



No influence on Kim Kashkashian is greater than her folk memory of Armenia

A unique empathy

Those of us who love the viola are living in a golden age – there's a galaxy of soloists to thrill us, not least Kim Kashkashian, one of the most distinctive voices on the string playing scene. Her own bears the American accent of her upbringing, but the voice she projects through her 1617 Amati is a little more complicated. Kashkashian's racial roots are plain to see: in her name, her darkish hair and fine bone structure and in the books lying on a coffee table in her Berlin apartment: one is a collection of prose pieces, *Armenia, Armenia* by the Russian poet Ossip Mandelstam, a victim of Stalinist purges; another is an anthology of Armenian folk tales.

This great virtuoso's membership of the vast persecuted Armenian diaspora is not only basic to her being, it also has a deep, very direct connection to her latest recording for the ECM New Series label, of works with orchestra by the Hungarians Bela Bartók, Peter Eötvös and György Kurtág. It links her through a unique empathy to Bartók, dying in poverty and exile in New York while struggling to finish his *Viola Concerto*; and to Eötvös, who has lived the life of a displaced musician since leaving Hungary in 1966 – his *Reptár* is bound to the idea of departure.

We talk about the importance of folklore and folk music to an Armenian or Hungarian. 'What happens to the feet and stomach is as important as the hands,' she says, gesturing across the table. 'There are more diaspora Armenians than there are in Armenia and I think that without exception diaspora Armenians are connected to an idea of "the old country". I have rural memories of my father and his sister singing, which tie me to Armenia. Singing seems to come naturally to Armenians – I don't know any who can't sing.' Kashkashian's grandparents on both sides emigrated to America after the First World War and spent the rest of their lives in a kind of time-warp, not speaking English and interacting only with other Armenians. Her father, Ardavast Dikran Kashkashian, was born in 'the old country', too, and her mother Elmas was born only a year after her parents emigrated.

Kim Kashkashian thinks 'this sense of longing, of trying to shorten the distance between you and a vanished land' links her to two other composers with whom she has worked for ECM, the Georgian Giya Kancheli and the Greek Eleni Karaindrou. 'When she played me some original folklore I could have imagined it was Armenian. I am also working with the modern Armenian

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composer Tigran Mansuryan. He is helping me to look into music by Komitas, who transcribed folksongs.' Her thumbnail sketch of Komitas (1869-1935), is of a monk who did so much for Armenian music but whose life ended in persecution by the Turks and mental breakdown. 'We'll definitely do a record which has a contemporary Armenian thrust to it, but we'll also look to the possibility of doing a CD of original material. Mansuryan plans a viola concerto, as well as a duo for Robyn and me.' Robyn Schulkowsky is a scintillating percussionist who appears with Kim on an ECM disc coupling pieces for viola and percussion by Paul Chihara and Linda Bouchard with the Shostakovich Sonata.

By now, readers unfamiliar with ECM's New Series will have gathered that it is an unusual outfit. In fact, it is dedicated to the unusual. Kashkashian's own ECM discography takes in Schnittke, Penderecki, Britten, Kancheli, Karaindrou, Kurtág and Hindemith. The only middle-of-the-road disc is one of Brahms sonatas with her regular piano partner, Robert Levin. Even her Bach sonatas have an offbeat aspect – the harpsichord is played by the jazz pianist Keith Jarrett. ECM discs are genuine examples of Wagner's ideal of *Gesamtkunst*, with distinctive artwork, photography, notes and engineering.

Kashkashian is the first to give credit to the label's founder,

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Manfred Eicher, a former jazz and classical bass player who takes personal charge of every ECM project. 'I feel quite grateful to be hooked into this process,' she says, 'where you can have an influence on the cover, the text – and where the leader of the company is an artist. If he sets the mikes and you start playing, he just looks – I've seen him blow on the cables – and it's a different sound. He's always able to sense the atmosphere during a recording and not let it get too narrow. If he thinks the players are getting in a rut or the engineer is thinking too much of the missing notes and not

enough of the big phrase, he will intervene.'

There is a connection between Kim's latest ECM disc and the time we first met, during the inaugural Lionel Tertis Viola Competition on the Isle of Man 20 years ago. Her semi-final recital was one of the best performances of anything by anyone I had heard. Those of us lucky enough to be present reeled out into the afternoon sunshine as if we had been pole-axed. But she could not play like that twice and in the final lost out to a younger American, Paul Neubauer – who in recent years has helped to prepare a new edition of Bartók's Viola Concerto.

For her recording, Kashkashian, working with Peter Eötvös in his capacity of conductor of the crack Netherlands Radio CO, has stuck with Serly's edition. 'We looked carefully at the manuscript and Peter corrected some instrumental errors. He did not refer to the new edition. I looked at it and accepted its version of a few places which were crystal clear in the manuscript. But we mainly stuck to Serly because as a whole picture it made more sense to us. I think it's great that both versions are available and that we have a choice.'

Between them Kashkashian and Eötvös have come up with a vital and convincing performance of the Bartók. The interpretations of Eötvös's own *Replica* and Kurtág's *Macswear* – the first segment of an early work but the only part he now wishes to preserve – sound equally authentic. Kim has had a close professional relationship with Kurtág for years and has played all his chamber music for viola, but working with Eötvös is a newer experience. She is full of praise for his structural sense and his exceptional ear for sonority – which is demonstrated by the recordings. 'It matters that he is a composer. He finds a way to breathe with the musical speech.'

This autumn Kashkashian will return to America to teach at the New England Conservatory, but will keep one foot in the old world. 'In my personal life, I've sacrificed a lot to live in Europe – away from friends and family – but musically it's more flexible.' And she has many ties in Europe, including her viola duo with the Paris-based Scots virtuoso Garth Knox, and a string trio with Leonidas Kavakos and Natalia Gutman, as well as projects for ECM. We must hope they will include more of her stock of some 20 concertos. Who said the viola has no repertoire? **Tully Potter**