Interview

Shostakovich and Tishchenko

An interview with Gabriel Tchalik

By Alan Mercer

That the young instrumentalist Gabriel Tchalik is better known in France than on the Anglo-Saxon concert scene is no reflection on his artistry; his life is currently centred around his performing and studying activities in the French capital. That said, some readers may well have heard mention of Tchalik's recent CDs dedicated to the music of Pietro Locatelli and Boris Tishchenko (more of which, see below). Various concert halls around Europe have equally had the opportunity to see and hear the Tchalik Quartet: this ensemble was founded in 2011 and is made up of Gabriel, his brother Marc (cello), and his two sisters, Louise (violin) and Sarah (viola). The ensemble dates from the young siblings' earliest recollections: their upbringing was firmly rooted in music-making and in surroundings where music held an important place. Another family member, pianist Dania, Professor of Harmony at the Strasbourg Conservatoire, occasionally augments the ensemble for quintet work.

Tchalik was born in France in 1989 into a Franco-Russian family. His consequent personal and artistic development was—and continues to be—influenced and nourished by both cultures. That said, his musical training was placed firmly under the sign of the Russian school, starting with pianist Igor Lazko and violinist Elina Kuperman, and continuing with Alexander Brussilovsky—Tchalik's teacher for many years.

The Tchalik Quartet: (from left) Gabriel and Louise, violin; Sarah, viola; Marc, cello.
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Tchalik graduated from the Conservatoire de Versailles in 2007, but decided to deviate from a strictly academic path, thus allowing him to combine his musical ambitions with personal goals that fall outside the world of music, e.g., studying philosophy at the Sorbonne University.

His awards as an interpreter are numerous, including top prizes from the Islam Petrella Competition in Albania in 2003 and the First International Yuri Yankelevich Violin Competition in Russia in 2009.

He has taken a special interest in the music of one of Shostakovich's pupils, Boris Tishchenko, discussing his life and work when the two of them met in 2009. Tchalik has recently released a CD of world premiere recordings of Boris Tishchenko's complete works for violin.

I caught up with the young violinist on the terrace of a typical *brasserie* in central Paris: the hustle and bustle of the city traffic contrasted with Gabriel's quiet, self-assured demeanour, as he proudly presented me with his recently released CD. As the scowling waitress left us to our devices, and coffee, I asked him about his family roots and present-day influences.

Tchalik: My father arrived in France in 1988—he's Russian. He grew up in Odessa, and later lived and worked in Moscow, where he met my mother. My mother, who isn't a musician, is French, and is a professor of Russian. She speaks the language like any other Russian might: my friends are always surprised when they find that she isn't Russian. She really speaks without a trace of an accent, although she

learned Russian in college like everyone else: perhaps this is a special case of reincarnation? [He laughs.] I was born in 1989, and I speak Russian with my father.

DSCH: Do any other members of your family live in Paris?

Tchalik: Yes, my grandmother is from Odessa—she is a real character! She still comes to cook for us. She arrived in France the year after my mother and father. My parents applied to leave Russia in 1988, and it took the authorities six months to grant an exit visa—which was pretty fast in those days. They made the journey to France by car, travelling from Moscow to Odessa, and bringing a selection of items with them, although in the end they had to leave most of their belongings back in Moscow. My father is a musician, a piano tuner, an artistic director, and an audio engineer. In fact, I have always lived with music characterised by an unmistakable Russianness. This began with piano lessons from my father, and then with Igor Lazko, Alexander Brussilovsky, and Elina Kuperman. This Russianness was deeply ingrained—so much so that the first time I took violin lessons in French, I found it extremely difficult to adapt!

DSCH: From a musical standpoint, do you consider yourself to be more Russian than French?

Tchalik: As a performing musician, yes, I feel an affinity with the Russian school. That said, when working with French musicians, I'm often reminded of two cultural traditions—two different ways of approaching music.

DSCH: Such as?

Tchalik: Russians are very passionate; they invest their hearts and minds completely in the music. This is something vital for them—the only thing that counts. The French are perhaps more rational: guided and inspired more by taste and pure talent. I believe I'm a mix of the two—Russian and French! I'm not at all saying that one is good and one isn't, of course.

DSCH: You know Russia well?

