

Arts & Travel

Russian violist brings his unique style to Roy Thomson Hall

By RITA POLIAKOV

Special to The CJN

Svetlana Dvoretkaia was about 12 years old when she first saw violist Yuri Bashmet perform. The famous Tchaikovsky Hall in Moscow was packed, the crowd was excited



and the police were guarding the venue. But what she remembered most was the silence.

"When he played, it's silence. No one's coughing," she said. "What I do remember is the silence after he finished – that moment when people are digesting the music, when the audience is still numb – then you have this explosion of applause."

On Feb. 17, after several years of negotiations, Dvoretkaia, the producer of Show One Entertainment, a company that showcases high-profile musicians and artists, will be bringing Bashmet to Toronto's Roy Thomson Hall.

Bashmet, along with his musical group the Moscow Soloists, won a Grammy in 2008 for best small ensemble performance. Although he started his career determined to become a rock star, he is known as the performer who brought the viola into the limelight.

"He was not planning to be a classical music performer," Dvoretkaia said. "He always wanted to be a rock star, and he played rock guitar for the longest time."

Bashmet began playing classical music only as a favour to his mother. Although he started with the violin, he was once asked to try the viola, an instrument that many saw as inconsequential. He quickly proved them wrong.

"He's one of the very important musicians in the world," Dvoretkaia said. "He's a very serious household name in Russia."

Bashmet has a unique style. "He has long hair," Dvoretkaia said. "When he plays, he's very emotional. He moves his head a lot, his hair is all over. When he plays, he has tears sometimes." Just recently, it was reported that Bashmet was playing so fast, he broke his 250-year-old viola at a concert in Italy.

In Toronto, Bashmet will perform two solo pieces, Paganini's Concertino in A Minor and Bruch's Kol Nidrei, an old Jewish prayer that's sung on Yom Kippur.

When reviewing the list of possible songs, Dvoretkaia immediately knew Kol Nidrei was a significant choice.

"As soon as I saw Kol Nidrei, [I knew] that was something I wanted them to play," she said. "I'm Jewish myself. If there's any chance to somehow popularize Jewish tradition or Jewish music, I take that chance."

Growing up in St. Petersburg, Russia, Dvoretkaia often had to hide her religion.

"At a certain point, I didn't even know I was Jewish," she said. "That country was anti-Semitic at that time."

Dvoretkaia believes music is a way to encourage understanding. "I strongly believe that music has no borders," she said. "It's my obligation to promote and present Jewish music to non-Jews, because I can."

Dvoretkaia hopes the concert will encourage Torontonians to embrace classical music.

"A lot of people I know never listened to classical music before," she said. "It can awaken something that sleeps deep inside."

Bashmet will perform at Roy Thomson Hall on Feb. 17 at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$45 to \$90. Call 416-872-4255.