B O R O D I N Q U A R T E T

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH

24 MAY 2005

'The Soviets were only interested in the money'

Valentin Berlinsky tells Geoffrey Norris about his amazing 60 years with the Borodin Quartet and Shostakovich's wonky metronome

On May 18, 1938, two young cellists took part in a concert given by pupils of a Moscow music school for children. One was a 10-year-old Mstislav Rostropovich, the other his friend, Valentin Berlinsky, who had just entered his teens. Almost seven decades later, the two men remain close friends and continue to enrich the world of classical music, Rostropovich as soloist and conductor, Berlinsky as cellist of the venerable Borodin String Quartet, which celebrates its diamond jubilee this season.

Unique: Borodin Quartet, with Valentin Berlinsky second from left

It is rare for a quartet to have an unbroken history of 60 years, unique for the same artist to have been a member throughout. While there have been changes of occupancy in the other three seats over the years, Berlinsky, now a nimble 80-year-old, took part in the quartet's first public concerts in 1945 (when it was known as the Moscow Conservatoire Quartet) and has been its common thread ever since.

He was destined for a life in chamber music. His father played the violin in a family quartet. Talent and aptitude were bequeathed to the young Valentin, who is now passing them on to the dynasty's next generations. The festivities for Moscow's Borodin/Berlinsky birthdays earlier this year focused not just on the quartet but on performances by Berlinsky's pianist daughter Lyudmila, and grandchildren Mariya (piano) and Dmitry (cello) - all of whom are due to appear at one of three celebratory concerts in London this weekend.

Another concert features, understandably, a quartet by the Russian composer Borodin. But why did Berlinsky and his colleagues name themselves after Borodin? "In Russian quartet music we could only think of about two composers - Borodin and Tchaikovsky," he says. "But there was already a Tchaikovsky Quartet. It played only for a couple of years, but

the name was blocked. Getting the name of Borodin - or any other - in the 1950s was a serious task. It had to pass through various Communist Party institutions, and the government had to issue a decree. Eventually, in 1955, we were accorded the title State Borodin Quartet.

"He was an amazing composer," Berlinsky adds. "There is a real Russian feeling. We've played Borodin's quartets hundreds of times, but they never cease to stir the emotions." Since those early days, the Borodins have run the whole gamut of the quartet repertoire, with the mellow timbre that is their trademark and, following their first foreign tours in the 1950s, with an international acclaim second to none. The music of Shostakovich has become one of their mainstays. They played the Third Quartet from manuscript in 1947, and thereafter the Borodins and Shostakovich forged a close bond of friendship. They often played works through to him. Did he offer any interpretative tips? "Sometimes he commented on our tempos. We'd say that we were only following his own metronome marks, and his reply was, 'My metronome at home is broken. Don't pay any attention to my metronome marks.' "

After Shostakovich's death in 1975, the Borodins were the first to give a complete cycle of all 15 quartets in a single season. They have also embraced the entire Beethoven canon, and in recent years have given parallel performances of the two. "We've been playing both composers all our lives, and came to the conclusion that no other composers contributed so much to the string quartet literature. They are both so powerful, and extended the boundaries of what a quartet can express." And that assessment could apply equally to the Borodin Quartet itself.

Borodin highlights

On playing at Stalin's funeral, March 1953

"We got a call from the Ministry of Culture to say that we were going to be privileged to see our leader off on his final journey. We were told to be ready at a certain time, and a car would take us to the Colonnaded Hall. So we were taken there - the Georgian Quartet, David Oistrakh, Svyatoslav Richter, Tatyana Nikolayeva and others - and one after another we went on stage and performed. Stalin's coffin was in the hall, with his relatives and members of the Politburo - Malenkov, Beria and Molotov - standing by. We spent three days there, almost without sleeping. Halfway through, we were suddenly taken off to the House of Composers to play in a similar ceremony for Prokofiev, who had died on the same day. There were few people there, because they were all in the Colonnaded Hall. Then we went back to Stalin. Somebody said to me, 'Do you think we're going to be paid for this?' 'Of course not,' I replied. 'They think it's a great honour.' "

On working with Shostakovich

"Shostakovich was part of the quartet's biography from the first time we met him. When we were working together, he was serious, listening. But he was different at the table with close friends, drinking vodka and telling anecdotes. With people he wasn't close to, he was buttoned up. But in the company of the limited number of people he trusted, he could be very open and natural. I remember one remarkable evening, when our first violinist, Rostislav Dubinsky, had a house-warming, and the guests included Shostakovich, Richter and Oistrakh. It was a very nice warm atmosphere." As to Shostakovich's views on some other composers, "We were once in London, strolling in Hyde Park, and I mentioned that Luigi Nono wanted to write a piece for us. Shostakovich became a bit gloomier, and said, 'Have you played all the Haydn quartets? Did you know he wrote 83 quartets? Why don't you play all the Haydn quartets first?' "

On travelling abroad during the Cold War

Soviet artists could only travel abroad with official sanction. "Everything was done through Goskontsert [the state concert agency]. In the beginning, we only went to socialist countries: our first trip was in 1955 to East Germany, then Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland. Our first time beyond the Iron Curtain was to Italy in 1958. We had nothing to do with choosing where we went: we had lots of offers from the West, but couldn't accept them. As to repertoire, we were given 'recommendations' by a special ideological department of the Central Committee. Two-thirds of the programme had to be of Russian or Soviet music, but there was a hole in the ideological system. Western impresarios might ask us for Beethoven, Mozart or Schubert. We'd agree this with the impresario; with Goskontsert we'd confirm a programme of Schubert plus Russian music, and on the platform we'd go ahead and play Schubert, Beethoven and Mozart. Nobody kept an eye on our programmes. Goskontsert wasn't interested in what we played, but only in the money we brought back."