Tchalik: Yes. I have been there many times, often with my mother, who organises trips to Russia for her students; and also, of course, to give concerts in various parts of Russia.

DSCH: Including Odessa?

Tchalik: I went there once, but only to visit and see the town. This was with Dania. He was at the Stolyarsky School there, so for him it was quite something to return 15 years later. Post-Soviet towns and cities have changed a lot since then, including the architecture. In Odessa, some quite strange buildings have sprung up, often in a rather inharmonious fashion. You know the famous steps from *Battleship Potemkin*? Well now on this same spot, by the jetty, they've built a 300-metre high tower block, which completely eradicates the perspective that Eisenstein captured on film: that same sequence and perspective would now be impossible!

DSCH: You know Moscow and St. Petersburg?

Tchalik: I've only been to St. Petersburg once, in fact—a year and a half ago, to play a concert of French music with my family's quintet. We played a concert of pieces by Franck, Ravel, and the quartet by Reynaldo Hahn, the friend [and lover] of Marcel Proust.

DSCH: Are you conscious of the different schools and traditions that exist between Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Odessa?

Tchalik: Not so much between Moscow and St. Petersburg, but the attitudes of people from Odessa are quite different now.

DSCH: Could you tell us more about your work and your rapport with Tishchenko? How did this come about?

Tchalik: First and foremost, I got to know Shostakovich's music, just as all musicians do. I first discovered Tishchenko's music in a small shop in Moscow that sells scores—this is a great shop for us Westerners, as it's possible to find scores that simply don't exist in the West. And it was there that I found the score for the *Fantasy* [for violin and piano, comp. 1994] by Tishchenko, a piece about which I'd heard nothing at all. I showed it to my professor Alexander Brussilovsky, who gave me more information about Tishchenko's music and life, including the fact that he was one of Shostakovich's leading pupils. He encouraged me very much to work on the piece—something I did with my brother Dania.

DSCH: Brussilovsky knew Shostakovich and Tishchenko?

Tchalik: He certainly crossed Shostakovich's path in the corridors of the Conservatory, and he must have met Tishchenko similarly. Brussilovsky played a great deal of Shostakovich's music, including the four preludes scored for violin and piano (transcribed by Tsyganov), which I studied. After this, I learned Shostakovich's First Concerto with him. At this time, however, Brussilovsky still hadn't played any of Tishchenko's music.

So to come back to Tishchenko, I adored the *Fantasy* (op. 118). In fact, the rendition of the piece on my recent CD is the world premiere recording of the work, as are all of the other works on the disc! The piece is 15 minutes long. It really is a wonderful work. Each time I play it in public, I get a different reaction. Most of this music was written in the Soviet era, and despite Tishchenko's connections to Shostakovich, his writing is quite different—and in some places, not particularly easy for the listener. It's a piece that deserves to be performed far more often.

Although Shostakovich and Tishchenko both grew up in Russia, they came of age during very different periods. As such, they were logically quite different people—and this comes through in the music. Shostakovich became very fatalistic—disillusioned, even— towards the end of his life. Even if Tishchenko used similar expressions of grimness and desperation, he was someone who consistently pushed musical ideas and expressions to their extreme: he never leaves any path unexplored, never stands still; he's always searching and striving. This contrasts with the expressive style of Shostakovich, in which we sometimes hear doubts, hesitations, reservations.

DSCH: What about Tishchenko's use of atonal techniques?

Tchalik: Tishchenko did explore ideas formed from within the Second Viennese School. These were techniques to which, of course, Shostakovich did not have direct access during the Stalinist period. Very many of the modernist movements in the Soviet Union occurred during the 1950s and 60s, at the time of the Thaw under Khrushchev. Composers such as Denisov, Gubaidulina, and Schnittke took full advantage of the relative liberty this period brought, although Tishchenko never embraced the style and compositional methods of the twelve-tone movement to the same extent.

Other important influences in Tishchenko's music can be found in the works of Bartók and Stravinsky; this, of course, is not the case for Shostakovich. The use of rhythm in many of Tishchenko's works is very pronounced and generally much more prominent than in Shostakovich's music. All of that said, the sense of *spirit* that runs through the music of each composer conjures up clear and strong similarities: both were prodigies, and both began their symphonic careers at a very early age. On the new CD, I perform Tishchenko's first two works for violin [*Rondo,* op. 2, and the First Sonata, op. 5], which were composed when he was 18. It's interesting to note that, at this time in his musical development, Tishchenko's voice and style were more akin to Prokofiev than to Shostakovich.

