



Editor's Lunch: STEVEN ISSERLIS

For the Amati Magazine's inaugural Editor's Lunch, who better to entertain than the man who is arguably Britain's greatest living cellist? Steven Isserlis joins Jessica Duchen for a Baltic feast

by Jessica Duchen, 23 January 2015

[Steven Isserlis](#) and I have come to Southwark to find his roots. Culinary ones, at least: for [Baltic](#), London's leading Polish-plus restaurant in the shadow of the Shard, is rather nearer than Krakow.

The founding father of the sizeable Isserlis dynasty was [Moses Isserlis](#), a great Talmudic scholar whose 16th-century synagogue is among the historic Polish city's most fascinating destinations. "Along the way the family included Mendelssohn, Karl Marx, Helena Rubinstein and a few others," Isserlis remarks, "and on my mother's side we're related to the composer Louis Lewandowski [the 19th-century composer of synagogue music in Berlin]. There's been music pouring through the family tree."

His sisters are both musicians: Rachel a violinist, Annette a violist and a vital member of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. They have all collaborated in producing a CD for Hyperion devoted to the music of their grandfather, the pianist and composer [Julius Isserlis](#), performed by Sam Haywood.

Baltic's menu explores the broad cuisine of its eponymous region, enhanced by the skylit airiness of the atmosphere. The list of different vodkas has to be seen to be believed – more than 60 varieties, with many flavours home-made – and the possible eats even include potato latkes.

Isserlis, post-festive season, has nevertheless specified that he'd like a *healthy* lunch (which wasn't altogether what I had in mind) and when he bounces into Baltic, his silver curls unmistakable at the entrance, his will power is firmly in place. "I need to lose weight, but I draw the line at eating less or exercising," he declares.

We do our very best. Non-alcoholic cocktails featuring apple and rhubarb prove refreshing, if less thrilling than some of the adventurous Polish-themed

cocktails on the list (next time, maybe, but at least I don't have to choose one and miss the others). As starters, we enjoy respectively a bittersweet salad of chicory, manouri cheese, ruby-glowing pomegranate and crunchy walnuts, and marinated quail with kasha – a comforting Russian staple – and more pomegranate. As main course I tuck into pink seared salmon atop purple beetroot and yet more pomegranate (it is reputedly very good for you). The vivid colours are mirrored by remarkably complementary flavours. Isserlis picks a carb-richer option of plentiful, springy blinis with lavish quantities of smoked salmon. You can choose from a variety of blini toppings, including sour cream, caviar real or caviar of aubergine, and much more; or try a bit of all of them.

We stay off alcohol until “Polish coffee” – ie, mixed with krupnik (honey vodka) and “floated cream” – proves impossible for me to resist: glorious, but not altogether recommended if you have to work afterwards. I can feel a return visit coming on; ideally in the evening, and probably on a Saturday, when Baltic hosts live jazz.

A musician's work is never done...

“I listen to music all the time,” Isserlis remarks. “I need it like a drug. I don't always listen as attentively as I should, but if I'm shaving, the radio is on. This morning BBC Radio 3 played a wonderful piece by Holst I'd never heard before. You can discover some amazing things...”

The Isserlis family's path from Poland to London took in Russia, notably Odessa, where his father was born. The family left in 1923 for Vienna, where during their flat-hunting they encountered a landlady of venerable vintage who refused to accept musicians as lodgers because her aunt had, many years earlier, rented a room to one of this profession: a mad, deaf and thoroughly objectionable character who used to spit on the floor. She told the astonished Julius that she thought his name was Beethoven. Later Julius was fortunate to be on tour in the UK during the week of the Anschluss in 1938. The family was soon able to settle in London.

Born in south-west London in 1958, Isserlis was among a surge of gifted UK cellists who rose to prominence in the wake of Jacqueline du Pré; perhaps her galvanising presence sparked a flurry of interest in the instrument. That remarkable generation includes figures such as Raphael Wallfisch, Robert Cohen, David Waterman and more.

Du Pré, whose 70th birthday would have fallen this year, was indeed a vital inspiration, Isserlis agrees. He saw her play several times before she was forced by multiple sclerosis to withdraw from performance in 1973; later he went to play to her. “She also came to my concerts,” he adds. His memories of her in full flood include, he says, “Swaying! But she was an extremely charismatic figure. A great performer and a great communicator.”

