The Strad

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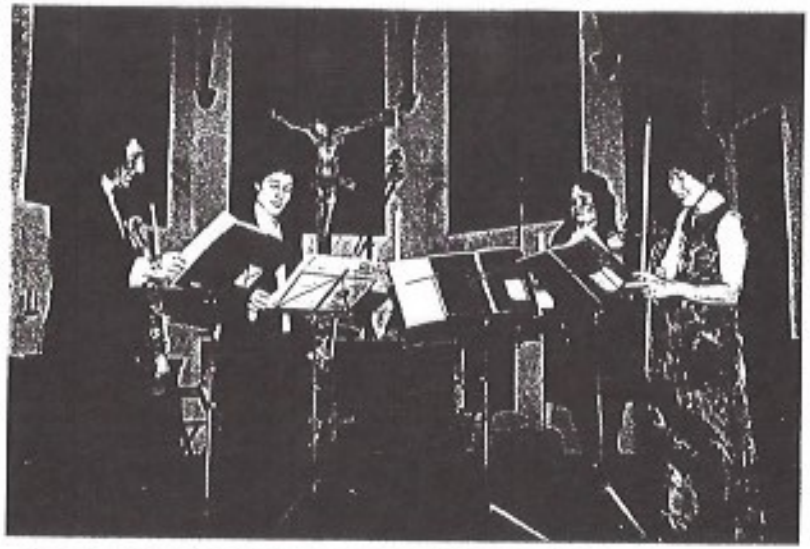
Impresariat

Carlos Maria Solare luxuriates in first-class viola playing and a sophisticated atmosphere at the Kronberg Viola Festival



Above and opposite from left to right: the festival protagonists Tabea Zimmermann, Kim Kashkashian, Yuri Bashmet and Nobuko Imai. They all gave solo recitals before uniting to an evening of chamber music for multiple violas, including original works, transcriptions and new arrangements

Four of the best

The International Chamber Music Academy at Kronberg im Taunus has been transposed up an octave. After several cello festivals organised by the academy which have put Kronberg firmly on the map, in June four viola players, who are arguably the best in the business, came together for two days of recitals, chamber music and concertos. An old hand at viola jamboreen of many kinds, I found the atmosphere at Kronberg distinctly more sophisticated than usual, with sun-tanned audiences dressed up to the nines and the mayor at hand to open the proceedings. As a colleague pointed out to me, there are more millionaires per square mile here than anywhere else in Germany (the bank capital Frankfurt is a few minutes' drive from Kronberg).

The protagonists of the event, featured in the programme brochure in strictly alphabetical order, were Yuri Bashmet, Nobuko Imai, Kim Kashkashian and Tabea Zimmermann. Each of them contributed a solo recital before coming together for an evening of chamber music for multiple violas. The last concert featured Bashmet's own orchestra, the Moscow Soloists, in an evening of concertante works of various sorts.

Tabea Zimmermann and pianist Daniel Kräuke inaugurated proceedings with an old favourite, Schumann's *Märchenbilder*, followed by György Ligeti's Solo Sonata from 1994, which is dedicated to Zimmermann. More a series of genre pieces than a sonata in the strict sense of the word, it is nonetheless an important and, at over 20 minutes, substantial addition to the repertoire; this was the first of three discoveries I made during the course of the festival. Even the most uncomfortable passages (of which there are plenty, starting with a first movement that makes full use of the four octaves contained within the C string) came across with the warm, enveloping Zimmermann tone, as did the encore, Kreisler's *Liebesleid*.

I was disappointed with Bashmet's recital (with the faithful Mikhail Muntian at the piano as always) because I know he can do much better, as indeed he did in the closing concert of the festival. But his playing of the Schubert and Shostakovich sonatas was too mannered, with so much flautando and sul tasto that it made me long for just one hard, even scratched, note!

For the chamber music concert we moved from the Concert Hall to the beautiful Johanniskirche, which dates from the mid-15th century with a choir that is 100 years older. The acoustics of the place, to say nothing of the incredible frescoes, played a not unimportant part in the feast of viola sound that followed. The D major Sonata for two violas by Jean-Marie Leclair (Zimmermann and Imai), Isang Yun's *Contemplation* (Imai and Kashkashian) and assorted Bartók duos (in all possible pairings) were followed by viola quartets by Max von Weinzierl (*Nachtstück* op.34) and Telemann (Concerto in D major, originally for violins), the former a somewhat sugary serenade with a middle section of Mendelssohnian lightness, the latter an irresistibly energetic encore. For reasons officially described as 'organisational', Bashmet's part in the *Nachtstück* was taken over by the principal viola of his orchestra, Vitaly Astakhov is an excellent player who acquitted himself irreproachably in the three women's company.

The following morning started with a recital by Kim Kashkashian, which brought the second of my three discoveries: *Nenuvale* by Luciano Berio, a haunting piece for viola, percussion and a tape containing recordings of Sicilian songs. The interplay between these three elements generates an uncanny atmosphere, especially as Kashkashian's playing was so eloquent that the viola part seemed to have words of its own. The recital, devoted to music for viola and percussion, with the brilliant and athletic Robyn Schulkowsky, had started with Linda Bouchard's *Pourtinuale* and the players' own arrangement of three of Maria Tarais's French dances.

After this, Nobuko Imai's recital, with Ellen Bradowsky at the piano, for all its excellence seemed unadventurous. Two stalwarts of the repertoire, Brahms's F minor and Hindemith's op.11 no.4 sonatas, sandwiched Tom Zikmitsu's pregnant *A Bird Came Down the Walk*, one of the composer's last works, which is dedicated to Imai. Arrangements of Kreisler's *Schön Rosmarin* and Paganini's *Cantabile* in D major were called upon to serve as encores.

The concluding concert opened with a sparkling rendition of Bach's Sixth Brandenburg Concerto, with Kashkashian and Imai accompanied by members of the Moscow Soloists and Muntian on harpsichord. An arrangement for viola and strings of the slow movement from Brahms's Clarinet Quintet proved less effective, beautifully as Bashmet played it, since the orchestra had to repress themselves in order not to drown him (even though the middle section was accompanied by a solo quartet only). Bashmet took the baton for the next two pieces, expertly accompanying Kashkashian, who was again almost unbearably intense, in Hindemith's *Trauermusik*, and Imai in a finely nuanced rendition of Britten's *Lachrymae*.

The end of the festival brought the last of my discoveries: Shostakovich's 13th Quartet in a transcription for viola and strings by Alexander Tchaikovsky. According to the programme notes the idea came to Bashmet 'after a sleepless night' – rather appropriately as the piece in its original form has caused nightmares to many quartet violists (including mell, especially at the very end when everybody else stops playing and the viola starts a lonely ascent towards the highest reaches of its range and disappears off the end of the fingerboard.

Tchaikovsky has written a completely new viola part, incorporating music from the parts of the other three instruments, and has created an effective concerto, effective, that is, when played as it was that evening by a transfigured Bashmet, who knew how to extract the maximum of expression from music that gnaws pitilessly at your nerve-ends. There was no question of encores after this, so we were released into the night feeling exhausted but satisfied after a weekend that is not likely to come around again very soon. ❑

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