

Interview: Lilian and Victor Hochhauser

The impresarios have spent years bringing the finest musicians, dancers and composers to the UK.

By Jessica Duchen, December 3, 2009

To visit Victor and Lilian Hochhauser's home in Hampstead is to step into a world bursting with history. For more than 50 years, the husband-and-wife impresarios have been the undersung heroes of the arts, serving most famously as a bridge between British and Russian music, opera and ballet — their office is currently busy preparing the Bolshoi's visit to London next summer.

On the coffee table lie the photographs. Two of Russia's greatest 20th-century musicians together, Dmitri Shostakovich and Mstislav Rostropovich, autographed to Victor and Lilian by both; the violinist David Oistrakh; pianist Sviatoslav Richter and Rudolf Nureyev in his prime. Lilian picks up a photo from a party the couple held at home when the Kirov Ballet first visited Britain in 1961: "That's Bronislava Nijinska, sister of Vaslav," she says. "That's Marie Rambert, and Anton Dolin. Quite an interesting collection of people." That is putting it mildly.

Now the Hochhausers have been presented with the Royal Academy of Dancing's highest honour: the Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Award. In 2006 they were given a special prize by the Russian government for their unique role in promoting Russian culture in Britain, and Victor was presented with the CBE in 1993. None of this recognition has come a moment too soon. Both are in their eighties and Victor has officially retired. Lilian, though, has no intention of doing so: "As long as there's the interest and the enthusiasm, I don't think it's necessary," she declares.

Lilian was born in Britain to Russian-Jewish parents; Victor arrived in London in 1939 as a refugee with his family from the Nazi encroachment on Hungarian-speaking Slovakia. His first job in his early twenties was working for the Holocaust hero, Rabbi Dr Solomon Schonfeld, in which capacity he was asked to arrange a charity concert. It featured the great British pianist Solomon, and was such a success that they decided to stage another, starring the young violinist Ida Haendel. "Again, it went very well," Lilian recounts, "so it seemed like a good idea to continue."

Victor adds, sparkling: "It seemed like a good idea to marry me, too!"

The pair met at work, brought together by their shared passion for music: “I was working in Rabbi Schonfeld’s office,” says Lilian, “and Victor used to come over and perch on my desk.”

After the war, there existed a hunger for revival and cultural events, opening up all kinds of possibilities. “In those days,” says Lilian, “we brought to Britain the Vienna Philharmonic with the conductors Bruno Walter, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Josef Krips and more — quite a good roster. And Yehudi Menuhin played the complete Beethoven cycle.” Menuhin, the legendary violinist, became one of their closest associates.

When they encountered the teenaged ballerina Svetlana Beriosova, they were so taken with her that they elected to put on a ballet series at the Empress Hall, in London, in 1948-49. ‘That was the first time that anyone had tried to bring ballet to the masses,’ says Lilian. ‘It was simply a thought, that here we have stars — it’s important to have stars, big names — and there was nothing much available at the time. We had the idea to arrange this season, which was an amazing success.’

A turning point arrived when Stalin died in 1953. Victor remembers that “a Russian delegation from the Society for Cultural Relations, a semi-government organisation for culture, came to Britain with seven or eight artists including Bella Davidovich, Emil Gilels and Igor Oistrakh.” The Hochhausers met the youthful violinist Oistrakh and presented him in a smash-hit concert. “From then on,” says Lilian, “we worked with the Russians. They realised that they had a wonderful export in their greatest artists, and that they could make money this way, bringing foreign currency into Russia.” The state took 90 per cent of the fees; just 10 per cent was left for the performers.

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Not that the audiences knew that as they flocked to the first UK appearances of Igor’s father David Oistrakh, Richter, Rostropovich and the Kirov Ballet. Oistrakh, one of the greatest violinists of the century, became the Hochhausers’ closest friend. Shostakovich came to stay with them five times — “I don’t know if one ever got really close to him,” says Lilian, “but he was a very charming person, a lovely man.” They arranged the UK premieres of a number of his finest works, including his Symphony No.8 and the devastating Symphony No.13, *Babi Yar*, with words by the poet Yevtushenko. Shostakovich might never have become so popular in Britain without this initiation. They introduced the Russian composer to Benjamin Britten, precipitating a remarkable musical friendship. “Though I like to think they would have met and it would all have happened without us,” Lilian says.

Their one major problem, Lilian recounts, was that Richter was prone to cancelling his concerts at short notice, which made him difficult to insure —

and the Hochhausers have always operated without any form of subsidy, so the financial risk was theirs.

Then there came a hiatus in their relationship with Russia: when Rostropovich defected to the West in 1974, he stayed in London with the Hochhausers for about a year. “Therefore we became persona non grata with the USSR and they wouldn’t work with us any more,” says Lilian, who until then had steered a fine diplomatic line between the Foreign Office, the Soviet Ministry of Culture and the USSR’s state musical agency Gosconcert, among others. It was only 16 years later that they returned to Russia, after the collapse of the Soviet regime.

“But that break didn’t matter,” Victor adds, “because we started working with China!” They were the first to bring the Peking Opera to London, and took the London Festival Ballet to China. “It was the first western ballet company to visit after the Cultural Revolution, in 1979,” says Lilian. “For 18 years China had never seen anything from the West, so you can imagine the sensation.”

Can they pinpoint the secret of their success? “To recognise what is excellent,” Lilian reflects, “and to get the balance right between what the public wants to hear while presenting good art, not simply something commercial.” Add determination to instinct: bringing Russian companies to Britain at the height of the communist era involved huge logistical exercises. “But we didn’t really think about that. We just did it.”

And one final ingredient — luck: “Of course we were lucky to have these artists! Without them we couldn’t do anything,” Victor says. “Nobody these days is of the calibre as the artists of that extraordinary era. We were incredibly lucky.”