



Photo by: Courtesy

Alexander the great
By MAXIM REIDER
25/03/2011

Outstanding Russian cellist Alexander Ivashkin performs classical repertoires and champions modern music.

The renowned Russian cellist who makes his Israeli debut at the Sixth Eilat Chamber Music Festival this weekend says he has no real answer to the question “How do you manage to live several lives simultaneously, being an active performer, conductor, writer, teacher, jury member in cello competitions and festival organizer?” “I think that for me, this switching of activities serves as a substitute for rest,” he says in a phone interview from his London home.

Alexander Ivashkin, who was described as an outstanding cellist by Mstislav Rostropovich, an excellent musician by John Cage, and an outstanding person in present-day music activities by Krzysztof Penderecki, performs throughout the world as a soloists with the best orchestras and also plays chamber music. But starting his music studies at the Gnessin Special School of Music for gifted students at the age of five, he still remembers how he cried when he realized he was going to play the cello. “It was an ugly instrument I’d never seen before and I simply hated it, but to be accepted to the piano department, you needed to already have a good command of the instrument.”

Later, studying both instruments at the same level, he was advised by Rostropovich to stay with cello “because it gives you a chance to make a better living,” he smiles.

And he never regretted it. “In the 20th century, the cello developed rapidly and has undergone a tremendous change. Not only the repertoire grew immensely and is almost as rich as that of the piano, but the style has changed as well.

Now playing the cello does not especially mean producing beautiful melodies or playing with fat tone, it means all sorts of techniques.”

Graduating from the Gnessin Institute with a double degree as a cellist and musicologist, he started his professional writing experience as a music critic. His first book was dedicated to composer Charles Ives “and was real research work,” while his books about composer Alfred Schnittke “were not about musicology but rather biographies.”

In 1989, Ivashkin and his wife “signed very good teaching contracts with the

Canterbury University in Christchurch, New Zealand. It was an extremely unpleasant time in Russia, and I simply did not want to be there,” he recollects, adding that he actually never left his country, since he has dual citizenship and still keeps an apartment in Moscow. In 1999 they settled in England, and “this too was a great move because despite the tough competition, London offers a musician a lot of performing possibilities, as well as good exposure. In New Zealand, you can get a great local review, but that’s it.”

Ivashkin is famous not only as a performer of the standard cello repertoire but also an avid champion of modern music, with many composers, such as Alfred Schnittke, dedicating works to him.

“I was always interested in playing contemporary music. That is why, while still living in Moscow, I founded the Bolshoi Soloists ensemble, which existed for 12 years during very difficult times in 1970-1980s. We played a lot of contemporary music – that of Cage, Kagel, Penderecki – and commissioned music to Schnittke, Gubaidulia, Denisov. Quite soon, I will world premiere a cello concerto by Vladimir Tarnopolsky.

This is a very complex piece, not written in a traditional cello way, so I’m learning a lot.”

And he elaborates: “For me, playing contemporary music is a good lesson in how to play any music. I’m trying to play Brahms, Beethoven and Bach as if it were written today: otherwise, you will follow clichés that other people have created. It simply teaches you how to read between the lines.”

Alexander Ivashkin performs at the Eilat Chamber Music Festival on March 25 at 5 p.m. For more details: www.eilat-festival.co.il