore viola but sheaves of air tickets.

This article would be previewing his London and Liverpool performances in November, I told him. He looked at me blankly. The concert itself was half-exhausted, half-electric.

What with his playing, conducting and international teaching, Bashmet spends barely two months a year with his family in Moscow, and the fact that so much of the viola repertory is redolent of troubled spirits and even death gives his life a faintly Faustian aura - as if the musician lives in a parallel universe to ours, trading in normality to tune his talent to a heavenly pitch.

The viola, he points out in his aptly lugubrious voice, has "a sound of death". Ballet-lovers know the viola's role in the ghostly act of Giselle.

A viola sonata was Shostakovich's heart-rending last composition; Bartók's viola concerto, which Bashmet will play in London next week, was almost his last; Bruch wrote his viola Romanze, which Bashmet will play in Liverpool, in his old age.

Since Bashmet has been around, the demographic of viola composers has got younger and hipper. More than 56 works have been written for him, of which he thinks "seven or eight" are major achievements, such as Alfred Schnittke's and Sofia Gubaidulina's viola concertos.

Where Bashmet's teacher, Vadim Borisovsky, was the only violist at the Moscow Conservatoire, nowadays he says, "In Moscow the viola is a very fashionable instrument." Understandably, as he is the chief professor.

In Bashmet's youth in Ukraine in the chilly 1950s, music was fashionable too, for different reasons. "Every mama wanted her child to have a good future. Music was not so risky a life in the Soviet Union as some, as it was sound, not words.

You didn't have to say something wrong that put you in Siberia. And it was as good for money as being a dentist. But if a child learned music successfully, then maybe he or she had a prospect of going abroad. There was no other way."

He was a lazy kid, he admits, and the viola was an easier option than the violin, which he studied only to quell his mother's complaints about his obsession with his rock band and the Beatles.

When he entered the Moscow Conservatoire, indolent as he says he was, he was still far better than the other viola students, but, with his soloist's outlook, gazing into a rather arid landscape.

For where the violin had great concerti such as Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky and Sibelius, all that the better violists had was Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante - duetting with the violin - and the viola solo in Berlioz's Harold in Italy symphony.

To create a new viola repertory, Borisovsky had re-arranged Bach and Beethoven sonatas.

Not until long after the USSR's collapse did the Moscow Conservatoire grant its international superstar the status for his instrument of a solo viola recital.

Bashmet's tales of how he had to outwit the lumbering Soviet and KGB machines to make his career are so strange that they seem to belong in a surreal genre of literature. Those absurd, dreadful battles shaped his character, but so too did the fact that viola players had no standard orthodoxies to follow.

Bashmet has laid a template for violists as unusual, questing musicians. With his orchestra, the Moscow Soloists, he was recently conducting Japanese and Chinese contemporary music in Chicago. Last month his latest viola première was an extraordinary combination of Bashmet and orchestra with the duduk, a 3,000-year-old wooden oboe from Armenia.

Having badgered the Moscow Conservatoire into establishing a Yuri Bashmet viola competition in the '90s, this year he received the ultimate accolade. The Conservatoire's rector told him: "Yuri, your violists are on a fantastic level, much better than the violinists." This is a joke that will not be appreciated by violinists.

- At the Barbican, London EC2 (020 7638 8891), with LSO, Nov 14; Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool (0151 709 3789), with RLPO, Nov 28 & 29.

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