

## INTERVIEW

Mstislav Rostropovich,  
'Cellist and Conductor

# 'We carry out a divine service with our music'

*The now 70-year-old Mstislav Rostropovich is considered the greatest 'cellist of our time, and is generally mentioned in the same breath as the legendary Pablo Casals. The proximity to Casals is not accidental, for his father and first teacher, Leopold Rostropovich, admired Casals' art greatly, and was for a time his student in Paris. Like Casals, who revolutionized 'cello playing at the beginning of this century—liberating Bach's Suites for Violoncello Solo from the taint of a naked "étude," and performing these brilliant Classical compositions for the first time in the concert hall, so that they were established as the foundation of 'cello literature—Mstislav Rostropovich has also distinguished himself as a revolutionary on his instrument. Nearly all modern composers have been stimulated by his 'cello playing. Most of all, it is thanks to him and his innumerable students, who themselves belong to the elite of 'cellists today, that the 'cello has experienced a true renaissance in recent decades. Yet, as Rostropovich recounts in this interview, he was already as a child fascinated by conducting, and even at the beginning of his career as a soloist, prepared seriously for the conductor's calling.*

*Born in 1927, the son of a 'cellist and a pianist, Rostropovich took in music "with his mother's milk," so to speak. As a child, he received a thorough education on both piano and 'cello, until, in accordance with his father's wishes, he concentrated entirely on the violoncello. He debuted as a soloist when he was only 13 years of age—at the "advanced" age of 14, following the early death of his father, he had to concern him-*

*self with supporting his family—and, owing to his outstanding accomplishments, within three years he entered the renowned Moscow Music Conservatory. He immediately began a meteoric career as the leading 'cellist of the former Soviet Union, which very quickly led him abroad. At the beginning of the 1960's, he conducted his first public concert, together with his friend, the composer Dmitri Shostakovich, and in 1968 he premiered a sensational "musically new production" of Tchaikovsky's opera "Eugene Onegin" at the world-renowned Bolshoi Theater, in which his wife, the soprano Galina Vishnevskaya, held the position of Primadonna assoluta.*

### Befriending Solzhenitsyn

*In the West, besides his great artistic achievements—he has concertized with practically every world-class orchestra and chamber music group—Rostropovich is known above all for his public championship of the author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who, beginning the late 1960's, was banned by the former Soviet regime, and finally, in 1973, exiled from that country altogether. Solzhenitsyn lived for nearly four years in Rostropovich's dacha, as he otherwise had no place to live with adequate working conditions. A crisis with the regime was reached in the late fall of 1970, after Rostropovich had confirmed his attitude on this question in an Open Letter. Although*



*suppressed in the Soviet Union, after this letter hit the West like a tidal wave, Rostropovich himself quickly became a Soviet "non-person": his artistic activity was drastically curtailed and foreign trips were forbidden, as were concerts in the great cities of Moscow and Leningrad. Nearly all his friends turned against him. In the beginning of 1974, Rostropovich received—particularly through the intervention of U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy—approval from the Soviet regime for a "two-year foreign residence," accompanied by his family. In 1978, Soviet citizenship was stripped from him and his wife.*

*Rostropovich could not complain about a lack of work in the West. Besides his intense activity as an internationally sought-after soloist, he was frequently also a guest conductor with renowned orchestras. Besides these duties, in 1977 he undertook the position of chief conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C., a position for which he*

had prepared for seventeen long years. When the Berlin Wall fell on Nov. 9, 1989, he flew to Berlin with his 'cello as quickly as possible, to play one of Bach's solo suites at Checkpoint Charlie—a work which he has only just, at the age of 70, really undertaken for the first time, because, as he says below, "I had now the 'balance' at my disposal for the first time."

At the time of this interview, Mstislav Rostropovich was on tour, concertizing as both 'cellist and conductor on the occasion of his 70th birthday. At the end of November 1997, two of these Jubilee concerts took place with the Vienna Philharmonic, in the concert hall of the tradition-rich Vienna Music Association. There, on November 20, Mr. Rostropovich was interviewed for *Fidelio*, and its German-language sister publication *Ibykus*, by Hartmut Cramer.

