

Dialogue with violinist, UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and MIAGI patron Maxim Vengerov, 29th May 2003

(the dialogue is based on the recorded material and has not been edited or cut)

"I think that the power of music is waiting for us...we have just not matured yet" (Maxim Vengerov)

M: Maxim Vengerov

I: Ingrid Hedlund

I: As UNICEF Honorary Envoy for Music, do you think that UNICEF could do more for using music as a tool for positive social development, by providing music and music education for the children in AIDS orphanages, in homes for abused children and so on?

M: Unfortunately in the whole world children are suffering, also because of all the disagreements between adults. There is so immensely much that needs to be done, regarding the awareness of HIV/AIDS, child abuse, drug abuse, using children for drug traffic, the first primary education, and naturally also immunisation...so you see, with all of this we are still stuck. There, music comes second, a very important point, but still second.

I: But involvement in music can help the children become less vulnerable to all that what you are mentioning, it can give them a totally different frame of mind, bring an other dimension to their reality.

M: Yes, I agree with you, I agree totally with you. We wish music can be put first, we wish...but unfortunately there is still that basic rule of life...survival...and once that has been accomplished, then immediately comes cultural values. I remember, my mother, she used to be a choir conductor and have an orphanage in Siberia. She fetched the children from the street, rescued them, gave them a place to live, gave them food and dressed them well. She used to fight for this, with the government you know, because in Siberia in the old days, there were no means for this. First, she built a school, a most beautiful school for the children to enjoy, and then came music, this was the procedure...one at a time.

I: We are busy building our music programme for destitute children. We are also very grateful, that now in this third year of our initiative we finally have a feeling of really gaining support. Culture is so immensely important...it gives meaning...and to live one needs to feel one lives a meaningful life...in order to

have strength to cope with the daily toil, have energy and become motivated, develop ones own creativeness in society.

M: Yes of course, it is very important, the spiritual dimension, it is not less important than all those 'basic things' that come first...

I: You have been in many countries working with children, did you on our travels to Africa find that these children have a different approach or capacity for dance and music than European children?

M: I have been in many countries working with children, in America in Harlem, in Serbia, I worked with Albanian children and I was in Thailand... but one of the most memorable experiences I had, was in Uganda...children are of course everywhere children, you know, beautiful, joyful but, the joyfulness of the kids in Uganda, their big smiling faces will always stay with me. It was so incredible to see, so incredible, also this incredible rhythm that they have for music, it is just perfect, it is just so natural! I was in a town playing, with many hundred kids around me, and then this one guy stood up and said I would like to play something for you. He started playing his simple instrument, it was wood and a nail (laughing) and a string...and instead of the bow...the bow that he used was a stick, a wooden stick...but it was incredible, he started playing this music with a most fantastic rhythm, and then he started dancing, and the whole group of kids, they all gathered around him, started dancing around him, some of them playing drums. I joined them and started improvising. I had a the most fantastic time!

But of course, as said, kids are everywhere basically the same, they have the same joy, the same innocence, the only thing that is a bit different is their reactions.

I: In this context I have often been remembering the words of the former renowned pianist and piano pedagogue at the Moscow Conservatory, Heinrich Neuhaus (teacher of among others, Sviatoslav Richter). He once said: '*to teach a great talent is to destroy it*'. So, in this line... with kids with that kind of natural intelligence...to teach them wisely...well, this is not easy....and brings enormous responsibility....

M: Yes, yes I see what you mean and I feel...I am also teaching, at the high school of music in Saarbrücken in Germany, and the way I teach...I basically just let them play and just direct them a bit, to leave them the freedom.

I: ..wonderful...basically....in our civilisation and schools, that what is called discipline, contains an element of violence, and our so-called freedom, chaos. In

music on the other hand (that is, music by great composers and performers) there is a unity, and what we usually consider a matter of discipline, turns into care, a great deal of joy, and definitely passion, but no force (M: no, no force), yet there is always this amazing order...

So, back to teaching, how to bring this order united with freedom into education and into life as a whole, and not destroy the seeds of this quality where it already exists?

M: Quite, quite, not to destroy, it is so easy to destroy...much easier than we think...

I: Your playing, how did you avoid being destroyed by teachers?

M: Ah....a good question (lots of laughter)!!

I: No, seriously, this is a real mystery to me. Of course it must be due to some kind of built in 'protection shield' in you or?

M: Aah, well, my first teacher was the most fantastic...she actually did not teach me but let me play like I wanted to and directed me. This showed me above all, to enjoy music, to have fun with it. The second teacher, actually, was teaching me (laughs)! It was important, but it was more like 'survival' with him, I had to battle with that teacher you know, but at the same time I became much stronger, started to appreciate and learn to know music from the other side, totally different...

Then again, I had further two teachers, who were knowledgeable teachers and who were mentors, Daniel Barenboim (world renowned pianist/conductor) and Mstislav Rostropovitch (world renowned cellist/conductor). Again, Rostropovitch did not teach me but created with me, and drew so much things out of me that I did not know, told me to love music and have passion for it... to give to people...draw from inside very deep you know...personality, maturity, power. Barenboim again...he was a 'teacher', basically he told me to (laughter) analyse! (I: oh no!!!) But....these were two extremes that were very important for me to know, the one wouldn't be possible without the other. So, I am very thankful that I had these two extremes during different stages of my life, first time, when I was a child and then when I was a teenager. I am very happy, I couldn't have wished for any better education. I am incredibly lucky to have had what I had, I got to learn really everything that there is... today... and I learned so much from many conductors and musicians while travelling around the world. It is blending now within me. I am playing and learning every day on the stage.

