AMATI

EDITOR'S LUNCH: Raphael Wallfisch

His warm, powerful sound and generous-spirited musicianship make him a favourite soloist the world over. His restoration of repertoire rarities is a vibrant legacy. And he's a great guy, too. Jessica Duchen gets Raphael Wallfisch to put his cello in the cloakroom and sample some of London's best Italian cuisine…

by Jessica Duchen, 11 May 2015

When Raphael Wallfisch suggests that we go Italian for our Amati lunch date, I suspect he's thinking about a good bowl of spag bol. I'm planning, though, to give him more than he bargained for. Theo Randall at the Intercontinental has been named Best Italian Restaurant of The Year by the London Restaurant Awards and was the highest ranked Italian on the Sunday Times Food List 2013. Opened in November 2006 by the chef who had spent 17 years at the River Café, its ambience is of the chromy, understated, upmarket type – but nouvelle cuisine this ain't. Instead it's the sort of phenomenal-quality, home-cooked comfort food you might be served to help you settle in on your first day in heaven.

Tucking into a lavish helping of *controfilletto di manzo* – beef with a glory of mixed vegetables in aged balsamic vinegar – with a glass of nearly ebony-hued Barolo wine to match, Wallfisch, 62, seems a happy man. He is a suitably beefy cellist, with a generous, enveloping sound and a straightforward, to-the-point musicality that powers him through anything from the Bach suites to the inspiring quantity of rare repertoire that he has helped to bring to wider note. His recent projects range from a disc of rare Hungarian concertos – including the cello version of Bartók's Viola Concerto – to some performances of the substantial and challenging concerto by Gerald Finzi, which he plays at the English Music Festival in May.

We start with the Finzi over insalata di granchio (fresh Devon crab salad) and insalata mista – which proves as colourful as the English composer's music, full of different shades of green, pink and scarlet.

'This is my number one favourite British concerto,' Wallfisch declares. 'The piece encompasses so much: it's very British in its sound and has all the hallmarks of Finzi's music, but goes further, on a bigger scale, than he ever went elsewhere.' The work was the fruit of a long gestation. Though it was written in 1955, when Finzi was already ill (he died a year later), the composer's copious correspondence reveals that he had been mulling over it as much as 15 years earlier. Wallfisch first played it with the conductor Vernon Handley and recorded it for Chandos in the 1980s; for Finzi's centenary in 2001 he took it to the Proms.

Finzi might sound like a typically 'English' composer at first. But the truth is more complex. His father was Italian and his mother German Jewish; he was born in St John's Wood and grew up in Harrogate. 'He was not a prolific composer,' Wallfisch says. 'World War II affected him very strongly and he died too young, in his fifties.' It turns out that his middle name was…Raphael. 'I didn't know that when I fell in love with the concerto…'

'Problem: people just haven't heard of Finzi…'

At nearly 40 minutes long, the Finzi Concerto is a major undertaking: 'It's a huge virtuoso piece and a little bit daunting,' says Wallfisch, 'which is probably why it wasn't taken up immediately by everybody. It's one of my pet causes and I've made an edition of it for Boosey and Hawkes. I always try and persuade people to do it – and when they get to know it, they love it,' he adds. 'But it's the usual battle: they've never heard of Finzi and they don't know his music.'

To help remedy this, he has made a short film about Finzi and the concerto that he hopes will go viral. 'Finzi was a fascinating man: quite a philosopher, deep into poetry, a gardener with an incredible apple orchard and, next to Britten, he was the greatest of English songwriters. Yet there's been nothing about him in terms of a documentary.'

Well, there is now. Here it is:

'Kiffer' Finzi, the composer's son, married Jacqueline du Pré's sister, Hilary, on whose controversial memoirs the film *Hilary and Jackie* was based. Wallfisch has many memories of listening to du Pré herself. 'My mother was playing in the English Chamber Orchestra, so I'd go along to concerts and recording sessions,' he says. 'I remember recording sessions of Boccherini and Haydn where she changed her dress between pieces and the atmosphere was easy, like a big party. As a 15 year old, I was just amazed: it's that much fun?'

Although du Pré was an extraordinary cellist, he adds, the saintly aura that has come to surround her memory was nowhere to be felt. 'I remember going to the Queen Elizabeth Hall to hear her, Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zukerman and all of them, playing showpieces – again it was one fun act after the other. Once I listened to her rehearsing with the Philharmonia, playing Saint-Saëns under Zubin Mehta. He asked her to play one passage several times and she said: "Oh, you slave-driver!"'

