

*Valentin Berlinsky – A Quartet for Life*. Foreword by Steven Isserlis. Ed. Maria Matalaev, trans. Angela Dickson. Kahn & Averill, London, 2018. xvii, 265 pp. Appendices. Index. 43 Photographs and music examples. Paperback. ISBN 9780995757400

By Darya Protopopova, independent scholar

### **A biography of a famous Soviet cellist raises questions about the possibility of free art under totalitarianism and about differences between the USSR and modern Russia**

The biography of Valentin Berlinsky (1925-2008), a world-famous cellist and founder of the legendary Borodin Quartet, came out in 2018 and was immediately recognised as an important music publication: in fact, it made that year's "best classical music book releases" list according to BBC Music Magazine. In 2023, in the context of war and mass emigration of artists protesting against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this book needs to be recognised as an important historical and social study. It reopens the question of whether "to stay" means "to collaborate" and whether it is possible for a musician to stay honest *despite* the regime. Can the artist separate themselves from the country they live in? The editor of the book, Maria Matalaev, Berlinsky's granddaughter, compiled a balanced volume comprising Berlinsky's own memoirs, as well as accounts of him by his family and friends.

In his last word in court on 3 March 2023, Andrei Novashov, the first Russian journalist jailed for anti-war posts, said,

"In the 70s, to find out the truth, they [the Soviet people] spent a lot of time and effort. Today, on the contrary, millions of Russians spend all their energy on isolating themselves from the truth. Playing hide-and-seek with reason and conscience is the national sport."<sup>1</sup>

This is an important difference we need to keep in mind when reading a book about Valentin Berlinsky. Berlinsky and other members of the Borodin Quartet (founded in 1943) lived under the oppressive Soviet rule. They had to negotiate with the State in order to continue rehearsing and performing classical music. They toured the world representing the USSR, but fame and fortune was not what they were after. Their generation of musicians were obsessed about one thing – music. Things have changed since then in Russia in that respect, and shockingly for the worst. The Russian conductor Valery Gergiev and Russian violinist, violist, and conductor Yuri Bashmet, for example, made statements in support of the war in Ukraine. Reading Berlinsky's biography makes you wonder if idealism, pure passion for music and moral resolve are becoming impossible in modern Russia. Can Berlinsky's integrity be explained by the fact that he was born *before* the ideological poison had taken root, *before* the mass repressions of the 1930s had scared future generations into submission and moral compromise? This question takes us to the beginning of the book, Berlinsky's childhood.

Berlinsky's unwavering devotion to music stemmed in many ways from his early cultural milieu, largely untouched by the regime. He was born in 1925 in Irkutsk, Siberia – an area where many political prisoners in the tsarist Russia spent their sentences. Leaders of the Decembrists' revolt of 1825, for example, were sent to Irkutsk. As Matalaev points out, the USSR had existed only for three years when he was born: Berlinsky's early influences had been, therefore, not of the state education, but of his family, consisting of pre-revolutionary intelligentsia. He was the only child of Alexander Berlinsky, a lawyer, who himself was passionate about music and studied the violin with Leopold Auer, and Elizaveta Popova-Kokoulina, a singer. The family celebrated both Jewish and Orthodox holidays. This combination of music and multiculturalism resulted in Berlinsky's "violent opposition" to "any sign of arrogance, patriotism or nationalism" (p.6). From Irkutsk, the family moved to Yakutsk, the coldest town on earth, and then to Kamchatka. Growing up in that harsh region no

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<sup>1</sup> Ходорковский, Михаил, et al. *Непоследние слова*. United Kingdom, Freedom Letters, 2023. P. 267.

doubt made Berlinsky aware of what the Russian government traditionally did to any freethinking person. It was also one of the things that brought him closer to his lifelong friend Dmitri Shostakovich. Shostakovich was also “from Siberia, to where his paternal grandfather, a Polish revolutionary, had been deported” (p.5).

The biography of Berlinsky is first and foremost a book on music – a timeline of concerts, famous collaborations, meticulously planned repertoire, etc. But it is also a detailed study in social history, as Berlinsky’s years at the Moscow Conservatory coincided with Stalin’s purges. In 1937, “the arrests started”, and Berlinsky’s father urgently moved his family to Moscow, where his son could pursue career in music (p.8). At the Moscow Central Music School Berlinsky joined a cohort of future brilliant musicians, including Ukrainian-born violinists Leonid Kogan (many consider him to be among the greatest violinists of the 20th century) and Julian Sitkovetsky (father of Dmitry Sitkovetsky, famous violinist and conductor), Rostislav Dubinsky (first violin in the Borodin Quartet from its conception to 1976), and many others. Berlinsky’s father took a job as a lawyer at the Moscow Conservatory. In 1942 both the Conservatory and the Central Music School were evacuated to Saratov. Berlinsky no doubt belonged to the generation, who, having witnessed the devastation that war brings, lived with the hope that such atrocities would never happen again. His memory of performing at the concert in Stalingrad immediately after it was liberated is powerful: “As we approached Stalingrad by boat, a scene from Dante emerged: a ghost town, [...] in ruins. All the buildings had been destroyed. Shell holes and sinkholes” (p.14). That day, Berlinsky nearly got killed by an anti-tank mine. He remembered that “life was very difficult” for years after the war, but the thought of having simply survived had made him even more dedicated to music. In 1943 he founded the Borodin Quartet and was prepared “to live on water and black bread” (p.18) to make it great.