**I have immense respect for Bach; he is one of the best examples, that art comes from God. As with a priest, it is not necessary that the Word of God be interpreted; rather, that God speak directly to man through the priest. Thus do I see it also with Bach and other great composers.**

**Fidelio:** Mr. Rostropovich, for nearly forty years, you—the world-famous 'cellist—have also experienced an equally great career as a conductor. Does this mean that you became a conductor without ever having properly learned conducting?

**Rostropovich:** Of course not. I'll tell you how my conducting career came about.

Since my youth, it was my dream to become a conductor and not a 'cellist. When I was somewhere between eight and nine years old, my father, who also was a 'cellist—by the way, he played much better 'cello than I—played often in the orchestra at a resort during the summer; I believe he did that only so

that we—his wife and two children—might have a vacation, since we simply had no money for normal vacations.

Unfortunately, my father died of a heart attack when he was very young; that was 1942, and he was just 50 years old. He was an unusually strong individual, and always said: "If the people need me, then they will come to me." He was that certain of his ability—and yet, no one came.

**Fidelio:** Was he very much embittered when he died?

**Rostropovich:** Yes, he was. I believe that my father, where he is now, must be very pleased that God has enabled me to have so beautiful an artistic life, because he had no luck in his. He was as musically gifted as I, he was highly gifted. He could play the piano—an entire orchestral score, in fact, by heart—he composed . . .

**Fidelio:** . . . Your father was a pianist too, not just your mother?

**Rostropovich:** Oh, my father was the best pianist in the family. He played Chopin's entire piano *oeuvre*, by heart; all the *ballades*, the *études*, sonatas, the concertos, all. And detailed study of a full score, this I learned from my father. So too, the ability to play a piece by heart after having played it through only two or three times. But the "prima vista"—to play at first sight, sight-reading—in that, my father held complete sway. He did that like no one else. When I put together my first piano concert—I was then a good 13 years old, and a year later my father died—he took the score and sight-read the entire concert. It was inconceivable, but true. That was my father and first teacher.

Now, because our family was very poor, my father accepted a position every summer in a small resort orchestra; that was in southern Russia, in Zaporozhye, and also in Slavyansk. It was there in Slavyansk, in 1940, that I played as a soloist with an orchestra for the first time—it was the 'cello concerto by Camille Saint-Saëns.

**Fidelio:** And with that began, at age 13, your career as a 'cellist?

**Rostropovich:** Yes. Before, my father had always taken me to rehearsals—even the concerts in Zaporozhye. I was at every rehearsal and sat in the orchestra, somewhere between the first and second violins, and listened. The people were very nice to me; I learned a lot. I had already composed my first piece at age four (which my father preserved in its entirety!). From the start, the conductors fascinated me a great deal. One of the first taught me transposition, at age six or seven; that is, reading the clarinet voice, the brass instruments, and so on. And, from that time on, I dreamt of becoming a conductor. Up until age 13, I would conduct old recordings; for example, the symphonies of Tchaikovsky. But, my father insisted that I become a 'cellist, and he also taught me. So I became a 'cellist, and not a conductor—but I never gave up my old dream. At first, in fact, I had no time for it, and also I wanted to finish up my musical education quickly. As a rule, students come to the Conservatory at age 18, and study there for five years. Now, I had difficulties with the final examination for the first term; of course not with 'cello playing, but in the theoretical division . . .

**Fidelio:** . . . music theory, harmony? . . .

**Rostropovich:** ...No, no—with that I had no problem. But we were also tested on Marxism-Leninism, the history of workers' movements, and so forth; and about these I really knew nothing at all. But—my father had been dead over a year, I had to provide for my family, for my mother and older sister—so I mastered all these requirements during the next year, so that it went better at the end of the term. I could do the 'cello playing anyway, of course, which my father had taught me. And, naturally, I perfected my technique at the Conservatory, broadened the repertoire, improved intonation still further; in all modesty, I can say, that I played very well in the examination at the end of the second term. I had sought out the most difficult things from the literature—pieces by Paganini, for example—and played them absolutely cleanly and technically perfectly.

