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Maxim Vengerov

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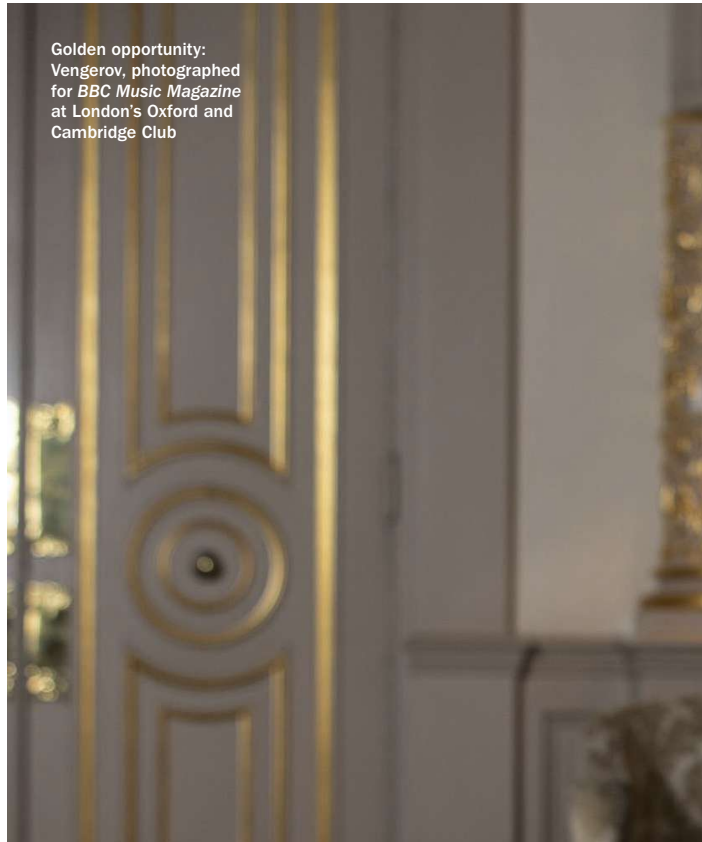
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Thirteen years ago, Russian violinist Maxim Vengerov hung up his bow and darted for the hills. Having now returned to playing, he celebrates 40 years on the concert stage with a renewed enthusiasm and a burgeoning conducting career. **Richard Morrison** meets him

PHOTOGRAPHY: JAMES CHEADLE

Golden opportunity: Vengerov, photographed for *BBC Music Magazine* at London's Oxford and Cambridge Club



Life begins at 40

He bounds into the building – dark, glamorous, and wearing jeans. I'd guess they are the sort of jeans that cost as much as a small car. But jeans they still are, and the doorkeeper of the stuffy Pall Mall club where Maxim Vengerov is staying won't bend the rules, even for one of the world's greatest violinists.

Vengerov, however, doesn't display even a flicker of artistic temperament, let alone a full-blown tantrum. It's actually quite disappointing, but entirely in character. Instead he leaps up the plushly carpeted stairs and returns 15 minutes later, grinning, in a gloriously opulent suit, replete with fancy tie and even matching handkerchief in the top pocket. 'Wow, thanks for dressing up,' I say. 'Anything for the press,' he replies. ▶





HE HAS LOVED LONDON, he says, since winning the Carl Flesch Violin Competition here at the age of 16: a remarkable triumph that launched his international career. But when he plays at the Royal Albert Hall on 12 June – a starry gala in which, among other things, he will be joined by pianist Martha Argerich and cellist Mischa Maisky in Beethoven's Triple Concerto – he will be celebrating the anniversary of an even more auspicious event. It will be 40 years since he gave his first public recital. And yes, he's only 45 now. He really did start young.

'Not really,' he laughs. 'I was already in the world for four years and eight months before I had my first violin lesson.' His mother was a conductor, his father the principal oboist of the orchestra in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk, where he grew up. 'You could say I was a child of the orchestra from the start,' he continues. 'The only question was which instrument I would learn. I chose the violin because I noticed they sat nearest to the audience.'

His progress was phenomenal, and word about this extraordinary five-year-old prodigy spread fast. 'Believe it or not, 800 people turned up for that first concert,' Vengerov recalls. 'It was only a half-hour recital of all sorts of pieces. But I knew even then that this was what I would do for a living.'

