



Moscow, St. Basil Cathedral

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE... AND DESPAIR

By Grant Llewellyn

Remember *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*? Those two iconic Russian words (“openness” and “rebuilding”) became a beacon of hope for so many of us in the West (I can only imagine what they could have meant for those in the East) during the Gorbachev era in the late 1980s. They were the two words ringing in my ears as a green 28-year-old conductor when I stepped off the plane in Moscow twenty years ago for my first visit to the former USSR to conduct orchestras in Kharkov, Ukraine and Irkutsk, Siberia. In those days everything Soviet went through Moscow. It was 1989 and I was met at the airport by Irina who was to be my faithful Party Watchdog for the duration of my stay. Now it’s twenty years on and Ekaterina greets me with a smile and a warmth that could never have been tolerated by the party back in the day.

We emerge from the airport into the Moscow traffic which is a topic I should get out of my system early on. It is simply hell on earth. The duration of any given journey has a variable of up to 1000%. I witnessed and suffered this uncertainty on a number of occasions. My journey to and from rehearsals took from ten minutes to one hour and forty-five minutes depending – (and there

didn’t seem to be any particular rush hour. You have a choice of twenty-four!).

The trip in from the airport took two and a half hours, but only thirty minutes on the way back. I once sat twenty minutes to go one hundred yards. As a musician I am perhaps not best qualified to assess urban planning, but when you have a population of ten million, most of whom now have cars, and you permit them to park at ninety degrees to the pavement on both sides of the street you cut down the available lanes for through traffic from four to one. Add to this the Muscovites’ apparent divine right to stop and double-park at any given place or time, in addition to the complete absence of any multi-story, single-story or any-story parking garages and then you have a recipe for gridlock.

While we’re on the subject of cars I must say that Moscow seems to have an extraordinary number of the largest SUVs on the market (eat your heart out Texas), and outstandingly the highest density of top-of-the-line Range Rovers (most with tinted windows) of any city in the world. It seems to be the vehicle of choice for wealthy Russians and combines the toughness and class that they desire. A sort of Hummer with style. There is a kind of

authoritarian anti-establishment feel to it all, or do I mean antidisestablishmentarianism?

There I’ve said it, and now I can get back to the love.

As a Welshman I was here to conduct the Moscow State Symphony in a program of Tango music by the Argentinian composer Astor Piazzolla, performed by bandoneon and guitar soloists from Croatia. Go figure. This should be the ultimate mismatch on paper, and maybe it would be, but let’s start at the beginning.

DAY ONE

I rehearse the solo septet for the *Concierto de Nacar* (in addition to the bandoneon and guitar the piece calls for a string quintet, piano and drums). The full orchestra has been called away at the last minute by an invitation/summons to appear at the Kremlin. And who was I to deny Medvedev and Putin a little light relief from the affairs of state? In the interests of Russo-Welsh relations I didn’t object too strongly. I arrived to find a string quartet minus the viola (“but don’t worry, she’s really good”) and a piano. The drummer was arriving later. The cellist had no music, and when it



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arrived, he had clearly never seen it before in his life, nor did he seem able to dance the Tango. The drummer turned up eventually, took a further twenty minutes to set up, then declared that he was a rock drummer and proceeded to count off the rehearsal “a-one, two, three, four” before starting each time.

I had to point out that it was my prerogative to set the tempo, besides which the number four in Russian is *chtyryrie*, a beautiful word, but one that got in the way of any intended rhythm. I was encouraged by the violins, both of whom had an authentic Latin *braggadocio*; one was even called Mario, though he didn’t speak any Spanish when I tried him out. The pianist Mikhail was obviously running the show and proved to be the teacher of most of the players, taking pains to reassure me that everything would be just fine and that they really didn’t need to rehearse with the orchestra on day three, as was scheduled, because they all “needed to hear the bandoneon and guitar” who arrived on day four. I was not convinced and it also transpired that the elusive viola was not available on day three either (“but she is still really good”). I reflected on the way back to the hotel that I really needed them all at that rehearsal and told Katya (we were now on familiar terms).

In case you are all beginning to feel the despair more than the love I should tell you that I was staying at the most exquisite small hotel I have ever enjoyed. A discreet, luxurious palace, just around the corner from the Bolshoi and Red Square, which made one dizzy with thoughts of 19th century opulence and privilege. I almost felt guilty at this taste of Tsarist Russia from before the revolution. Almost.