Berlinsky’s biography is an important page in the history of music. “The Moscow Conservatory of the 1940s was an exceptional institution. [...] We shared the corridors with composers such as Sergei Prokofiev, Dmitri Shostakovich, Nikolay Myaskovsky, Yuri Shaporin, Vissarion Shebalin, and the pianists Heinrich Neuhaus and Alexander Goldenweiser. Our teachers were the violinists David Oistrakh and Abram Yampolsky, Zeitlin and Mostras, and cellist Semyon Kozolupov and Sviatoslav Knushevitsky” (p.20). Berlinsky’s reminiscences contain intimate chapters on Dmitri Shostakovich, whose string quartets (fifteen in total) the Borodin Quartet “discovered [...] one by one as they were written, and always played them to the composer before bringing them to the audiences” (p.71), and Mstislav Rostropovich. Berlinsky met Rostropovich at school, and they “studied with the same teacher, Kozolupov, at the Moscow Conservatory” (p.126). “In 1958, we crossed the Iron Curtain for the first time, and went to a capitalist country, Italy, where we met with great acclaim” (p.62). Many more tours would follow: 28 visits to Austria, 19 to Canada, 48 to France, 60 to Germany, 44 to Italy, 45 to the Netherlands, 11 to Portugal, 23 to Spain, 18 to Switzerland, 57 to the UK, 21 to the United States, to name the most frequent destinations. During the Soviet times, the Quartet’s touring schedule and repertoire were controlled by the State’s ‘Special Ideology Committee’; “the State also took most of the money the Quartet made” (p.59). The ideological oppression could not be ignored. Glimpses of it are scattered throughout Berlinsky’s memoirs. For instance, he remembers Shostakovich making self-deprecating remarks about his own music, following the so-called “anti-formalism campaign” that had declared Shostakovich an anti-Soviet composer (p.11). Berlinsky does not mention the campaign directly, but the editor includes a note on the composer Vissarion Shebalin, who was brave enough to stand up for Shostakovich and paid for his bravery with his career (p.80). Shebalin’s son Dmitri Shebalin (1930–2013) was the violist of the Borodin Quartet for 43 years (1953–1996).

Naturally, some members of the Quartet wanted to escape the oppression and move abroad, but not Berlinsky: he regarded his colleagues’ decision to leave as a personal tragedy. For instance, when Rostislav Dubinsky, first violinist of the Borodin Quartet from its formation to 1975, emigrated to

the United States, Berlinsky was devastated: “Rostik [...] tried to convince me to leave the country with him, but I could not bring myself to do it” (p.92)<sup>2</sup>. In 2008, Berlinsky commented on Dubinsky’s departure in more detail, explaining his views on emigration and music:

“My view is this: that the Borodin Quartet came into being and will continue in Russia, and only in Russia. This is how I see it. It’s the only way, in my view. I don’t criticise those who must leave. Living here, or rather surviving here, is a complicated matter” (p.113).

In a way, Berlinsky performed at least one openly political act: he refused, despite pressure from the KGB, to spy on his colleagues at the Moscow Conservatory (p.111). He managed to by-pass the system by claiming that, if drunk, he would not be able to preserve state secrets. Ultimately, Berlinsky either ignored the regime or, in this case, ridiculed it. Should one still regard him as a collaborator for not emigrating? When asked “Why didn’t you leave the country?”, Berlinsky answered: “I found it impossible to do so. I am not a blind patriot. I can’t imagine a different life ... I was born here, I will die here, and that’s it” (p.113). This may be considered a sufficient explanation of Berlinsky’s loyalty to the USSR. But there is more, as the book tells us about his work in post-Soviet Russia. Berlinsky openly declares that he had accepted funds for the ‘Russian Performing Art’ foundation and the Borodin Quartet Foundation from “the Troika, a trio of philanthropists”: “These three oligarchs, Roman Abramovich, Oleg Deripaska, and Alexander Mamut, award funds to support our projects. Our foundation awards bursaries to students and teachers” (p.116). Now, when the first two names are under Western sanctions and Mamut’s name is under close scrutiny for his ties to the Kremlin, it is easy to doubt the possibility of “pure” music. At the same time, can one judge Berlinsky, who spent years in pre- and post-Soviet Russia “harass[ing] various bureaucratic bodies”, asking them to support music festivals and competitions (p.117)? Matalaev’s book allows us to form our personal view on the musician’s relations with his or her benefactors.

Going back to our initial quote, it is important to remember that Berlinsky’s career flourished in the 1960-1970s, in the cultural atmosphere defined by the Soviet dissident movement. In March 1953, the Borodin Quartet played at Stalin’s funeral. It was at that funeral that David Oistrakh announced the government’s decision to “form a ‘super’ quartet, with the intention of creating the best such group in the world” (p.60). Looking back on that day, Berlinsky commented, “the vanity of power and patriotism spawn such ideas” (p.61). In the end, the Borodin Quartet did become one of the world’s best quartets – not by the State’s decree, but thanks to dedication and professionalism of its members. In 1955, the Quartet went on their first trip abroad, to East Germany. The future looked bright. Khrushchev’s “thaw” was under way. Fast forward forty-five years, we are in 2000: the last photo in the book shows Vladimir Putin, then interim President, congratulating Berlinsky in the Grand Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, during the concert in honour of Berlinsky’s 75th birthday and the Quartet’s 55th birthday. What now looks like a controversial photograph is a reminder that Stalin’s and Putin’s time can actually frame one person’s lifespan. Berlinsky’s biography is a fascinating story of the musician’s survival in between the two tyrants.

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<sup>2</sup> Dubinsky left his own account of the events: Dubinsky, Rostislav, *Stormy Applause: Making Music in a Worker’s State* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989).