**Fidelio:** So, you were what Mozart called a “solid ’cellist”?

**Rostropovich:** Yes, one could say that. The professors were so pleased, that they promoted me at once from the second year to the fifth and last; so I had to study at the Moscow Conservatory for only two years, instead of five. By then I had completed nineteen years of study, and stood ready to begin a great career as a ’cellist. Yet, at the same time—and this quite seriously—I immediately began a career as a conductor.

First, I worked with the composer Alexander—in Russia, there are two famous musicians by the name of Alexander. One conducted the Red Army Chorus, and was for me, naturally, only an amateur. But the other was a true composer. And his wife—although not a professional musician—was a very brilliant teacher and ideal pedagogue. She taught conducting technique to me and other students.

At the same time, I began lessons with Leo Ginsburg, one of the most famous teachers at the Conservatory. Of course, these were private lessons, since I was then no longer a student, but already a successful working ’cellist. Ginsburg was absolutely the best teacher of conducting in the entire Conservatory. Genadi Rozhdestvensky had been his student, as well as all the other famous Russian conductors. Ginsburg was, himself, not a great conductor; but, as a teacher, he was the best. So I went to his house, and he was very enthusiastic. And he did a very unusual thing with me: his instruction began with my conducting string quartets.

**Fidelio:** Which quartets were those?

**Rostropovich:** Three or four of Beethoven’s, including late quartets, and several quartets of Mozart.

**Fidelio:** How did that work? Did you bring recordings with you?

**Rostropovich:** No, no; I brought some friends with me, who played the quartets of Beethoven and Mozart, and I conducted. Ginsburg advised me very closely, interrupted me, explained to me, and demonstrated for me ... it was wonderful, phenomenal. I learned a great

deal through that experience, because, in the four different voices of one string quartet of the great composers, you can study and try out so much.

**Fidelio:** It’s also very interesting, on this account, because historically the orchestra, to some extent, developed from the four voices of the string section. So the string quartet, so to speak, shaped the kernel of the orchestra, such that the other instruments—especially the woodwinds and horns—group around it.

**Rostropovich:** Exactly. Later, I conducted ’cello concerts under Ginsburg’s supervision, and after his death—after I got to know Kyrill Kondrashin—I conducted my first concert. I’m still in close contact with Kondrashin, and also with a conductor named Guzman, the chief conductor in Gorki (which nowadays is again called Nizhny Novgorod). He was not so famous, and neither was he a great musician—but he was a good bandmaster. I asked Kondrashin and Guzman to prepare a concert with me in Gorki. I studied Tchaikovsky’s First Symphony and Prokofiev’s Fifth Symphony with Kondrashin. This was my first public appearance as a conductor, at the end of 1961. Although, earlier, I had already conducted—five musical interludes for orchestra, from *Lady Macbeth*.

**Fidelio:** The *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* of Shostakovich?

**Rostropovich:** Yes, the *Lady Macbeth* of Shostakovich. In addition, somewhat earlier I also conducted a world premiere, the *Songs and Dances of Death* by Mussorgsky, which Shostakovich orchestrated and dedicated to my wife Galina. At this time, Shostakovich was already very ill, he suffered from atrophy of the muscles. He suffered even more, however, from the fact that he could no longer appear as a pianist, he loved this profession so much. He often accompanied my wife and me to piano concerts. And, when discussing his illness, I proposed that he could still conduct, that this would certainly still work. He agreed, and we put together a program in Gorki, in which he conducted the first part, and I the second part: Mussorgsky’s *Songs and Dances of Death* (in the orches-

tral setting) and five musical interludes from *Macbeth*. For me, it was great fortune, for the best review ever written about me as a conductor, came from Shostakovich. In this article, Shostakovich developed very interesting musical ideas; I still have it today.

Previously, Shostakovich had observed me at rehearsals. Afterwards he came to me, very excited, and went directly into details: “While at such-and-such passage, I did not hear the bassoon strongly enough, and thought, ‘that needs to be heard more clearly,’ at that very moment, you brought the bassoon into greater prominence wonderfully.” It happened somewhat similarly in reference to the *pianissimo*: for at the beginning, the orchestra played *mezzoforte* instead of *mezzopiano*, and thus the later *pianissimo* passage became too loud relatively too quickly. That is the most difficult thing, to get an orchestra to play truly *piano*, or, then again, *pianissimo*.