How does he think his five-year-old self performed that day? 'Well, you know the story about Mischa Elman? When he was 90, a journalist asked him: "What's the difference between playing at 90 and at 5?" He replied: "No difference at all. Whether at 90 or 5, they always told me I play very good for my age."

Although Vengerov is celebrating the 40th anniversary of his debut, that doesn't mean he has been playing continuously for 40 years. In May 2007 I went to watch him give an incredible concert in extraordinary circumstances: for patients with severe neurological conditions or traumatic brain injuries at the Royal Hospital for Neuro-disability in south-west London. (Since 1998, as a UNICEF ambassador, he had also been playing for war-traumatised children in places such as East Africa, as well as in many hospitals round the world.) The contrast between this handsome young Russian virtuoso at the peak of his



powers (or so I thought) and the wretched physical condition of his listeners struck me as heartbreakingly poignant.

Little did I know that this would be one of the last times Vengerov played the violin before taking a break of several years. The 'virtuoso at the peak of his powers' was in fact an exhausted 32-year-old on the edge of permanent burn-out, and about to disappear from the scene so suddenly,

'I was like a hamster on a wheel – I felt I had missed a little bit of my childhood'

completely and mysteriously that his absence from concert platforms became as much a subject for analysis as his playing had been in the two decades before that.

There were rumours that he had a problem with his bowing arm, caused (it was said) by rupturing a muscle when he was working out in a gym. At the time, Vengerov did not deny the rumours. Now he is much more forthright.

'The arm and shoulder injury was all totally exaggerated,' he says. 'People couldn't believe that, at the level I was playing at when I was 32, I could just stop.

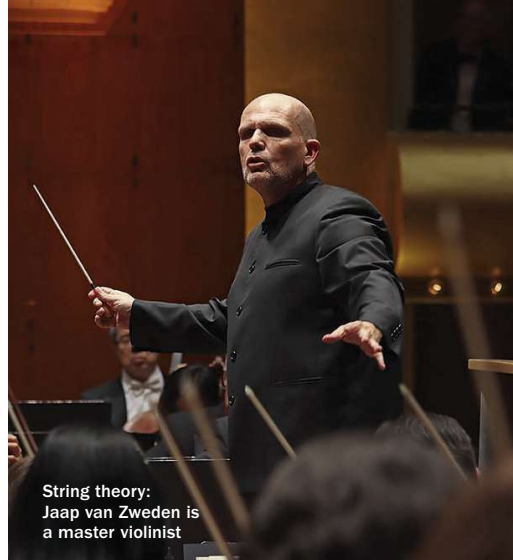


Musical summits: Vengerov conducts the UBS Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra at Carnegie Hall in 2007

So they speculated that there must be something wrong.'

And the truth? 'It's true I was tired, emotionally,' Vengerov admits. 'When I won the Carl Flesch competition at 16 I was already playing 70 concerts a year, and it rose to twice that number by the time I was 22. Giving 140 concerts a year is not a joke. I was like a hamster on a wheel. And maybe I felt I had missed a little bit of my childhood.'

That's understandable. One of the last products of the intensive Soviet method of training prodigies, the child Vengerov would have practised seven hours a day, mostly alone, in his parent's basement flat in Novosibirsk. 'So I guess,' he continues, 'that when I turned 30 I decided, perhaps even subconsciously, to have my teenage rebellion. I was feeling this heaviness weighing on my body. Every other morning I had to pack my bags for



String theory:
Jaap van Zweden is
a master violinist

an airport. I could write a book on how to pack bags. I only saw the inside of hotels.'

Vengerov's delayed 'teenage rebellion' wasn't exactly the last days of Kurt Cobain. In fact it largely comprised commissioning a weird new piece of music, the *Viola Tango Rock Concerto*, from his friend Benjamin Yusupov. 'I dyed my hair a mix of blond and red, put a ring in my ear, and danced on stage,' Vengerov recalls. 'However, by going through this I then found what I needed to do.' And what was that? 'Take a break. Put away the violin completely for three years. And I did. It worked. I came back completely refreshed in 2011.'

Something else was on Vengerov's mind, however. 'I had always wanted to be a conductor, like my mother,' he says. 'Now I decided to do something about it.'

Why? After all, he was earning fabulous fees (second only to Daniel Barenboim, it was reputed) and at the top of his game as a

violinist. 'Three reasons,' he replies. 'First, it meant I could share my musical life with many more performers, because life as a violin soloist can be lonely. Second, I could expand the repertoire of things I could perform in amazing directions. After all, Bruckner and Mahler didn't write any violin concertos.'