DAY TWO

Undoubtedly the finest breakfast spread I have ever witnessed set me up for my first encounter with the orchestra. Orchestral musicians and conductors will tell you that the die is cast in the first few minutes of the first rehearsal and there is some truth in this belief. That being the case this relationship should have been a disaster. Within the first fifty bars of music, I found that the percussion had no parts, the bar numbers were wrong from bar 47 onwards, though only in some instruments, the first oboe had most of the clarinet part, and the double bass pages were back to front.

Add my dubious attempt to ascertain whether or not anybody understood a word I was saying and you can imagine the drama. Incredibly the orchestra did not seem too fazed by this. It evidently must happen all the time. I tried to lighten the mood by joking about last night’s football – Russia had narrowly failed to qualify for the 2010 World Cup, being beaten 1-0 by Slovenia. But I don’t think they quite appreciated my Welsh humor.

My main concern was that the entire program required the orchestra to play an accompanying role, not something that any orchestra relishes let alone a proud Russian orchestra. Fortunately Piazzolla does occasionally give the musicians some musical meat to sink their Slavic teeth into, and so we were all able to let off some artistic steam. Nonetheless, it was a tough rehearsal and I vowed to shoot the publishers who had produced the parts and were presumably receiving a fee for their pathetic efforts. I made plans to set up a soloists’ rehearsal the following evening with bandoneon and guitar to be sure that we, at least were on the same page.

DAY THREE

Having been in L.A. the previous week I am slowly getting used to the eleven-hour time difference, which basically means that my 10am rehearsals start at 11pm the night before for my body clock. It is probably best not to think about it too much.

I am greeted in the lobby by a delightful vision in green who looks strangely familiar. This is Sdeniya, the twin sister of Katya and never were there two more lovely chaperones. Upon arrival at the rehearsal Katya appears with two bewildering pieces of information. Firstly, the entire solo septet had been fired, to be replaced by soloists from the orchestra, who had been duly informed of the decision. Whose decision? I dimly sensed the specter of totalitarianism again. Evidently, after I had insisted that the original septet turn up for today’s rehearsal as scheduled, it emerged that half of them had other gigs and so the orchestra director sacked them all.

I vaguely regretted never meeting the “talented” violist and I was not to see Mario ever again. The other news was that the bandoneon and guitar soloists, due in that afternoon from Croatia, had arrived at Zagreb airport to be told that their Lufthansa flights had been cancelled six months ago, and that they were rebooked on a flight leaving that evening,

arriving Moscow at 3am tomorrow morning. No one had told them. Typical German inefficiency. I was beginning to sympathize with Noel Coward’s immortal character “Senorita Nina from Argentina, despised the Tango, although she never was a girl to let a man go.” So much for our soloists’ rehearsal.

But not to worry, my mother and my Auntie Janet were arriving that evening and they would sort everything out!

DAY FOUR

I arrive early at the rehearsal expecting to find that everything had changed overnight, but lo and behold there were two Croats, bleary eyed on one hour’s sleep but ready and willing to talk and play Piazzolla. Miran Vaupotic (bandoneon) and Frane Kaupotac (guitar) are two very talented young musicians who are making quite a name for themselves in the Classical/Tango world. With the orchestra they were quick to appreciate the musical considerations (which were improving) and the orchestra applauded their heroic journey to be there and their stamina during the day.

Now that we are all present and correct let me dwell for a moment on the extraordinary world of Piazzolla. This is no ordinary tango music, but what the composer called “tango nuevo,” unmistakably tango but much harder hitting and spicier in every way. The difference between a capsicum and a jalapeno, or maybe even a habaero. They are all peppers after all. The Russians and Northern Europeans have a love affair with this music. Where else would you find sold out concerts of all Piazzolla besides Helsinki, Stockholm, Copenhagen and Buenos Aires? It is not “easy listening” as was assumed in a television interview I conducted before the concert, but rather very “difficult listening,” with jarring rhythms, brutal dissonances, and underlying everything that irresistible, intoxicating Tempo de Tango. It simultaneously seduces and offends the senses. The bandoneon, though invented in Germany, is the chosen instrument of the tango and technically seems to me to be the Devil’s Instrument with a hellish pattern of keys on either side of the bellows for both hands to negotiate. It helps if you are some kind of contortionist, I think. Its close relation the accordion is, of course staple Russian fare, and Miran even used a Russian-made accordion (they manufacture the Rolls Royce of accordions) for one of the pieces, “Aconagua,” named for Argentina’s (and South America’s) highest mountain.