I still remember vividly a discussion with the famous pianist Heinrich Neuhaus, who in his development debuted on the piano and one after another struck a key in *pianissimo* and in *forte-fortissimo* and asked: “How many gradual differences are there between these two tones?” The greatest difficulties in music belong to this, to really work out these many, many gradations.

I always spend a great deal of time working out the dynamic shadings when I work with an orchestra. I let them first play *piano*, then *mezzopiano*, *mezzoforte*, then *forte*, *fortissimo*, ... and, in the process, it usually becomes clear, that there is no possibility of increasing beyond *f* to *ff*, let alone a further increase to *fff*.

Shostakovich was not only completely excited about this rehearsal and the associated concert in Gorki, but he also then spoke later to friends about his appreciation of me as a conductor; and that naturally greatly helped me in my conducting career.

Later, I got a chance to conduct Tchaikovsky’s opera *Eugene Onegin* at the Bolshoi Theater. I studied that with yet another teacher. After the first three teachers—Ginsburg, Kondrashin, and Guzman—my fourth conductor-teacher

was Boris Kaikin, who conducted at the Bolshoi Theater. But that I must explain more precisely.

You know that my wife Galina had sung the title role of Tatiana in the opera *Eugene Onegin*; well, when I was in Moscow, I heard every performance. As a result, little by little, I observed that the interpretation of the opera was not right. So I studied the full score more closely, and determined that in the performance—a “standard performance,” which had been unchanged in the repertoire for a long time—many mistakes were being made. Tchaikovsky’s music sounded completely falsified; it was sentimental and trashy, indeed the rendering was almost smutty. I love Tchaikovsky very much, and when I perform



*Galina Vishnevskaya, in her 1953 Bolshoi Opera debut as Tatiana in “Eugene Onegin.”*

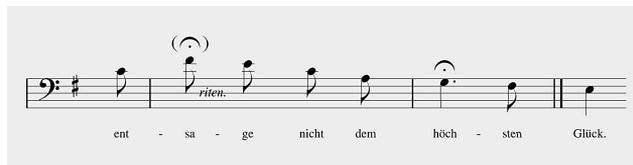
*Baritone phrase, “Eugene Onegin”: shifting the fermata transforms a musical idea into mere sentimentality.*

**My wife Galina sang the title role of Tatiana in the opera Eugene Onegin, and I heard every performance. Little by little, I observed that the interpretation of the opera was not right. Tchaikovsky’s music sounded completely falsified; it was sentimental and trashy. I love Tchaikovsky very much, and when I perform him, I take pains to present his music very intelligibly and clearly, exactly as he wrote it.**

him, I take pains to present his music very intelligibly and clearly, exactly as he wrote it. But what was offered at the Bolshoi Theater as a “standard performance” of *Eugene Onegin* was entirely otherwise.

**Fidelio:** That was the reason why, for your debut with the Bolshoi in 1968, you insisted on having so many rehearsals?

**Rostropovich:** Yes, and that in particular led to a scandal. Imagine, I come as a well-recognized ’cellist, but inexperienced conductor, to the world-renowned Bolshoi, which is by far the best theater in the entire Soviet Union, and insist for the performance of a decade-long-rehearsed “standard opera,” *ten* re-



hearsals. They would only give me *five*. I insist on ten. Finally, we reach a compromise on the number eight. But it winds up 22—because the musicians insisted on so many.

They said, that the music of Tchaikovsky—who was otherwise a person of strong character—is, quite to the contrary, as sentimental and trashy as anything they had hitherto heard or played. Line by line, I went through the

different passages with the orchestra, arguing and singing. And then they not only accepted, but were finally even excited.

For example, in the famous baritone phrase in the final scene duet [SEE musical example], in the original, Tchaikovsky writes out the fermata on the opposite end of the singing line [on the G–Ed.]; but, by the performance, however, it rings out already well before, just at the beginning on the F, the highest note of the baritone . . .

**Fidelio:** . . . because the baritone wants to shine just like a tenor or soprano . . .

**Rostropovich:** . . . naturally, and the conductors have submitted to him. And with time, it becomes completely absurd: The first singer sustains this high note ten seconds, then it becomes 12, 13, even 15; thus, Tchaikovsky’s music becomes trash—and this is but a single example, of which there are many. So, there was much to do, and I therefore needed many rehearsals. Because I wanted that the musicians, and through them ultimately the audience also, receive the most direct possible insight into the musical intention of the composer.