Still, he found du Pré less vital an inspiration than Zara Nelsova: 'That was a different kind of cello playing – I adored her sound and her persona. Jackie was not that much older than me, and although I found her extraordinary, I guess I was already looking at the older generation as my model.'

Piatigorsky: adventurer and matinée idol…

Even more vital was the impact of Gregor Piatigorsky, with whom Wallfisch studied in California. 'You sometimes don't realise until much later what some of the things he said really meant. They were often about the whole picture, not just practical advice on how to do this or that. He was very wise; he would help you find an ideal as an artist, exploring what you are looking for, why you are doing this.'

'By the time he moved to the US in the 1930s he'd already had an illustrious career. He was a real adventurer, handsome and popular, a sort of matinee idol. His

personality inspired lots of people to write for him; and his influence for our instrument was very large; lots of important repertoire was written for him, including the Walton Cello Concerto.'

Piatigorsky commissioned this work and gave its premiere in Boston in 1957. 'For me, going back to the concerto is like going back to the class again and seeing him, because the piece is so about him, about his sound, even about his portamenti – which Walton writes into the score. Some people don't get that and do different fingering. That's not the right style! Anyone who had contact with him would understand.'

He adds that Piatigorsky's memoir is one of the funniest books about music that he knows – worth a read if you can lay hands on a copy. And he is gutted that the great cellist's former home – 'a shrine to so many of us' – has recently fallen to the demolition bal

The Past is Present…

Wallfisch was born into a musical family in London: his father was the pianist Peter Wallfisch and his mother the cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, who came to Britain after surviving incarceration during the war in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. She is the author of a remarkable book of memoirs, Inherit the Truth, which describes her experiences there: as a cellist she was drafted into the women's orchestra of Auschwitz, which was conducted by another prisoner – Mahler's niece, Alma Rosé. Now 89, Lasker-Wallfisch is still an eloquent lecturer, making certain that the memories of those horrific years are recognised by new generations.

Family life is absolutely central to Wallfisch. His wife, Libby, is a violinist who specialises in period-instrument performance, and their three children, Ben, Simon and Joanna, are respectively a composer and conductor in Hollywood, a baritone who is also a cellist, and a jazz singer; Simon now has a one-year-old daughter, so Wallfisch has become a proud grandfather.

Ben Wallfisch is currently building a strong career in Hollywood, where he has recently written and recorded a soundtrack for a short documentary by Steven Spielberg, entitled *Auschwitz: The Past is Present*.

'It was something he found extremely important to do and it's being shown now at the museum in Auschwitz,' says Wallfisch. 'Ben usually writes a cello theme somewhere in his music and he asked me to play this one. With today's technology, I could record it at home and send it by computer so he could blend it in.'

Ben wondered if his grandmother could be persuaded to play something as well. Though she has long retired from playing, Wallfisch agreed to ask her. 'She hadn't played for years – but it's all there. She only had to play a few bars – we did it a few times and then she said: "Take that thing away now!"' But there she is, on the soundtrack: living testimony to the tenacity of the human spirit inspired by music.

http://sfi.usc.edu/pastispresent

Hungary for music

The three composers on Wallfisch's latest CD of Hungarian concertos, recorded with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales under Gabor Takács-Nagy (on Nimbus) had to call on their own powers of resilience and determination in exile. Bartók moved to the US at the time of World War II; Matyas Seiber fled the communist regime that followed it; and Antal Dorati left Hungary in the 1920s and Europe in the 1940s, building a career primarily as a conductor. The Bartók concerto is in an arrangement by Tibor Serly; Dorati conducted its world premiere.

Wallfisch's closest personal connection, though, is with Seiber, who is perhaps best known today for his film music – not least, the animation of Orwell's *Animal Farm*. He knew Wallfisch's parents and used to visit them at home. 'My father played quite a lot of his music,' Wallfisch says. 'I'm sorry I never met him – he died tragically in a car accident in South Africa. The three pieces on the CD (Tre Pezzi) I knew partly through my teacher, Amaryllis Fleming, who played them a lot and made a BBC recording. It's tough music, but fantastic – very powerful and very Hungarian. Bartók would not have been ashamed of it.' The style of the Dorati Concerto he describes as 'Hungarian Hollywood – much like Miklos Rosza'.

'If you can't be heard, forget it!'

