

SPECIAL FEATURE on DANIIL SHAFRAN

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Birth: 13th January 1923, San Petersburg, Russia (Leningrad, USSR)

Death: 7th February 1997, Moscow

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The truly great cellist Daniil Shafran was born in Leningrad on January 13th, 1923. His father Boris was the principal cellist of the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra and his mother, Frida Moiseyevna, was a pianist. According to Shafran himself, when his mother was going to give birth, his father was still practicing passages from Haydn's "Concerto in D major", so he was reluctant to go to the hospital until he had technically controlled a difficult passage!

With that dedication it should be of no surprise that he was originally taught by his father; however little Daniil was already asking him to please start! So when he was eight years old, his father showed up one day with a small cello and instructed him to start studying. His father was rather a serious scholar and strict teacher, but after a year and a half of being under his tutelage, Shafran had already absorbed many of the values that he would manifest throughout his life: a regular and diligent practice and the importance of striving to achieve the biggest goals. A fundamental principle that he naturally established for himself was the need to overcome technical obstacles by learning to play even beyond the demands of the work, so Shafran learned to be ruthlessly strict with himself during rehearsals and practice. From his father, he learned to play a piece through at twice the written speed, to ensure that all technical challenges were met!

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With a sound base he then began studying with Aleksander Shtrimer at the Special School of Music for children. Two years later he was one of ten talented children chosen to attend the Leningrad Conservatory, and fortunately with the same teacher. That year he also marked his first public appearance at one of the Conservatory's concerts when he played two Popper pieces of considerable difficulty, 'Spinning Song' and 'Elfentanz'. Things moved quickly...he made his orchestral debut the following year playing Tchaikovsky's "Rococo Variations" with the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra under British conductor Albert Coates.

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Then, in 1937, Shafran suddenly achieved national prominence when he entered the Soviet Union's National Cello Competition as an unofficial contestant and walked off with first prize! His age, and "filigree virtuosity and poetic appearance had caused something of a sensation" (words of Margaret Campbell: 'The Great Cellists'). Part of this important award was a magnificent Antonio Amati cello made in 1630, which remained faithfully with him the rest of his life.

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He was the most fascinating Russian cellist to appear after the mythical Piatigorsky, it is surprising as to how little fame he was collecting internationally. In a number of countries he was at one point virtually unknown. Shafran saw himself as a product of a Leningrad (rather than a Moscow) tradition that "*attached great importance to technical matters, gave more attention to interpretation, revealing the stylistic diversity of works, and developing the artistic propensities of the pupil*". Perhaps his rather shy and reserved personality was a detriment. Or perhaps he did not have the opportunity to leave Russia as did some other 'favoured' artists. Mstislav Rostropovich was also on the scene and they tied together in competitions well placed above the rest of competitors - they shared first prize in Budapest's 1949 World Democratic Youth Festival and the Hanus Wihan Contest in Prague in 1950.

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Shafran spent most of his career performing and recording in Russia although he did some touring in Europe, the U.S., and Japan. Since his performances overseas were rare, Shafran was not well known among musical circles.

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His career was almost entirely that of soloist. He played many duo recitals with Richter, Enescu, Zecchi Nina Musinyan, Anton Ginsburg and Felix Gottlieb. In the recital world he premiered many pieces, amongst them: Arapov - Cello Sonata, Schnittke - Suite in Old Style, Shchedrin - Imitating Albeniz, Tsintsadze - Five Pieces on Folk Themes, and Vlasov - Melody. It should also be mentioned that he recorded the Shostakovich Cello Sonata with the composer at piano.

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His concerto appearances were even more spectacular! Shafran recorded the Kabalevsky - Cello Concerto No. 1 in 1954, and the composer certainly took notice; he was later dedicated the Cello Concerto No.2, a tremendously powerful piece which exceptionally difficult technically, yet full of pathos in that it was conceived to honor the victims of World War II.

Other Russian great concerti he was a promoter of too, such as Prokofiev - Sinfonia Concertante and both the Shostakovich concertos, and especially the second of them. He also performed the first Khachaturian - Cello Concerto with the composer conducting. But his concerto/concertante repertoire encompassed all the greats, from Haydn, Schumann, through Dvorak, Tchaikovsky and Davidoff, to 20th century works.

In performance, his style was individual. He rehearsed in full concert dress, perched at the front of an unusually high chair, positioned on a little raised platform, and played with his eyes closed. His ritual preparation for concerts included early morning practice, eating, relaxation and mental preparation.

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His technique was wonderful; first off you notice his “legato” and his ability to make the instrument sing. His “staccato” and “spiccato” were made with a very light but yet extremely precise attack. The frequent use of the bow at the tip with the somewhat loose mane allowed it a silvery but warm and beautiful sound. The hair on his bow was not especially tight, he thought he was better able to change the contact point with the strings - for which he also was a master.

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His tone was of deep and soft intensity and his phrasing was closer to the French school than Russian, of which he maintained the typical intense vibes, a vibration modulated with an agogic, flexibility and expressiveness in the manner of the singers of the old school. This can be noted, for example, in his interpretations of the Chopin Cello Sonata in G minor or the delightful Rachmaninov Vocalise. One immediately notices that his vibrato is UNIQUE, ranging from the most intense fast vibration until notes without any, and many notes changing intensities in mid-stream. Who else developed an increasing intensity vibrato in a diminuendo to ‘pp’ - yet it worked for him! Legend has it that he often devoted one hour a day just on vibrato - I have even been told from contacts in the ‘Polish’ school of cellists that vibrato mattered so much to him that at one point of his career he carried inside his coat pocket a part of a wooden cello neck which he sometimes took out to ‘practise’ in the street - like when waiting at a bus stop for a bus! He practiced five or six hours every day, constantly changing fingerings and trying to find the right sound for him at that moment.