DSCH: When did Tishchenko first meet Shostakovich?

Tchalik: This was in 1961, after which Shostakovich's influence became more evident. Indeed, for Tishchenko, Shostakovich became something of a god-like figure.

DSCH: But weren't there some less than harmonious exchanges between the two composers?

Tchalik: The two men did become very good friends, which meant they could speak frankly about musical topics; and this is what is interesting about the influence on Tishchenko. There is a famous story of Tishchenko not following the rules in Shostakovich's conservatory class, a story that Tishchenko told me himself. It was just after he had written his Cello Concerto for Rostropovich. Tishchenko came into class and announced to his teacher, "Well here I am, and I have brought you my cello concerto!"; to which Shostakovich replied, "And your piano sonata is where?"; they continued, "But Rostropovich asked me to write this for him!"; "Oh, so whenever anyone asks you to write something, you simply drop everything do you?" You might even say that there was a slight hint of jealousy in Shostakovich's criticism.

DSCH: But then Shostakovich turned the tables and re-orchestrated the concerto, didn't he?

Tchalik: Yes. Shostakovich arrived one day and told Tishchenko that he had a gift for his 30th birthday, which was his re-orchestration of the concerto! Tishchenko took the whole affair very seriously and, of course, was quite touched and honoured; however, he did write several remarks in one of his notebooks, in red pen, including some probing questions about the orchestration. In a letter, Shostakovich told Tishchenko that if he had any questions he should not hesitate to ask, which is exactly what Tishchenko did. This irritated the older composer, who replied with the old Russian adage, "If you're given a horse, don't look at its teeth!"

If you listen to the two versions—one by Shostakovich, the other by Tishchenko—you can judge for yourself. But to be honest, I prefer the version by Tishchenko. I am not quite sure why, but overall, I feel it works better.

DSCH: Why do you think that Tishchenko's music still hasn't become better known, or even accepted by the contemporary concert-going public? Is it a lack of curiosity on the part of audiences?

Tchalik: In my opinion, it's a problem that comes from the interpreters and not from the general public. It also comes from concert organisers. If you look at contemporaries of Tishchenko (e.g., Gubaidulina, Schnittke and Silvestrov), they are much better known today than Tishchenko—in particular Gubaidulina and Schnittke. In my view, however, Tishchenko's work is no less consistent. In my own case, I prefer to play his music.

DSCH: What might be the reason for this neglect?

Tchalik: This may be based more on politics than anything to do with the music, especially as the composers I've cited were regarded more as dissidents. This affected the way Western critics viewed them, largely because of their political stance, including the fact that they apparently chose to work abroad to a great extent. Of course, this may or may not have been their choice. Tishchenko, on the other hand, rarely travelled outside of the Soviet Union, and whenever he did, it was in the capacity of a pianist rather than a composer. He was an excellent pianist, whose music was played very

Gabriel Tchalik. © Claire Douieb

little abroad, at least before the fall of the Soviet Union. I discussed this question with Jacques Ioffe [writer, friend of the composer], who told me that Tishchenko expressed no political opinions: he never spoke about politics, and he himself was certainly no dissident. Or at least if he had any political convictions, he kept those to himself. He was certainly never an overt dissident.

DSCH: It was Tishchenko's decision, then, to take up this apolitical stance?

Tchalik: Yes, indeed. Although this didn't prevent him from, for example, writing a Requiem based on Akhmatova's poem of the same name, which was subsequently banned. This was also the fate of his score for the ballet *The Twelve* based on Blok [op. 25, 1963] on which he worked with Yakobson, and which was also banned. This is a very touching story, in fact. Tishchenko absolutely wanted to keep the last scene. But it was cut, of course, which made the composer absolutely furious. Ultimately, the piece was banned in its entirety, and Tishchenko spent years arguing and fighting for it to be performed, often in the face of severe disapproval.

DSCH: Why the general relative lack of exposure, though, even in Russia?