Wallfisch is not a one-cello man; he has played instruments old and new, from historic Strads to newly commissioned creations. 'I love to have a powerful cello,' he says. 'On stage you need total confidence that whatever you do, whichever button you press, something will happen. If you can't be heard, forget it!

'I've got three cellos on the go at the moment. One was made for me recently by Patrick Robin; then I have my Vuillaume – which was part of a quartet made for Count Sheremetev from St Petersburg in 1865; and a Gagliano.' One of them is entrusted to the InterContinental's cloakroom on our way in to lunch. 'The Vuillaume is very powerful, it's got its own fabulous sheen to it,' Wallfisch says. 'The Robin is again very bright and I love it; I recorded the Hungarian disc on it.

'I received it on my 60th birthday and played it pretty solidly for about eight or nine months after that. Patrick knew my other cellos and knew my playing and he wanted to make something really special, so it's spectacular-looking, with fabulous wood. I played at the Proms on it and it has a big sound – the Albert Hall, no problem!'

For younger players in need of a good instrument in a climate where an historic cello can be worth some £10m, Wallfisch advises looking for a newly made instrument: 'They're still a lot of money – for the good European and American makers you'd be looking at probably between £15,000 and £30,000, give or take a bit – but I'd try that first if you can. Having said so, there's also some incredible making going on in China, where the look and sound of the instruments has improved enormously; for around £4000 you can get a very decent cello, and a violin would cost less.'

Somehow we manage to complete our meal with a perfect pear sorbet – light, smooth and not too sweet – and some coffee. Next up, though, Wallfisch will be going back to the musical red meat: he is off to record the complete Brahms trios with his regular chamber music partners, violinist Hagai Shaham and pianist Arnon Erez. 'The challenge with the Brahms trios is what to put with them in the remaining CD space," he remarks. 'So in June Hagai and I are recording the Double Concerto. After all, that's one big trio for violin, cello and orchestra.'

Wallfisch collects his cello from the cloakroom and heads off for more meetings: a grandfather with a spring in his step and a smile for the world. The Theo Randall lunch feast has been magnificent – but the true joy to take home and treasure is the warmth of Wallfisch's energy, humour and sterling-solid musicianship.

Raphael Wallfisch plays the Finzi Cello Concerto in Dorchester Abbey at the English Music Festival on 22 May and the complete Bach cello suites at the Temple Church, London, on 17 June. Find his full schedule here.

Raphael Wallfisch and Jessica Duchen lunched at Theo Randall at the InterContinental, Park Lane.

RAPHAEL WALLFISCH: UP CLOSE

If you could play only one composer from now on, who would it be?
Brahms.

What's your ideal instrument whether or not you already have it?
I'd have loved the chance to hang on to the 'Sleeping Beauty' Montagnana (1739), especially since Piatigorsky spent so many years with it. If you knocked on my door and offered it to me, I'd take it. It's called the 'Sleeping Beauty' because it wasn't played for a very long time; when Piatogorsky got it in the 1930s it was asleep and hardly had any sound. He had to wake it up. But it has now been sold and has gone to the Far East.

Which musician, alive or dead, would you most like to play with?
Fritz Kreisler! Interestingly, very few people did play chamber music with him, other than his brother and Sergei Rachmaninov.

What makes you happiest?
Being with my granddaughter, Alma.

Worst nightmare?
Any problem with the family.

If you could change three things about the set-up of your profession or its training, what would they be?
The biggest problem with our profession, I think, is that the people who are running things are not that knowledgeable. There's a lot of rubbish going on in the management world and in the running of orchestras. It would be great if musicians were more in charge of their own destiny.

Next, I don't like competitions – especially the BBC Young Musician of the Year. I'd love to do away with that kind of pressure. Competitions are OK for people who are about to enter the profession, but not while you're still at school. You shouldn't have that sort of exposure, however good you are, or the pressure that follows about how to continue.

At training level, it's important to offer more information for students about running a life in music. There isn't much out there, other than the occasional seminar on tax

returns. Maybe we shouldn't make teachers retire when they're 65; the wealth of experience you have by that time can help young people so much.

If you weren't a musician, what would you be?
A delicatessen. Or an actor, which was my first wish. I'd have loved to have the brains to be a doctor.

You're king for a day – what do you do with your power?
I would make sure that all children have the opportunity for exposure to culture – no matter their background, they'd all have the chance to see really fantastic things and hear wonderful music. If I see children at my concerts I always feel I'm playing for them.