# How's your TRILL?

*A Conversation with Ignat Solzhenitsyn*

Every high schooler cracking open *Romeo and Juliet* or museum visitor getting a first look at the water lilies knows that a few artists, though long passed, remain eternal. Putting it very simply, the reason for their longevity may be the new wrinkles, colors, subtleties – in short, the mysteries – uncovered and rediscovered each time we return to their work.

Such is the case with Beethoven, unquestionably one of history's leading artistic lights and a man at whom we take a direct look during concerts in Chapel Hill (October 27) and Raleigh (October 28 & 29). Our guest for these performances, renowned pianist and conductor Ignat Solzhenitsyn, is no stranger to the composer. He has been frequently celebrated for his interpretation of Beethoven's work, including resounding praise for breathing new life into those old music scores.

"Great Beethoven performances don't come along all that often," wrote *Philadelphia Inquirer* critic David Patrick Stearns following a 2008 concert by the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, which Solzhenitsyn led as principal conductor for six years. "Modern performers seem intimidated into respectful detachment rather than on-the-spot inspiration. You get used to it; it's still Beethoven, after all…Under Ignat Solzhenitsyn, the group has been a revitalizing force with Beethoven, but now more than ever."

You can understand our excitement, then, to welcome Solzhenitsyn back to the North Carolina Symphony, this time to perform Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4. It will be Solzhenitsyn's third appearance with the Symphony, following a successful Mozart/Brahms celebration in 2003 and acclaimed performances at our Schubert festival in 2006. Even for a man with his experience – and his reputation with the works of Beethoven – this performance will present some unique challenges. That's to be expected with one of those eternal artists.

**Opus: Tell us a little about yourself: where did you grow up? Other than piano, what were some of the things that interested you as a child?**

**IS:** I was born in Moscow and grew up in Switzerland, then Vermont. Being born into a Russian family, I loved reading and chess from an early age.

**How and when did you become interested in the piano? Where did you study?**

There was a baby grand that came with our house in Vermont, and it drew me immediately. I studied at first with teachers in the Vermont area, and then went to London at age 14, after being accepted by the great Maria Curcio. Eventually, I returned to the U.S. and completed a double major in piano and conducting at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia.

**What is it about classical music that speaks to you? What made you choose it over other forms of expression?**

More than other forms of art, music seems to speak directly to my core, to the inner me. It is something beyond reason, beyond emotion, something even more fundamental.

**What is the best thing about having a career as a classical pianist? What is the downside?**

The best thing about having a career in music is the music itself, thinking about it, performing it, hearing it. The downside is that, as with all art, the finish line keeps receding into the distance.

**What music do you like to listen to in your free time?**

Haydn quartets, Bruckner symphonies, anything by Brahms.

**Who is the most underrated classical composer, in your opinion?**

It could be Mendelssohn. It could be Shostakovich. But the best answer is Brahms, whose awe-inspiring synthesis of reason and emotion is so sophisticated that even most musicians fail adequately to perceive the full measure of his genius.

**Some critics are concerned that classical music is a dying art form. How do you respond to that?**

Nothing immortal can die. The forms and trappings of musical performance might change from one era to another, but the underlying nourishment remains essential to our self-awareness as humans. Should we ever cease to thirst for Beethoven (or Shakespeare or Dostoyevsky, for that matter), then truly, in the haunting words of Lord Balfour, "Man will go down into the pit and all his thought will perish."

**What is your practice routine? And do you have any performance rituals or superstitions?**

On a concert day, I like to go through the entire program in the morning. Then lunch and sleep. No dinner until afterwards.

**Historical figure you wish you could meet?**

Jesus of Nazareth.

**What is your fantasy career?**

Polar explorer. Even today names like Scott, Shackleton, Amundsen and Peary are synonymous with bravery, heroism, self-sacrifice.

**Your personal hero?**

Beethoven.

**Your biggest self-indulgence/guilty pleasure?**

Surfing the internet.

**Rudolf Serkin once said something to the effect that a performer could have all the musical feeling in the world, but if he didn't have a good trill he couldn't play Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 well. In other words, a solid foundation of technique is essential to projecting the emotion of the piece. First, how is your trill? But more seriously, what are your thoughts about technique vs. emotion in the success of a performance?**

This is a terrific example, because trills in Beethoven are very much expressive devices that outline some of his most poignant music. We can no more separate technique from music-making than we can indicate a preference for running with the left leg or the right.

**The Concerto's second movement has been described as a contest between the piano as pacifist and the orchestra as aggressor. Gradually the pacifist wins over the aggressor, and they stop opposing each other and start playing together. What can you tell us about the metaphorical messaging behind that idea? Are there other works you like to play that have a philosophical underpinning?**

Going back to Liszt and even Czerny, the atmosphere of this movement is associated with the pleading of Orpheus at the gates of Hades. The ideas of all-conquering love, indomitable human will, conditional victory and certainly a multitude of others are embedded in this dramatic and deeply moving myth. Of course, the irresistible power of this ancient narrative makes the Fourth Concerto especially compelling, but, in truth, all great music, probably without exception, has philosophical underpinnings that are central to its message. They that have ears let them hear.

**What piece of music has presented the greatest challenge to you? How did you meet that challenge?**

The greatest challenge frequently seems to lie straight ahead, while past successes (less so, past failures) are quickly forgotten. What keeps me awake at night is how best to bring across the next piece of music I am working on.

**You're both a conductor and a soloist. How is it different for you to be one in a given week and then the other the following week?**

Since I do both so much, the transition is quite natural. The main difference is in the much more intimate interaction with the musicians of the orchestra that occurs when conducting.

**You've been to Raleigh several times now. What do you most look forward to, other than, of course, the concert itself?**

I've made some close friends in Raleigh over the years, and I look forward to catching up with them while in town. ●