I: What about teachers at normal school?

M: Normal school...I had a wonderful teacher in elementary subjects in Moscow for four years when I studied there. It was a great time to spend...away from home. Then I went back to Novosibirsk (Maxim's hometown) and continued studies at an elementary school there which had no music subjects. That was a very different and difficult experience for me...the kids had no interest...they teased me, gave me names and said: 'ah, The Violinist' - especially you know, when I was going to play concerts and they had to stay at school. They did not like that. So they envied me...hated me (laughs), and in the end, when I was eleven or twelve, I couldn't continue... It started becoming too painful (laughs). The headmaster at the school was very knowledgeable, I studied privately with her, she taught me everything and I absolved exams. I obviously had to finish school, but going to regular classes was really impossible.

I: It has often been said about the Soviet era, that at least they took care of their talents?

M: Yes, they did, that is true.

I: This was something very precious and I think it is very different now.

M: Yes it is.

I: Do you think that it is true or not that great creativity and corruption has some connection...? I know this is a bit wishy washy perhaps and I don't know quite how to explain what I mean...but I can't help feeling somehow that the more beauty somebody transmits, the more truthful, incorruptible this person has to be?, examples like Franz Schubert or Dmitry Shostakovich?...

M: Composers?

I: Well yes, I mean really strong exceptional 'creators', those that become 'timeless'?

M: Well yes, composers such as Shostakovich or Prokofiev had this incredible wisdom...actually they were able to predict the future...they were able to give this energy to society, and they could even transform the society. This is the incredible wonder of music, well... that makes one wonder sometimes where this music comes from. It is from higher spiritual powers and spheres, and comes through normal human beings - or not normal - people like Shostakovich! And an example from the other side of the world, Benjamin Britten, his 'War-requiem'

was a statement of the 20th century, a statement of freedom. Shostakovich's 7th Symphony was also a statement of freedom. During the second world-war it gave such incredible power to people that had almost lost all their hopes...to win the war...historically the first performance of this symphony took place during the blockade of Leningrad and gave the population the feeling that 'it will survive'....you see... because of the music...This is the power that music has through composers such as Prokofiev and Shostakovich, and composers like that have to be truthful, they always remain truthful to themselves, they couldn't be otherwise.

I: Yes, yes...this is true.... however, if we look at music today...I don't know, but sometimes I get a feeling that we are somehow living in a musical 'vacuum' currently, and I have asked myself whether this might be that mankind has for some reason lost the quality that we are here talking about. We are all today too easily overtaken by the urge for 'fame - whatever the prize for it may be'. And if you want fame, there is the pressure from media, having to please.....few seem capable of resisting this temptation, yet the superficiality of it all makes an individual lose all his/her power.

M: Yeah.....I must say that... I have been wondering sometimes where the next Shostakovich is, who is it, where is the reincarnation? There is a lot of talent....but I think that the power of music is waiting for us...we have just not matured yet.

M: We have been sleeping during the seventies, eighties, nineties.

I: Oh, you mean we went to sleep and ceased to be mature during the last decades (laughs)?

M: Yes, seventies, eighties, nineties...

I: But why did we go asleep?

M: Well, we just did go asleep (laughs).

I: Why were we mature before but are not any more?

M: We stopped to create...and look...we have driven ourselves to an existential crisis, yet mankind would need to stay alert because things can all the time erupt and if there is good times we have to protect these good times and not just use them!! Not just use them.... for our own daily, basic needs. What we do

need is to live alertly in society, love others, and once these rules are obeyed the world would be a better place.

M: (laughter) It is simple what I am saying but.....

I:.....it is such an immensity actually, and we are getting further and further away from it...

M: yes....the whole world is in a crises...

I: yes I think we are...

M: ...and I also believe in the energy to what we create, to what we say, to what we do to each other, it always comes back like a boomerang - comes back not just equally but in an other form...it is an energy thing you know...if I would be able to explain it physically I would be a master (laughs). But I feel it - I know it from my own life.

I: ...yes... let's look at Beethoven for instance, he had to endure so much... his constant financial problems, his deafness,... not to speak about Schubert ... and some of this, at least their financial troubles to a great extent it seems...exactly because of their determination and their truthfulness, pursuing their creative intuition against all odds. Yet, wasn't it this 'against all odds' that gave them this incredible strength...as they stood through it...?

M: Quite, they stood through it.

I:...and ...do I dare what they dared...

M: well yes, it is a hard life for everybody...but life is actually not just 'playing safe'.

I: No.....of course not... and this applies to your performing as well, ...to bring the quality you bring, you have to go on stage not knowing what will happen really, leave all security blankets behind you I think...(M: yes)...so obviously it could apply to how to live life all in all?

M:....everyone has a different energy, and different ways, but I think everybody should look at this, you know, in this way, 'not playing safe'. Also in relationship, always to give, and not to close ourselves.

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