Tchalik: Tishchenko's works were, and still are, performed by Gergiev and Rozhdestvensky, among other well-known conductors. Kondrashin was also a great proponent. I believe, however, that one reason for the relative lack of popularity and exposure is that Tishchenko's symphonies are perceived as long and difficult. This is ironic, given that the epic symphonies by Mahler and Shostakovich are played so often these days. So in all honesty, I'm sure that Tishchenko symphonies would—and should—find a place in the repertoire, given the listening public's familiarity with the epic genre.

Another major problem is that conductors find it harder and harder to integrate "new" works into the concert repertoire—whether or not the music merits more exposure. Take Tishchenko's Fifth Symphony, which includes themes linked to Shostakovich's works. This piece would be accessible to the majority of concert-going audiences and would not require a huge amount of work to bring to fruition, yet it remains almost totally unperformed. The same is true of the Cello Concerto, which, as we mentioned, was written for Rostropovich. Unfortunately, the system and organisation of concert planning and concert giving today in Russia is very complex: there is very little money available for innovation. And even when the possibility arises to depart from the standard repertoire, concert organisers tend to prefer "true" contemporary music written by living composers.

DSCH: So what do musicians in Russia actually know about Tishchenko's music?

Tchalik: It's difficult to know. I have many musical friends in Russia who know very little about Tishchenko and his music; in particular, the younger members of the musical fraternity know almost nothing about him. I hope that the appearance of CDs dedicated to Tishchenko's music will improve this situation. There is a

Gabriel and Dania Tchalik with Boris Tishchenko. Paris, November 2009

disc featuring Tishchenko's two piano sonatas (nos. 7 and 8) by Nicolas Stavy, which was released recently in France. And then there is my own disc, which I hope will raise awareness of the quality of Tishchenko's music. As I mentioned earlier, there is the *Fantasy*, which is, in my view, a major twentieth-century work for violin and piano. Works of this calibre are few and far between—at the beginning of the century, the only works of real quality in this genre were by Ravel and Bartók. But after that, very little music was written of that standard, and in my view, the *Fantasy* belongs to that category. There's also the Second Sonata for solo violin, which is an incredible piece.

DSCH: Can you relate any more direct exchanges with Tishchenko?

Tchalik: Unfortunately, we only met briefly when he came to Paris in 2009, and when I performed in front of a small audience at the Shostakovich Centre there. He really did like the fact that I was playing his violin repertoire. When I told him that I intended to record his works, he mentioned specifically that the Second Sonata was something important to him, and that he was keen for it to be performed again. I had only recently obtained the score of the Sonata—it's an exceptional work in seven movements, and lasts more than half an hour.

DSCH: The work has an unusual form, doesn't it?

Tchalik: Yes, it does! There are four movements, each of which is separated by an intermezzo in the style of the Second Viennese School. In fact, the four "core" movements could well have been inspired by Shostakovich in typical Tishchenko Russian-Soviet style, whereas the intermezzi are completely different and represent music that would never find its place in Shostakovich's repertoire—it's Webern! These intermezzi pull the work apart completely. But ultimately, the music is fully coherent. It's a real *tour de force*. I know of no other work quite like it: such a mix of style, genre, and technique—a unique piece that works very well on the concert platform and in the studio.

DSCH: You mentioned irony?

Tchalik: Yes, but not in the sense of mocking or grotesque; it is more a case of specific stylistic choices tending towards an ironic tone. You know, Tishchenko likes long passages, and this tendentiousness in the music becomes more and more strained, veering towards the unsupportable, rather like the long sections in Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony, but with even more tenuous, drawn-out passages. This is typical Tishchenko—leading up to the point at which climaxes become almost hysterical, and out-of-control.

DSCH: Was this a reflection of his personality?

Tchalik: I think so. This was somebody who might be described as tormented, rather like Shostakovich. In fact, I was able to talk with Valentin Silvestrov about this phenomenon. He knew Tishchenko very well, and elucidated his obsessive streak through an incident that took place when they attended one of those typical Soviet composers'

retreats together in the 1970s. Silvestrov lent Tishchenko a book he had been reading that included Buddhist texts. Tishchenko was somebody who was forever curious, and interested in many different cultures. He knew African and Oriental music very well, for instance. But in his haste to return the book to Silvestrov, he accidentally slid the book under the door of a bedroom belonging to a woman unknown to him! The next day, Silvestrov reprimanded Tishchenko for not having returned the book. Then, in a fit of reckless guilt, Tishchenko was seen climbing out of his bedroom window and into the bedroom of the lady to rescue the book! We sometimes catch a glimpse of this boldness in his music. His works are very rarely discrete. In fact, Brussilovsky once told me that Tishchenko was capable of being very short-tempered—certainly somebody without airs and graces.