'And thirdly, when I was in my mid-twenties my first teacher said to me: "Don't forget your dream to be a conductor, because it will improve you as a violinist". I asked him how, and he replied: "All concertos are really written like symphonies, so unless you get to know the orchestra inside-out you will only understand half the story." He totally convinced me.'

Vengerov being Vengerov, he didn't just pick up a baton and rely on his fame to get him conducting gigs, as one or two other famous soloists have done. Instead, he

From bow to baton

More violinists-turned-conductors

Part of being a conductor is commanding respect from your musicians, so an understanding of an orchestra's string section is an advantage. No wonder, then, that so many top violinists have gone on to stellar conducting careers.

In his thirties and forties, **Neville Marriner** was a successful orchestral and chamber violinist including stints in the Philharmonia, LSO and London Mozart Players. His experience stood him in good stead for directorship of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, and by his death in 2016, many had even forgotten about his playing.

Principal conductor of the New York Phil and Hong Kong Phil, **Jaap van Zweden** studied violin at the Juilliard before becoming concertmaster of the Concertgebouw at 18 in 1979, the youngest ever holder of that role.

Period violinist **Andrew Manze** has many fine recordings under his belt and has directed the Academy of the Ancient Music and English Concert. Recently, he has put violin aside to concentrate on his work conducting the NDR Radiophilharmonie, Helsingborg Symphony and RLPO.

Pinchas Zukerman has, since 2009, been the principal guest conductor of the RPO and has conducted the English Chamber and Saint Paul Chamber orchestras among others.

As a violinist, **Nicolaj Szeps-Znaider** recorded the Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Korngold and Elgar concertos for RCA Red Seal. This year he becomes music director of the Orchestre National de Lyon alongside his principal guest conductorship of the Mariinsky Orchestra.



Back on track:
'I needed to put the
violin aside completely'

signed on for conducting lessons with one of the big beasts of the baton brigade: none other than Yuri Simonov, for 16 years chief conductor of Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre.

'In fact, Simonov approached me,' Vengerov says. 'He had seen me conduct a symphony, Mendelssohn's *Scottish*, and invited me to study with him. I said "maestro I would be honoured, but will you tell me why you would be the best teacher for me?" He replied: "Because I am the answer to all your prayers."

At the first lesson, Simonov gave Vengerov what he said was the first rule of conducting – that the orchestral musicians are always right. 'I asked him why and he said: "Because they are the ones who have to make the sounds. In their eyes, if they sound good it's because they are a good orchestra. And if they sound bad, it's because you are a bad conductor!" So I asked him: "And what if they sound marvellous?" He replied: "Well, then the players will say it was because you didn't interfere too much."

The first thing Simonov had to put right was Vengerov's arm movements. 'As a violinist, everything you do is horizontal,' Vengerov says. 'But imagine if you conducted horizontally. The musicians

'As a soloist, you come and go. You are never part of a permanent set-up'

would say: "where's the first beat?" Simonov has arguably the best conducting technique in the world. He teaches you that clarity is essential, but so much more. He made me aware of how a conductor must be responsible for every single musician, individually and as a group.'

Did Vengerov not feel that responsibility already? He always struck me, even in his youthful days, as the most empathetic of musicians. 'Yes, of course as a soloist you do try to take some responsibility for the entire performance,' he says. 'But you come and go. You are never part of a permanent set-up. You don't have to take care of a group. What I've learnt is that each musician in the orchestra is like a different string on my violin. They all have to be in tune with each other. And I don't

mean that just literally, or that they all have to play in time. Today's orchestras are so expert that they don't need a conductor to do that. I mean you have to give them a common purpose. You have to bring your own sound to the orchestra.'

Vengerov spent three years studying with Simonov. What happened to his violin playing during this time? Did he simply stop? 'Yes,' he replies. 'I needed to put the violin aside completely, simply to get my arms moving vertically not horizontally – as they had been doing since the age of four.'

But wasn't he worried about losing his peerless technique on the fiddle after such a long lay-off? 'Actually no, and for that I thank my first violin teacher. Right from the start he made me take a break from playing of 40 days each year. When I came back I was totally out of shape, as you can imagine, but the technique always came back after two or three days, and I was refreshed mentally and physically. That trick of the brain has stayed with me. I know there are soloists who feel they have to practise every day, but I have never worried about that.'