Sunday night in Moscow in late November with mum and aunt. Ira Gershwin would have asked “What to do, what to do, what to do? The outlook was decidedly blue,” but as there was no fog and it wasn’t London town, we went for a dinner cruise on the Moscow River. A delivery had just been made of six \$2 million ice-breaking river boats from Turkey and so we felt reassured as we tucked into our food that we stood a good chance of returning to port. That, and the fact that our boat was called Geronimo, and frankly there was no ice to be seen anywhere, not even in my vodka.

DAY FIVE

Dress Rehearsal. Finally I get into the Tchaikovsky Hall and reflect that I had spent the previous evening on the river in which Tchaikovsky had unsuccessfully attempted to drown himself towards the end of his life. I had a job to do however, and could not afford to be maudlin. This was the first and last chance I would have to work out the choreography of the show, the lay-out of the stage and the real balance challenges. The bandoneon and guitar needed to be amplified to have any chance of being heard. Miran and Frane had slept for sixteen hours and were raring to go.

The orchestra seemed to be finally finding the groove, though alarmingly there were still misprints and basic bowings being debated. We get to grips, for the first time, with the “Four Seasons of Buenos Aires” and I remember the time I had spent in the city on tour with the Boston Symphony. Forty-eight hours of the most exhausting and exhilarating activity I had ever experienced. The Porteños (named for the harbor area of Buenos Aires) seem able to dance all night without stop and then work all day, though I did fear for the Gross National Product. I managed it for forty-eight hours then collapsed on a plane to Caracas.

One of the rare redeeming features of the former Soviet Union was that the arts were made available to all through government subsidies. Concerts were packed with everyone from the poorest students to the most powerful politburo chiefs. I was anxious to see who would comprise the current Moscow audience, which was sold out at \$40 or \$50 a ticket. My mother and aunt disappointingly assured me that they were surrounded by the monied elite that night.





Peterhof Grand Palace



St. Petersburg, Spasa Na Krovi

BITTER, SWEET, WILD, ANGRY, MELANCHOLY, EXOTIC, EROTIC, DANGEROUS AND PASSIONATE, BUT NEVER SENTIMENTAL.

And so to the concert. Sergei appears from nowhere in my dressing room to declare he was an actor who was to present the concert and could I please tell him how to pronounce my surname. “Levelin” was the nearest I could get him to it and he disappeared in a waft of cologne only to reappear in costume dressed as a cross between a Russian sailor and Liberace. This apparently was *haute couture*, or maybe he was dressed for Nina. Remember “Nina from Argentina?” She married a “sailor, who had acquired a wooden leg in Venezuela, and she married him because he couldn’t dance.”

A television crew had also arrived and had no qualms about sticking their lights and cameras into every closet and corner uninvited. I am told that the results could be found on YouTube the next morning, but I dare not look.

Miran and Frane prove themselves to be first class artists and adjust and adapt to the orchestra, as it pushes and pulls in an attempt to find the Piazzolla groove. We eventually lock in, and it’s off to the world of the Tango. Bitter, sweet, wild, angry, melancholy, exotic, erotic, dangerous and passionate, but never sentimental. Can you feel the love?



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David Hartman and Jodee Nimerichter

Dinner at Coquette

by David Hartman

Weekday afternoon rush hour. I-40 Durham to Raleigh is a parking lot. Going to be late. Hate being late, especially to dinner. Cell rings – can't answer – yeah am on the way. Would someone please explain the inner and outer beltline? Never mind. After over an hour, finally, there's the Six Forks Road exit, then left into North Hills. Bingo. Made it!

It was a chilly, breezy dusk in early December. Christmas lights twinkled around the mall. "The First Noel" filled our ears and warmed us from speakers unseen. A teen girl with a red Santa Claus hat and scarf flowing bounced into J.C. Penney. Christmas shopping season is in full swing.

There's the restaurant, Coquette – French. Cute name. Four fabulous artists are

about to meet and have dinner. This is the beginning of a North Carolina Symphony ritual that happens nearly two dozen times each year as guest artists and conductors descend on Raleigh, seemingly from nowhere, but, in truth, arrive from points north, south, east and west around the globe to join the orchestra for several rehearsals, then, usually, three performances at Meymandi Concert Hall and nearby communities. Then on Sunday the visitors, fresh from thrilling us with their extraordinary music, will disappear into the skies as magically as they arrived in early week.