**Fidelio:** What you describe is what Furtwängler referred to with the phrase, “I conduct what lies behind the notes.”

**Rostropovich:** That is exactly what I mean. In fact, I learned a great deal from Furtwängler, precisely in respect to Tchaikovsky. His interpretation of

Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony has given me so many ideas, far more than from any of the Russian conductors. Furtwängler’s interpretation bespeaks a

great deal of imagination, but also ever so much logic. And because of this unique combination of musical logic and creative imagination, I admire Furtwängler. He was a brilliant conductor.

**Fidelio:** How and when did you hear Furtwängler for the first time?

**Rostropovich:** On old recordings, which were protected by us in Moscow as treasures, having been received only secretly

and “under-the-table.”

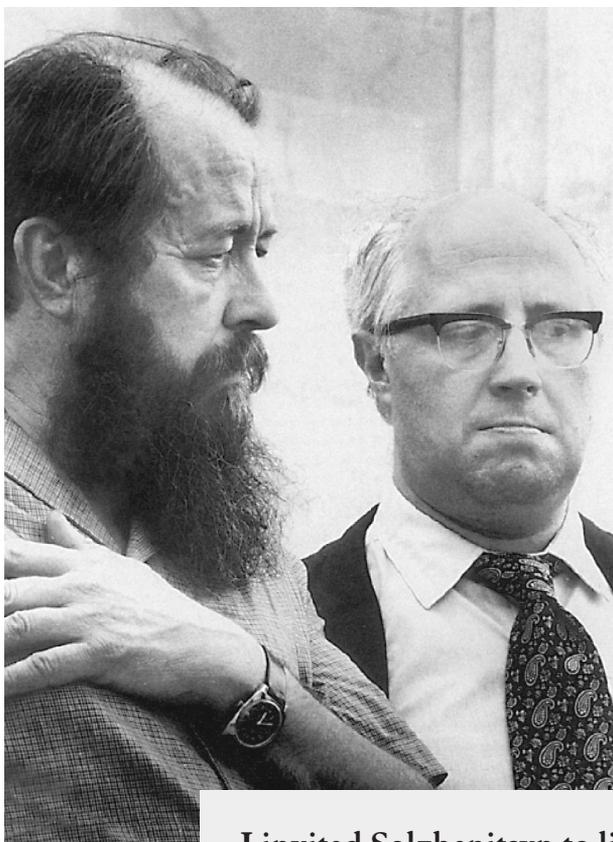
**Fidelio:** Because he was officially decried in Moscow—as was pretty much every German at that time—as a “fascist” and “counterrevolutionary”?

**Rostropovich:** Yes, yes—all these things are well known.

**Fidelio:** What else have you heard of Furtwängler’s, beside the symphonies of Tchaikovsky?

**Rostropovich:** Many different symphonies—above all, of course, Beethoven’s works. What especially impressed me: Furtwängler was always the same; as a person, as a musical personage. It’s for this reason, that he is for me the greatest conductor. He was a truly powerful individual. And it is especially important today to strenuously emphasize this; nowadays, in the electronic age, where recordings become manufactured as mass-produced articles, where distinctions become watered-down and everything is levelled, and even in art there is introduced something like a “statistical average.” There are even record experiments, in which, for instance, the Fourth Symphony of Brahms or Beethoven is assembled from old recordings, so that the first movement is done by Furtwängler, the second by Bruno Walter, the third by Klemperer, and the fourth . . . —whereas, these are completely different worlds.

I have also learned much from the conductors with whom I concertized as a ’cello soloist. Even when one plays the same ’cello concerto often, it is still always different every time. One can therefore learn a great deal, especially as I have had the fortune to practically always play under the best conductors in the world. In addition, I have con-



**Fidelio:** You have—just in the recent twenty years—conducted many great orchestras. It used to be, that each great orchestra was an individual body of sound. The “Vienna” was known for its strings, a tradition which—as the first violin of the Amadeus Quartet Norbert Brainin explained in a recent interview—goes back ultimately to Josef Böhm, whose artistry in string quartets even met with Beethoven’s approval. With the “Prague,” especially its horns shone—something Mozart had already really treasured. And the “Berlin” impresses above all through its discipline, its special ability to make the developmental process of a composition alive—something which surely traces back, above all, to their intensive work with Furtwängler.

