



KATIE MEETS

Viktoria Mullova, violinist

‘I knew that doing well was a way to a better life. A way out of the big prison, freedom to travel...’

words by **Katie Derham** photographs by **Sasha Gusov**

‘FRANKLY, I WOULD HAVE BEEN HAPPY WASHING DISHES to get out of Russia.’ It’s a comment said with such vehemence, such bitterness and passion, that you’d imagine Viktoria Mullova had only just left the mother country. But in fact the story of her defection, dramatic and well-known as it is, took place 20 years ago. It’s worth the re-telling. Already a critically acclaimed violinist, Viktoria found the atmosphere and conditions in Communist Russia unbearable. ‘Every time I was asked to perform abroad, I never knew if I’d get a passport, if I was deemed a good enough citizen to go. It was nothing to do with being a good musician. It was nerve-wracking, and after a while I couldn’t take it. That’s why I left.’ Not even her parents could know, but Viktoria started making plans. ‘I was performing in Finland, and, while I couldn’t get asylum there, the border was open with Sweden, so I crossed over and went to the US embassy. Unfortunately, I’d chosen a bank holiday weekend and the embassy was shut. I had to hide from the KGB in a hotel until the embassy

re-opened.’ It’s a tale that smacks of *The Bourne Supremacy* or a Le Carré novel, but evidently Viktoria is made of pretty stern stuff. Of her feelings during that weekend in hiding, she says, ‘No, it wasn’t scary – it was an adventure!’

Life now is very, very different. We’re talking in the extremely stylish house in West London that she and her husband, cellist Matthew Barley, designed and rebuilt from scratch, and family life is much in evidence. For Viktoria, the past 20 years have been a whirlwind of critical and popular success, international performance, a couple of high-profile romances and three children: Mischa, 13, Katya, 10, and 7-year-old Nadia. The one thing that hasn’t changed throughout her life, though, has been Viktoria’s dedication to her violin and practice, practice, practice. Until now, that is. She’s just taken an eight-month sabbatical and has enjoyed every minute. ‘I’ve loved everything about it. Mischa, my son, says it’s been the best year of his life. Normally I am very, very, very busy – packing and

Recording the new disc was a new challenge for Viktoria – but one she relished



'Giardino Armonico have been my idols for years; they're quite extreme'

unpacking, flying around. Until the kids went to school, they travelled with me and came to concerts. In fact some conductors had them on stage with their bottles! But that's had to change. So it has been fabulous to spend time with them and travel as a family.'

When we speak, a tour is looming for Viktoria in two weeks' time. Surely that's a huge challenge after eight months off? 'You know what, it's easy to get the playing back! The callouses on my fingers are growing back now, but I admit practising did hurt to start with!'

It shouldn't be a surprise that she felt like a rest – she had played non-stop since the age of four. 'My parents decided I should learn – I'd never even heard of a violin. Father was dedicated; he insisted I practise every day, he came to my lessons, he was learning with me. He was not a musician himself, none of the family was. A teacher had told him that the most important thing was the parent, and that talent came afterwards! It was like brushing my teeth – I didn't question it.' There seems to be a twinge of resentment in her tone,

but Viktoria will not admit to being pushed. 'No, I was doing well, so I guess that was my motivation. I was accepted at a special school, and then the ambition kicked in – competitions and so on – and I knew that doing well was a way to a better life. A way out of the big prison, freedom to travel, to earn some money – though the government kept 90 per cent!' So the rarified world of special school was reasonably enjoyable? 'Well, I didn't have many friends. They were jealous of my success and I was dedicated to practice. I probably wasn't that nice!' There's no question her experiences as a child have had an impact. She is vehement that her children won't play the violin. 'They play the piano, the flute, the French horn... NOT the violin! They don't want to, and I won't let them.'

There's another sabbatical planned for 2007, but plenty to squeeze in before then. After 20 years with the record label Philips – a happy relationship – Viktoria has moved on, so that she could make a recording of Vivaldi her way. 'My contract was nearly over; I had recorded some Mozart, some Beethoven, and was planning the Vivaldi, when they cancelled it and stopped all classical recordings. It was so disappointing. So I thought, I'll do it myself. It's been quite an adventure. I could have lost everything. I recorded it, paid for it – the musicians, their accommodation, the editing, everything. It's nearly done and I'm very, very pleased.' She's done a deal with a label called Onyx and signed a contract whereby she owns the rights to the recording and can do what she wants with it. She wants to make sure that experiences she's had in the past, where recordings have been deleted from a record company's list or there have been problems with distribution, don't happen again. And it seems the project has

been both challenging and fun. She describes the Vivaldi disc, recorded with Baroque experts Il Giardino Armonico, as her best ever.

'Giardino Armonico have been my idols for years; they're quite extreme, not at all boring Baroque music! There are no rules for them – they're always experimenting, always fresh, never stale. It's such a great feeling when you're in the group. Giovanni Antonini, the director, is an amazing recorder player. He heard my Bach and contacted me to play at the Styrian Festival of Baroque music in Graz ages ago. It took a few years before I felt ready. It has to be in your blood, playing Baroque music on period instruments – it's not just the technical stuff. When you see them play, you see it is completely different. Physically you feel it, and the way you are on stage looks different too.' Her excitement is infectious. 'We were recording in a church near Milan – it wasn't too expensive. We recorded for 10-12 hours for three days and they stood the whole time. The body is so important to them... it's almost dance sometimes! No other band does that. Sometimes they sound like a rock band. But without their director, it wouldn't come close. He inspires every musician there.'

So there's already a tour planned to promote the disc. And then there may be plans for another jazz album with husband Matthew (they've already recorded a disc called *Through the Looking Glass*) and a contemporary piece commissioned for her by Fraser Trainer, which she'll perform with Matthew's band. It looks likely to be another busy couple of years, but somehow I know the quality of Viktoria's work will be even greater now that she's discovered the delights of rest and relaxation in the heart of her charming family, after decades of highly driven professionalism. ■



Katie Derham presents the Hall of Fame Concert every Sunday on Classic FM from 5-7pm



ON DISC



Vivaldi: Violin Concertos
Il Giardino Armonico/
Giovanni Antonini

The disc Viktoria's new disc of Vivaldi concertos includes four violin concertos and the Concerto in B minor for four violins and cello, which she performs with the charismatic Italian Baroque group Il Giardino Armonico, directed by Giovanni Antonini. Look out for a review next month.
Onyx 4001

This autumn sees Viktoria's next release on the Onyx label: the Schubert Octet with her own Mullova Ensemble. Her tantalising possible recording plans include Bach solo violin sonatas and Schubert with Katia Labeque.