DSCH: One might say a complex person?

Tchalik: Yes, you're right. You know, he remarried several times, and therefore lived through some rather tempestuous periods in his personal life, too.

DSCH: Isn't there a definitive biography of Tishchenko?

Tchalik: No, there isn't, but that would be a wonderful project to undertake for someone who knew him—someone who could relate his life and his work. His widow could do this, I suppose. She remains a very active person. In fact, she helped me a great deal when I was looking for certain scores. Perhaps she could take this on.

DSCH: In what other ways do the lives of Shostakovich and Tishchenko overlap?

Tchalik: Certainly in the context of Russian literature. The two composers would often debate poetry and literature, and not always agree. As you know, Shostakovich was a great supporter of Yevgeny Yevtushenko, whereas Tishchenko didn't really like him. Shostakovich became exasperated by this and wrote a number of letters to Tishchenko to try to persuade him that the poet really was up there with the best. Tishchenko's opinion was based on a mixture of Yevtushenko the man and Yevtushenko the poet, and what you might call the "moralising" aspect of Yevtushenko's works. Tishchenko was a good friend of Brodsky, and he also knew Akhmatova well. He circulated in the most elevated of literary circles, knew all of Dante's works, and wrote many works for theatre, including a work based on Anatole France (*Symphonie Frantsuzskaya - French Symphony*) and Jean Anouilh (*Zhavoronok – The Lark*). The composer was a great admirer of France and French literature.

DSCH: As somebody who knows Tishchenko's music as well as anyone in the West, which three works would you recommend to the *DSCH Journal*'s readers?

Tchalik: Of course, you would expect me to nominate the *Fantasy*! This is representative of Tishchenko's repertoire, as is the Fifth Symphony—also mentioned. The Seventh Symphony, however, is one of the easiest works by Tishchenko to listen to, and therefore would make a good introduction to the composer. It's quite accessible and joyful. It's not at all tortured, and is even playful in places, with just a touch of humour mixed with irony—just like Shostakovich.

That said, the listener should not imagine that much of Tishchenko's repertoire is similar to the Seventh Symphony—far from it. We also talked about the Cello Concerto as performed by Rostropovich, which is a fabulous piece.

I remember Tishchenko explaining, during a conference in Paris, why all of his symphonies have five moments. He explained that four movements, in his view, were not enough, and that the works needed, as he put it, a "backbone," which he placed at the centre of the symphonies' structure. For Tishchenko, this "extra" movement provides an enhanced symmetrical structure. Another common symphonic trait of his involves passages of thematic development that plunge suddenly into total disharmony! This is, again, where the Second Viennese School comes into play; sometimes this takes the shape of a large percussion ensemble, resembling modern jazz or even rock music—very rhythmic. This is something that we find in many of his works. It is chaos, but rhythmic chaos! A real trademark.

You know that much of what was imported into the USSR in the 1960s came from the conductor Blazhkov, most notably as regards Berg and Schoenberg's music. But whereas the works of Silvestrov and Denisov, for example, take on a dodecaphonic guise, Tishchenko's works insert such passages in the middle of more conventional, tonal music.

DSCH: I seem to remember a reference to twelve-tone technique in a letter from Shostakovich to Tishchenko.

Tchalik: Yes, that's right. Referring to one of Tishchenko's piano sonatas, Shostakovich asked, "Is that the well-known twelve-tone technique?" Tishchenko replied, "No, no, not at all, I just chose those notes by ear!" And apparently Shostakovich found that remark very amusing, repeating it when they next met. "Just by ear!"

To come back to the question of choosing works by Tishchenko to listen to, I strongly recommend the Dante Symphonies. There are several of them [op. 123, nos. 1–5], and they are excellent. In fact, after Tishchenko had completed the Dante Symphonies, he announced, "I have finished my work. Now I can die." And, indeed, he died not long after completing the cycle.