Further inspirations included Mstislav Rostropovich and Paul Tortelier; but the cellists who formed his tastes chiefly included Pablo Casals and, more

unusually, the Russian cellist Daniil Shafran, who died in 1997. “I *loved* Shafran,” he says. “He wasn’t always at his best, but when he was, it was magic. He was a free spirit. A Russian folk singer who played the cello, and a Russian folk dancer. He danced.” Isserlis recalls making himself unpopular with his teacher for attempting to imitate Shafran’s rather maverick style.

Grumbling about gut?

Isserlis is not without maverick qualities of his own. For instance, he famously prefers using gut strings, though points out that he switches to steel ones when the repertoire requires it. His forthcoming CD of concertos by Prokofiev and Shostakovich, for instance, needed steel strings and a robust instrument – a Montagnana of 1740 that he is in the slow process of buying.

If critics grumble about gut, though, he gives not a fig. “I was playing in the States once when a critic rang the orchestra to ask if I was still playing on gut,” he recounts, “and I told them to tell him I’d changed over to steel. He wrote a wonderful review saying how good I sounded on my steel strings. I never had the heart to tell him that actually they were nothing of the kind...”

The instrument on which he plays most often, though, is the Marquis de Coberon Stradivarius of 1726. He first “met” the instrument when Zara Nelsova brought it to the International Musicians’ Seminar, Prussia Cove, Cornwall, the advanced course of masterclasses and chamber music of which Isserlis is now artistic director. “I was sitting listening to her together with David Waterman, and at the end she turned to me and said: ‘That’s the cello for you’. And now I have it. She was always lovely to me; I hope she wouldn’t have minded my taking it over.

“I love this cello,” he adds. “It’s so gorgeous, with a beautiful, warm, poetic sound and real power as well. It’s the perfect cello for me.” The Strad is on loan to him from the Royal Academy of Music – at which institution you can hear Isserlis in an open interview on 20 February. “I asked them to loan me the cello for life. They said: ‘Ten years’. And I said, ‘No, it’s for life, because if you take it away from me I’ll kill myself. That means it’s for life...”

There is yet another instrument to Isserlis’s bow: a Guadagnini of 1745 that he co-owns with David Waterman (cellist of the Endellion String Quartet). “I had this wonderful Guadagnini,” he explains, “but it didn’t quite have the power to soar over an orchestra. I knew I’d have to get another cello, I needed to raise the money for one, but I didn’t want to let the Guadagnini go, because it’s so lovely. So we compromised. David owns 55 per cent of it and plays it 90 per cent of the time; I own 45 per cent. We’ve each left our share of it to the other in our wills, so whoever dies first, the other will get the whole thing.”

“There are people who have no nerves, but I’m not one of them...”

No artist can afford to be without self-criticism, but Isserlis seems to take this to an extreme. Over our closing coffee I’ve asked what he’s looking forward to in the year ahead, but his response is: “I never really look forward to anything,

because I'm always afraid I'm going to mess it up." So he can only be pleasantly surprised? "Or gloomily have my worst fears confirmed," he says, becoming for a moment an ironic, cellistic version of Eeyore.

If it sounds as if he has a dark side, that is because he probably does. "There are people out there who have no nerves, but I'm not one of them," he remarks, considering the agony and ecstasy of performing the Bach cello suites. "I'm playing the suites again soon and I can't say I'm looking forward to it, though I usually enjoy it once I'm there. I might use the music, with a page-turner; then I'm not alone on the stage."

His somewhat barbed sense of humour feeds in to his books for children, *Why Handel Wagged his Wig* and *Why Beethoven Threw the Stew* – wildly readable introductions to the great composers that have won an enthusiastic young following. He's a literary soul through and through, passionate about good writing and counting some exceptional novelists among his close friends. Listeners can reap the benefits of that in the nuanced narratives of his music-making.

There is no doubt, though, that he has been through some extremely tough times. His wife, Pauline, died four and a half years ago; Isserlis's album *ReVisions*, released soon afterwards, was dedicated to her memory. He prefers not to talk about that time, having done his best to move on, with music a sustaining source of strength.