Since graduating from Simonov's classes, Vengerov hasn't exactly eased



Full of beans: Vengerov at 22

Maxim Vengerov

A brief biographical timeline

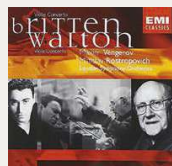
1974 Vengerov is born in Novosibirsk, Siberia, where his father is first oboist in the Novosibirsk Philharmonic.

1984 He wins the junior division of the Wieniawski Competition in Poland.

1990 At 16, Vengerov wins London's International Carl Flesch Competition.

1997 He is made UNICEF's Envoy for Music and travels to battle-scarred countries to give concerts.

2000 Following his first recording with EMI Classics in 1999, Vengerov signs



an exclusive contract with the major label.

2003 His EMI disc of the Britten Violin Concerto and Walton Viola Concerto (left) wins a Grammy.

2007 He steps away from concert performances and takes a six-month sabbatical during which he films the documentary 'Living the Dream' with director Ken Howard. It goes on to win a 2008 BBC Music Magazine Award. He starts conducting.

2010 Appointed the Gstaad Festival Orchestra's first chief conductor.

2013 Returning to playing, Vengerov begins a long and fruitful relationship with the Oxford Philharmonic Orchestra, recording the Brahms and Sibelius violin concertos.

2014 After studying conducting with Yuri Simonov, Vengerov graduates as a conductor with a diploma from the Ippolitov-Ivanov State Musical Pedagogical Institute.

2017 Vengerov starts a year as the Queensland Symphony Orchestra's artist-in-residence.

2020 In one of the first deals of its kind, Vengerov an exclusive contract to make recordings for the music streaming site Idagio.



Royal appointment: Prince Charles presents Vengerov with an honorary doctorate at the Royal College of Music in 2019

himself gently into the conducting world. He has Bruckner's Ninth Symphony and Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6, the 'Pathétique', under his belt now, neither of them works you would associate with beginners. 'And the amazing thing is that after conducting the "Pathétique", I see Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in a completely different light,' he says.

Does he conduct without a score? 'No, because if the musicians are reading from music, why shouldn't I?' he replies. 'To show that I am superior to them? To show off? No. There's a great story about Mendelssohn. He was conducting one of his own works, but someone mistakenly put a score of a Bach work on his stand. Yet as he conducted he continued to turn the pages. He was too humble to make a fuss, and he didn't want the musicians and audience to realise anything was wrong.'

While studying with Simonov, Vengerov conducted a production of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. Has that given him a taste for conducting opera as well? 'Absolutely not,' he declares. 'I did *Onegin* as part of my studies, safely within the walls of my university [the Moscow Institute of Ippolitov-Ivanov]. But being a soloist is a full-time job. Being a symphonic conductor is also a full-time job. And being a professor of violin [as he is at the Royal College of Music in London and the Mozarteum University in Salzburg] is another full-time job. So I have three full-time jobs, plus running a family! I enjoyed *Onegin* tremendously but I

cannot spare the time for more opera if I want to continue playing.'

And, thank goodness, Vengerov does want to continue playing. But you will have to shift into a decidedly 21st-century mindset if you want to hear his recordings in future. In January he signed up to the streaming-service Idagio. 'CDs are dying out,' he says. 'Streaming is a great new medium, and the sound is fabulous.'

Not only will Idagio be releasing exclusive recordings of Vengerov, it will also carry playlists devised by him. 'Yes I will be creating a series of them, each themed to help, for example, people with insomnia or people with depression. Very Russian! They will be simple, effective, and tested on me and my friends.'

It's hard to imagine Vengerov being depressed for long. At 45 he looks in the prime of life. Since 2011 he has been married to Olga, the art-historian sister of another top violinist, Ilya Gringolts. 'We were constantly flirting at the Verbier Festival,' he says, 'so she was a known soul to me and has made me very happy.' Now living in Monaco, they have two daughters. Are they musical? 'Miraculously, yes,' he replies. 'Because you know the old theory about talent skipping a generation. Polina is six and plays the cello, and Lisa is eight and is a pianist. I am already planning concerts by the Vengerov Piano Trio.' 🎧 *Vengerov's first recording for Idagio, Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France under Myung-Whun Chung, is out now*