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Shafran, who was known for his sometimes remarkably individual fingerings, denied that they would only work for his hand and on a cello of this size: *"Any cellist with a normal stretch can use my fingerings on a standard sized cello, though they would, of course, be more difficult for a cellist with a small finger stretch"*. One can often witness an abundance of the 4th finger in the higher positions (above the 'A' octave harmonic), no doubt helped a little by a slightly more 'vertical' cello than many of his contemporaries. He also trained the left-hand Q to play and sound as a normal finger, and achieved a magical vibrato with only his thumb - and such ideas as starting the first three notes of Saint-Saëns 'The Swan' with 4-3-Q on the 'A-string' could only be contemplated by a genius!

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He played with a certain detachment and peacefulness, always looking for the transcendent in the years of his maximum splendor (until the late 1970s) - he never played a note in vain. Neither was he afraid to experiment; we are usually taught in music school that as the notes go upward we make a crescendo and when going downwards a diminuendo, yet Daniil Shafran often did it the other way round - a big jump upwards simply 'evaporated' into a beautiful airy sound whereas low notes gained force to 'hit' the ground! Daniil's style certainly evolved over the years. As he grew older, his playing became more and more personal. He simply ceased to care what others thought and he played exactly how he wanted to without fear of being judged. With a noble sensuality, an elegance, a finesse unknown to most of today's cellists Shafran remains very much a milestone in the history of musical performance on the cello. Long may his sound remain with us!!

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This following paragraph appeared in "cello.org" and I feel compelled to reproduce it. When his step-daughter, Vera, was asked: *"Why was he not honored by the 'establishment' when he died, not even with a headstone for his grave? He was a historically significant cellist and he certainly deserved more recognition than he receive."* the answer was:

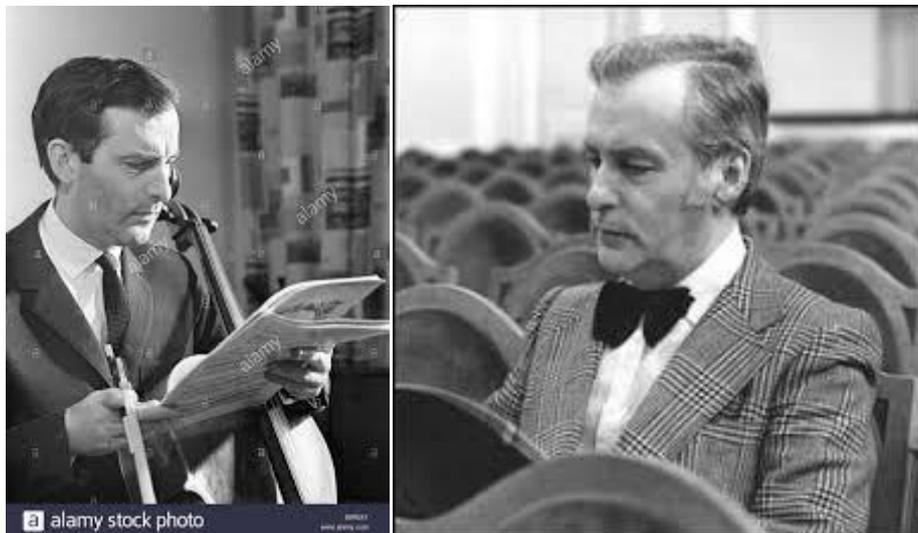
"His headstone was my arduous task to contend with. After Daniil's death we received some telephone calls and letters asking if we would like to sell Daniil's 'Amati' cello. This was unnerving because it is dangerous to be rich in Russia because of the Russian Mafia. We were afraid both to sell the cello and have a large sum of money in our hands, and we were afraid to keep the valuable cello in our home. We decided to donate it to the State Museum of Musical Culture instead. In retrospect, this was a mistake because the instrument isn't played; we should have given it to the State Musical Collection instead. Anyway, the director of the Museum promised to honor Daniil with a monument. We heard this promise repeatedly for three years; he kept claiming that the delay was due to the financial situation in Russia. We finally gave up. Then Steven Isserlis, Daniil's and my close friend, decided to help with a headstone. Steven managed a Fund named 'The Daniil Shafran Memorial Fund' in London and wrote to some musical magazines to promote it. At the

same time my friends in Russia helped me to do a scandal piece on Russian TV and we received many supportive calls. A director of a large stone factory ended up donating a headstone, and I used the money from the fund instead to publish a book about Daniil, called 'Daniil Shafran - cello solo', which is only printed in Russian at the moment."

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The cellist Steven Isserlis summed up this artist:

"as a cellist and musician, Shafran was unlike anyone else. At a time in which, thanks to various media, musical styles are converging, Shafran's voice remained apart. His vibrato, his phrasing, his rhythm all belonged to a unique whole; his astounding virtuosity conveyed a musical personality that retained the passion, the simplicity and the poetry of a great Russian folk singer. He was incapable of playing one note insincerely; his music spoke from the soul".



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