

## DISCS UNDER DISCUSSION

Violist Kim Kashkashian's love of vocal music goes back to her childhood, and it still informs her work. She talks to **Zoë Rigden**

'My first memories of music are of my father's singing,' says Kim Kashkashian. Of Armenian descent, she grew up in Detroit, Michigan, and began playing the violin at the age of nine. 'Recordings were rare with us - we were living on a shoestring and didn't have a phonograph. I listened to the radio of course, but most of all I remember my father singing Armenian folk songs - Armenians are all singers.'

It was this emphasis on vocal music that drew her to the viola: 'It was the instrument that most matched my idea of vocal output.' Later, at school, she encountered her first recordings. 'I was at the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan, which had a brilliant record library - I just went in and ploughed my way through it. It was my introduction to modern music - I listened to Berio, Penderecki, Veress - I had no idea what I was listening to, but I loved it.'

It was at 18, however, that Kashkashian discovered the recordings that were to become lifelong companions. She became aware of the great chamber music repertoire - Mozart, Schumann, Beethoven - that for most comes before an introduction to modern music. 'The Budapest and Amadeus quartets made a huge impact on me, and particularly the playing of violist Boris Kroyt.

He achieved real vocalisation through his instrument - and that's what I'm aiming for. I particularly remember a recording of him playing at Marlboro with Harold Wright and Murray Perahia performing Bruch, Mozart and Schumann.' (ncs)

Norbert Brainin was another player Kashkashian hoped to emulate. 'I felt the same way about his playing as I did about Kroyt's - how vocal it was. His recording of the Brahms quintets and sextets [with the Amadeus Quartet and guests] is superb.' (DG 474 358-2)

Live performances seem to be a recurrent theme in her choices: does she generally prefer them to studio-produced recordings? 'There is something extraordinary in a live performance that one rarely finds in a studio. Listen to Rudolf Firkušný playing Janáček's *On an Overgrown Path* - it is an organic whole, like a performance in one breath. (DG 449764-2GOR2) When you record in pieces, which I often do, you have to work hard not to lose that sense of wholeness: it can be very difficult to maintain.

'Another recording I remember from that time is Benita Valente singing the *Shepherds on the Rock*, again at Marlboro. (Sony 48176) I love the spin she puts on the sound, the intelligence of the phrasing,' she says.

At Peabody Kashkashian was taught by Walter Trampler and Karen Tuttle, and she also came into contact with pianist Leon Fleisher. 'His recording of the Brahms D minor Concerto with the Cleveland Orchestra is near perfect for me,' she says. 'It has such depth: the sound comes out of his whole being.' (Sony MH2K63225)

She acknowledges that her early musical influences have had a strong impact on the course of her career. 'I hadn't really thought about it before, but I suppose it's obvious: the things I listened to most in my youth, new music and vocal music - and by that I also mean instrumental music with a vocal quality - these are the things I have been drawn to in my career.' In this vein, Kashkashian enthuses about her disc of Armenian Folk songs by Komitas, whom she calls 'the Armenian Bartók', arranged by the contemporary composer Tigran Mansurian. (ECM 1754)

In the same genre, she is excited about a new disc by the János Ensemble. 'This is an incredible record of Bulgarian and Armenian folk music. It's the source music for Bartók and Liszt, and you can really hear the melodies they used. I'm fascinated by this style of music. (HCD 18191)

'If there's one contemporary violist who inspires me, it's Garth Knox. Our sound is



very different but we've both learnt from one another. His recording of solo viola music is extraordinary. (Montaigne-Auvidis MO 782082) His playing has a truly vocal quality, and I like the contemporary works he chooses - there are those themes again! ■

ncs = not currently available

Violist Kim Kashkashian has an international career as a chamber musician and soloist. In her youth she won prizes in the ARD Munich and Lionel Tertis competitions, and she has recorded for Deutsche Grammophon, Sony and ECM. She is well known for her work with modern composers including Gubaidulina, Jaks, Penderecki and Kurtag and through these collaborations and others has significantly extended the solo viola repertoire.