But, this is just the start, the meeting of four people who have all arrived within the last few hours from many time zones away. They have never met each

other. Well, that's not exactly true. We can assume that two of them have met because they're married – to each other. That would be Pascal and Ami Rogé. They play the piano, sometimes the same one at the same time, at other times two pianos. He's French and for more than three decades has played the major music halls of the world. Ami was born in Japan and grew up in the United States. When you think, "French piano music," you think, "the Rogés," who have concertized together for many years, but were married just last spring, twice (more on that later). This week the Rogés will play Poulenc as the orchestra performs an evening of all French music. The Rogés arrived from recent appearances in Hong Kong, Rotterdam and England.

Across the table from the Rogés will be the brilliant and charismatic Music Director of the North Carolina Symphony, Welshman Grant Llewellyn. The high frequent flyer-mileage conductor just blew in from appearances in Los Angeles and Moscow with one night at home in Wales thrown in. And next to him is Jodee Nimerichter, Co-Director of the American Dance Festival, the six week international modern dance festival that begins its 73rd season at Duke this summer. Jodee and Grant are meeting each other and the Rogés for the first time.

Safe to say, given their recent travels, that all four are jet lagged. The clock on the wall says 7pm, but there's no telling where their body clocks are ticking, probably somewhere between droopy drowsy and confusion. As we headed to the table, Grant whispered to please forgive him if he nodded off with the appetizer. Actually, the energy that would develop around the table would make sure that could not happen, and it didn't. Good job, Grant. You stayed awake!

Something to start, a glass of wine and menus, in French. The very American waiter was charming and of good humor, but the poor guy was blind-sided by the fact that three of his four guests were French speakers. As the waiter methodically explained the menu, Pascal, especially, was pleased to not only pronounce the words in his beautiful French, but detail the culinary history of many of the dishes. Given the expectation of conversations about music, the tutorial on French cooking was an added treat with the waiter the most delighted.

Coquette's reputation is good and the food did not disappoint. The French dishes were, in the gushed words of my former colleague of many years back, the late Julia Child, "Yum!" (Julia taught me how to make many dishes, including omelettes, crepes and Rhode Island clam chowder. I'm grateful that, at the same time, she assured me in her familiar bubbling way of talking, that "cheffing" and cooking were not my calling. This, of course, came as no surprise to me. It's amazing, by the way, how much Julia sounds like Meryl Streep. But, I digress.)

With hungers satisfied and palates assuaged, the focus turned to music. So often, when people meet for the first time,

there is the warm-up, the get acquainted period as we size each other up – who's quiet or talky – who's naughty or nice, or both. Sometimes it all clicks or can fall flat. Well, this evening instantly became a romp of the smart, talented, urbane, unpretentious, wonderfully sensitive (where do I stop!) and fun! These four world-class artists, each so accomplished in his/her own field, playing at the top of their games, shared the thoughtful insights of people who are experienced, world-travelled and warmly confident in their own skins without being smug. As they sat face-to-face and elbow-to-elbow, energy enveloped the table like a swirling cloud. Each comment and observation kicked into the scrum of ideas kept the dialogue perking, at times, rockin'.

These four people are among a small minority who had the guts to follow their dreams and their passions, what they loved doing, making those passions into careers, despite knowing there were no guarantees and the roads would be long, disciplined, and at times, perhaps, painful. And this evening, at a nice dinner in North Carolina, their love of what they do and gratitude for their professional positions were on prominent display along with giant respect for each other. They were not like kids yelling, "Wow! I actually AM a pro ball player! How good does it get!" But, not far off.

A difficult challenge for performers (actors, dancers, musicians, conductors) is to explain, articulate for the rest of us what it is they actually do when performing and how they do it? (Many years back, I asked Jimmy Cagney that question about his acting. His answer was concise and clear. "Muh boy, I walk in, plant my feet, look the other guy in the eye and tell the truth.") Many, if not most, artists would not be so facile at explaining their craft and art, but Pascal took on the challenge.

Pascal: "I'm not very good at talking." With a wry smile and a twinkle in her eye Ami leaned in and gently intoned, "Yes, you are!" Pascal continued, "I find it difficult to put into words the emotions I feel when I play. Sometimes people want information, hear me talk about the music or what I am doing, but I never talk before my concerts. I want people to just close their eyes, listen and go with the experience. Many people tell me later that



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