Today, there is no longer anything unique, the orchestras are more and more similar to one another—in their

*Alexander Solzhenitsyn (left) and Mstislav Rostropovich, in the 1970’s.*

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sulted many conductors, for instance Herbert von Karajan. With him, it also went into details, as to the opening phrase of the Fourth Symphony of Shostakovich, or a particular choral and orchestral part in the second act of *Eugene Onegin*, where Karajan was an important stimulus.

And I have not only learned from having seen and heard the most famous conductors, but, I have always taken the time to consult them, to discuss the smallest details with them, and to continuously improve myself.

sound, especially. What is your experience with this?

**Rostropovich:** I see this also, and it is really too bad. A great orchestra has a very specific “character,” which personifies an entirely specific tradition; but, at the same time, it also has the ability, to precisely render the “character” of different composers. Because, every composer has a very specific sound, and the orchestra must render this sound appropriately—while also preserving its own tradition. It must have a feeling for this sound. This means, above all, that the

conductor must consider the correct balance, the appropriate distribution of sound of the individual instrumental groups, to render the characteristic sound of a composer.

I had the fortune to work with Prokofiev, and especially Shostakovich, and learned a great deal in this regard. Also, indirectly, from Dvořák, because I studied his 'cello concerto with the Czech violinist and conductor Václav Talich, who had personally known Dvořák. Talich showed me how Dvořák had thought about the rendering of his 'cello concerto. Naturally, I questioned Talich intensely, because I wanted to render Dvořák's music exactly as he had thought and felt.

Normally, one can only convey the intentions of composers through images. I still remember a rehearsal with Sviatoslav Richter, when we were intensively studying Brahms' E-minor 'Cello Sonata, and he suddenly asked me: "In what kind of weather, do you think, did Brahms compose this sonata?" And sure enough, it went better.

**Fidelio:** Mr. Rostropovich, the period from 1969 to 1974 was very difficult for you. You were inconvenient for the regime, not least of all because you had opened your dacha to the proscribed author Alexander Solzhenitsyn. You were harassed in this regard. The culture

ministry would typically say that your planned foreign tours were cancelled "on account of illness"; in Moscow and Leningrad, concert halls were suddenly "no longer available" for you; you were no longer allowed to appear in the provinces, where your concerts were largely blacked out; and, in reviews of orchestral concerts and opera performances, your name and that of your wife—the *Primadonna assoluta* of the Bolshoi Theater—were no longer mentioned. You were considered to be a "non-person," and were finally forced to go into exile at the beginning of 1974. What was the greatest problem for you during these difficult years?

**Rostropovich:** That was truly a difficult time, for at that time I was, for the first time in my life, confronted with a truly great problem. I am a believing man, and I think that God was in this way testing me.

My friendship with Alexander Solzhenitsyn began in 1969, after my first concert in the state of Ryazan, where Solzhenitsyn at that time lived with his family, or was lodged, as the case may be. At that moment, he was the greatest of all Soviet authors.

*Pravda* had showered him with hymns of praise, because, after all, Khrushchov had released him from prison, or rather, a workcamp. One should have no illusions: Khrushchov merely wanted to show how "liberal" he was in comparison to Stalin; therefore, he ordered that Solzhenitsyn be "our greatest author." When Brezhnev came to power, this was changed just as abruptly. Brezhnev hated Khrushchov, and just as Khrushchov damned practically everything wholesale that Stalin had called good, so Brezhnev did with respect to Khrushchov. Thus has it gone for the rest, up to today. For Gorbachov, almost everything that Brezhnev had done was bad, and for Yeltsin, almost everything that Gorbachov had done is bad—that's how things are run by us in Russia. And so, Solzhenitsyn was again proscribed and banned under Brezhnev.

Solzhenitsyn came on the aforementioned evening to my concert, but, unfortunately, not later to the dressing room.