Beethoven: a special kind of joy

"I didn't like playing Beethoven when I was younger, but now there's nothing I prefer to play," he remarks. "There's nothing that gives me more joy these days. It's a real cliché to say that Beethoven gets more important to you as you get older, but it's true." Why did he not enjoy it at the outset? "I didn't understand it, maybe," he says. "I didn't know what it was about. Because you can't; it's pure music. That's not the same as saying you can't put in emotions, because you can – but it's not like Schumann, where you can very often put a story to it, as he was such a literary composer. With Beethoven you just can't."

The year ahead – whether he's "looking forward to it" or not – contains some exciting moments. First of all he is back with his beloved Beethoven, touring the cello sonatas together with the fortepianist Robert Levin around Austria, Switzerland, Cleveland and Vancouver. He is visiting Australia in May and June, with Thomas Adès's *Lieux retrouvés* – written for him – featuring prominently; he is also undertaking a return tour with the Asian Youth Orchestra around the Far East ("I toured with them a couple of years ago and *loved* them"). Three recordings are due for release on Hyperion: the Prokofiev and Shostakovich concertos, the Bach Gamba Sonatas and a recital with pianist Stephen Hough (whom he nicknames "PH"; reciprocally, he is "V"), including Hough's own latest sonata for cello and piano left hand. Spring sees him back in Cornwall, where he remains devoted to the IMS Prussia Cove as an enclave of pure music-making away from humdrum modern life; this year, he says, the course received its highest-ever number of applications.

Contemporary music is a field in which he takes a strong interest: "In Britain I think we're going through a golden era. There were three mega-successful new operas in London recently: Adès's *The Tempest*, George Benjamin's *Written on Skin* and Julian Anderson's *Thebans*. That's unusual. And David Matthews wrote a wonderful concerto for me. What I don't like is when I feel music is just desperately trying to reach an audience just for the sake of a standing ovation. Some American music I've heard brings in the percussion at the last minute and is completely tonal just to be successful, rather than from conviction. But in Britain I think we're doing well."

On a positive note, then, replete with blinis, Isserlis heads home to tackle the second edit of his Bach Gamba Sonatas recording. "Then I'm going to press a button, send it off and there'll be nothing I can do about it any more," he remarks. "What a relief!"

Steven Isserlis gives the Barbirolli Lecture as an interview at the [Royal Academy of Music on 20 February](#). He gives masterclasses there on 5 March. He tours the [Beethoven Cello Sonatas with Robert Levin](#) (fortepiano) in Europe and the US during March

Steven Isserlis and Jessica Duchon went to Baltic Restaurant and Bar, 74 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 1HA. <http://www.balticrestaurant.co.uk>

STEVEN ISSERLIS: IN PERSON

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

Probably Bach or Beethoven, because of the quantity of their masterpieces. But I think I'd rather kill myself than only choose one composer; it's simpler.

What's your ideal instrument, whether or not you already have it?

I pretty much have it in the Marquis de Coberon Strad. But I need two instruments because I can't play the Shostakovich First Concerto, where you have to hit the cello and treat it like a percussion instrument, on a Strad. It won't take it. It will look at you in disgust.

Which musician, alive or dead, would you most like to play with?

Carlos Kleiber. But I'd love to play their own works with the great composers...

What makes you happiest?

A good night's sleep. And playing Beethoven – it's a special sort of joy.

What is your worst nightmare?

Something happening to someone I love. After that, something happening to my cello.

If you could make three changes to the set-up of your profession or its training, what would they be?

I would ban the use of the word Projection. I would force all students to learn the piano and to learn scores from the piano or a keyboard instrument. And I'd ban *ideas* from performance: I hate listening to someone play a Bach suite when they've got a *big idea* to show off about. I just want to hear the music.

If you weren't a musician, what would you be?

A writer. But I'm glad I'm a musician.

You're king for a day. What do you do with your power?

I'd ban things! I'd ban: all food I don't like, all musicians I don't like, all music I don't like, but crossover especially, plus weighing scales, bathroom mirrors and mornings. And I'd shoot anybody who criticises Schumann or Fauré. More seriously, I'd make all children study classical music from the age of four, and I'd make a rule that music students must never listen to recordings of works they're learning.