

Maxim Vengerov: I'm old-fashioned but making up for lost time

T [thetimes.co.uk/article/maxim-vengerov-im-old-fashioned-but-making-up-for-lost-time-rgv2swqlr](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/maxim-vengerov-im-old-fashioned-but-making-up-for-lost-time-rgv2swqlr)

CLASSICAL | MAXIM VENGEROV

The virtuoso violinist first performed on stage at five — four decades on, he's still learning new tricks



Maxim Vengerov
DIAGO MARIOTTA MENDEZ/NICKY THOMAS MEDIA

Jessica Duchon

Sunday April 23 2023, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

The violinist Maxim Vengerov, a former child prodigy, had big plans to mark the 40th anniversary of his stage debut. These were repeatedly scuppered. Now, three years late, fourth time lucky, the big evening will happen on Tuesday: an all-Brahms concert with the Oxford Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Marios Papadopoulos at the Royal Albert Hall.

It's a vast venue for a celebration, but Vengerov is a violinist who reaches places others cannot. With his communicative, colourful and technically near-miraculous playing, and an individual sound recognisable for its seductive richness, he is the nearest thing the violin has today to a household name.

The son of an oboist (his father) and a choral conductor (his mother) from Novosibirsk, Siberia, Vengerov first performed in the city's Philharmonic Hall when he was just five. "Siberia was very cold and I thought playing the violin might enable me to travel somewhere warmer," he jokes. Yet it worked: he is speaking from sun-drenched Monaco, where he lives with his wife, the art historian Olga Gringolts, and their three children. "If I missed out on some childhood experiences myself, I can make up for that, playing with my kids."



Vengerov with the Oxford Philharmonic Orchestra

NICKY THOMAS MEDIA

Now 48 and very professorial, possibly beyond his years, he remarks: "I've decided deliberately to remain old-fashioned. To me, this means not to be detached from the source of what you've learnt. You take it with you, then naturally develop your own voice."

That source is his childhood inspiration, the "Golden Age" violinists of the earlier 20th century. "I grew up listening to the recordings of David Oistrakh and Leonid Kogan, all the great musicians from the Soviet Union," he says, "but then, when I was ten I heard a recording of Jascha Heifetz. You couldn't get these records so easily [Heifetz emigrated to America after the 1917 revolution], but someone brought it to me. The sound was electrifying, like something from another planet, and I thought, 'Wow, a violin can do that?'"

After the Soviet Union collapsed, his family emigrated to Israel. He studied for a while in London, where his professor, Zakhar Bron, was teaching at the Royal Academy of Music. “We lived in Oxford and I have loved the place and its atmosphere and traditions ever since,” he says. Hence his long association with the Oxford Philharmonic. “It’s a friendship that goes beyond music. They’re my buddies.”

About 15 years ago, however, Vengerov vanished from concert life after a shoulder injury — not from playing, but from weightlifting. Admirers feared his career might be over, especially as he later admitted that after the relentless schedule he had pursued since childhood, the enforced break was not unwelcome.

He learnt new skills — Argentine tango (dancing, not playing) and conducting — developed an enduring enthusiasm for teaching and, not least, rethought his approach to violin technique. For a while he took up the viola. “Before that, I had imagined a violin sound that I could not produce,” he remembers. “On the viola, however, all those colours were present in the sound and I have brought them with me back to the violin.”

He bounced back stronger than ever at a recital at Wigmore Hall in 2012, showing himself to be the same dazzling performer, yet transformed: less theatrical, more focused.

Vengerov may be old-fashioned, but he’s not shy of breaking convention. He could have wrapped any record company around his little finger, but instead he is seeking an alternative means of issuing his own recordings. He has already tried an own-label approach, and worked with a streaming company. “I don’t want to produce ‘just another recording,’” he insists. “I want it to be really special and unique. I have seven in the pipeline that I’ve recorded myself.” What? He’s sitting on seven potential golden eggs? “When I have found the right way to release them, I will let you know.”

Another long-term project is “a huge study” of his violin, the magnificent “Kreutzer” Stradivarius of 1727 (named after the violinist Rodolphe Kreutzer, to whom it belonged). He is planning a book to celebrate its 300th anniversary, and hopes to use new technology for analysing wood to reveal some secrets of the great violin-maker’s methods.

Brahms’s autumnal romanticism is ideal for Vengerov’s luscious, dark-hued sound. At his gala he performs not only the Violin Concerto, but also the Double Concerto with the young Norwegian cellist Sandra Lied Haga, whom he has invited specially. “I’m amazed by the beauty of her sound and her very dramatic and lyrical playing,” he says. Student violinists from the Royal College of Music, where he is a visiting professor, join him for an encore, “so I hope not everyone in the audience has to catch a train!”

The different strands of Vengerov’s music-making are, he says, all part of his efforts to feel “complete”. And does he? “Ah, but to be really complete as a musician, you have to be a composer.” He hasn’t tried that yet. There’s still time.

The Brahms Gala is at the Royal Albert Hall, London SW7, on Apr 25

Music