**Galina reproached me, that I would risk my career, the future of the family, above all, the children, with this letter. . . .**

**It became clear to her, however, that I was adamant on this question—because this decision affected my life as an artist. Neither of us slept for two nights; we fought, discussed, cried. But then my wife's great strength of character manifested itself. We went through the letter together, line by line; she worked it over editorially, and even improved it.**



*Rehearsing with his wife Galina.*

So I located his address, and the next morning drove to his home to visit him; we had an intense discussion which lasted approximately two hours. Solzhenitsyn was pleased, as he expressed it, by the “colorfulness” of my Russian speech, and he encouraged further cultivation of our acquaintance.

I saw in a glance that his financial situation was very tight, and that he actually could barely work in his circumstances; in addition, he was sick and needed medicines, which could only be purchased with difficulty in such a small city as Ryazan. So, I invited him to live in my dacha in the vicinity of Moscow, although this immediately got me into difficulties with the regime. Two ministers, under the Interior Minister, even asked me “to throw Solzhenitsyn on the street,” when I argued that, aside from my dacha, he really had no place to stay.

Solzhenitsyn, who lived in my dacha until his 1973 expatriation, knew precisely what to expect from the system, and that he would be constantly watched. When we drove to Moscow, we sometimes did it in his car—a very old *Moskwitsch*—and sometimes in mine, until he once said to me: “Slava, this doesn’t work. This way, we’re making it too easy for the KGB. They need only ram us with a van, to finish us both off together. Suppose, then, we make it more difficult for them; each of us should drive his own car.” I was also anxious, of course, when we went for a walk together. But, this opened my eyes to the political situation in my country. In my youth, I had, because of my talent, made my career very quickly, and therefore had not had political problems.

Naturally, I thought about my family in this situation, especially of my two daughters, whose future I did not want to obstruct. On the other hand, they and possible grandchildren ought not to later be able to reproach me, that I had been silent about the truth, and conformed out of cowardice and laziness. It was clear to me, that I *must* speak the truth on such an important question; no matter what happened, what I *think* must be said. When I now, in retrospect, consider my decision at that time, I come to the

conclusion that I never did anything better in my life, than when I stood up for Solzhenitsyn in this situation. This was morally the best thing that I ever did.

But, of course, it wasn’t easy. In October 1970, I drafted an Open Letter, in which I explained my attitude on this question, and then later I sent it to the four most important Soviet newspapers. After Galina read the letter, she said, to begin with, only one word: “No!” Then she reproached me, that I would, cavalierly, risk my career, the future of the family, above all, the children, that I would ruin my life with this letter—along the lines of the saying, “Make of your life what you will, but don’t risk the future for me and the children.” So, then, I came up with a “way out”—I proposed a staged separation. We would

newspapers did not publish—appeared in the Western press and made quite a stir, I began to feel the full severity of the regime. And, I had expected this, in certain ways, too. But, what really took me by surprise, was not the fact that I was no longer permitted to travel to the West—only once was I allowed during those years to concertize abroad, here in Vienna, where I performed Prokofiev’s *War and Peace* with the Bolshoi, an opera which nobody but I had conducted with the Bolshoi. Moreover, I was very closely surveilled by the KGB during that period, and the reviews were—despite the fact that the public was enthusiastic about the performance—astonishingly very bad, something I attribute to the influence of the KGB, which was very active here in Vienna. . . .

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separate *pro forma*, such that nothing would change between us; we would otherwise continue to live as before. As a result, neither of us slept for two nights; we fought, discussed, cried, and so forth; but then, my wife’s great strength of character manifested itself. Galina agreed with my decision. We went through the letter together, line by line; she worked it over editorially, and even improved it.

**Fidelio:** She strengthened your arguments?

**Rostropovich:** Yes, because, after forty-eight hours, it became clear to her, that I was adamant on this question, and would not give in—because this decision affected *my life as an artist*. Of course, then, as the letter—which the Soviet

*Rostropovich conducts “his” Washingtonians, Red Square, Moscow, 1993.*

**Fidelio:** ...Vienna was, at the time of the Cold War, in respect to the intelligence services, something like a revolving door; as was Berlin.

**Rostropovich:** Exactly. So, beyond this one appearance here in Vienna in 1971, I was not allowed to concertize any more abroad. Neither in Moscow nor Leningrad, either—only in the provinces, and that under impossible conditions. But, that was not the worst. The worst was, that nearly all my friends—and I had at that time many Soviet friends—fell away from me like the leaves of a tree in autumn. We received no more visits, no telephone calls, nothing. It was as if we

no longer existed. We were alone. That was the worst.

At the Bolshoi Theater, where, following the Vienna trip, I was no longer allowed to conduct, another conductor was hired, and it was commanded: “Forget everything Rostropovich ever said.” Even in *Eugene Onegin*—and I have already explained how enthusiastically the orchestra had reacted to my proposals at my 1968 debut.

As the situation was now totally unbearable, there remained finally nothing else for me, but to turn to my friends



in the West; and they helped me. Just as they helped in November 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell, and I was very, very fortunate to fly as quickly as possible to Berlin and play at the opening of the Wall.

**Fidelio:** At that moment, many people were very much moved that you left no stone unturned, immediately after the Wall began to fall—it is said, you called a friend in Paris and asked him to fly you immediately to Berlin, and on November 11 you played a Bach suite at Checkpoint Charlie.

**Rostropovich:** It was a simple need; I had to do it. And by myself, for sure. Because, this Wall was a symbol of my life, or my “two” lives—the one before 1974, and the one thereafter—which were so completely different, and could not be brought into harmony so long as this Wall existed. I’m now seeking to work this out; for instance, I am now at the point of bringing together, in my new home in St. Petersburg, all my documents, my entire archives, from a total of six different countries.

**Fidelio:** Yet one final question about music, Mr. Rostropovich. You have, when characterizing the role of an artist—instrumentalist or conductor—frequently used the metaphor, of approaching a resemblance to a mediating role, like a priest. Could you elucidate that further?

**Rostropovich:** Certainly. We interpreters are the servants of the composers; we must be very modest and ought never to present ourselves—our ego—in the front lines; rather, the idea of the composer, which, on the contrary, is *divinely in-*

*spired*, should be presented. You know that I was chief conductor in Washington for seventeen years; and I still clearly remember the first day, when I said to the musicians: “Friends, you make mistakes, and I make mistakes; we both make many mistakes. But we both carry out a divine service with our music.”

Often, it is not so easy, because naturally it can also thereby lead to conflicts. As a conductor, one has the choice between two possibilities: Either one is a dictator, who disciplines his musicians by means of terror, or—and this is my way

of approaching it—one works together with them on the basis of friendship. I forgive the musicians their failures, and they forgive me mine; but we both work with our music for God.

This modesty, of course, also applies to me as a ‘cellist. Take the following example: Why have I made a recording of the Bach ‘cello suites for the first time so late in life, at 70 years of age? Because it was a question of balance; and that is a question of one’s person, one’s character. Permit me this comparison: It is very similar to when a young man sees a beautiful young woman on the street. He falls in love with her immediately and wants to possess her. He simply feels the “balance.” Thank God, the animal instincts usually wear off with time, and reason comes more and more to the fore. The problem persists above all for us Russians—I speak here from my own experience. As a young man and ‘cellist, I also had no balance, and I had to learn that *my* personality did not come first, but *that of the composer*. When I was young, it was many times more likely the opposite.

With the performance of Debussy’s ‘Cello Sonata it often happened to me, that I played it with a “Russian sound”; that is of course completely wrong. With Bach it was still clearer. In order to render his music, I had to give up my “Russian personality”; because a composer as great as Bach actually needs hardly any “rendering” to come into being. It “suffices” to perform it as he wrote it. And that is true for all great composers.

I have immense respect for Bach; he is one of the best examples, that art comes from God. As with a priest, it is not necessary that the Word of God be interpreted; rather, that God speak directly to man through the priest. And thus I see it also with Bach and other great composers. In order to bring them directly in contact with people, I ought not to render *my* “word,” but I must render it as it is written. That is also the reason why I have studied the Partitas in such detail, and made such a great effort to achieve a precise rendering.

**Fidelio:** Mr. Rostropovich, thank you very much for this fascinating conversation.

—translated by Marianna Wertz