

# Cellists' Corner

## Brief Career Details of Important Cellists

*prepared by David Johnstone from public information*

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## SPECIAL FEATURE on VALENTIN BERLINSKY

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Birth: 19th January 1925 - Irkutsk, Siberia, Russia

Death: 15th December 2008 - Moscow

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Valentin Berlinsky was a Russian cellist. A few days ago I made a special feature on Daniil Shafran - well, if you like the sound of Shafran you are sure to like the sound of Berlinsky too - for although Shafran belong to the 'Leningrad' school of cellists and Berlinsky born thousands of kilometres to the east in Siberia their sound, bowings and vibrato were remarkably similar. And of course they were also contemporaries! The name of Valentin Berlinsky is a much less familiar one to western ears than either that of Shafran or that of another great Russian cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich. Rostropovich was a long-term friend and colleague, and would surely have been the first to admit that in his supremely cultured musicianship, his lifelong encouragement and support of the contemporary repertoire and his concern to pass on the beacon of his musical knowledge to a younger generation, Berlinsky deserves so many honours.

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Young Valentin took violin lessons from his father, who had been a pupil of Leopold Auer and who, with his three brothers, played as the 'Berlinsky Quartet' in that part of the Soviet Union. He was soon sent to Moscow to study at the Moscow Conservatory. By the time he graduated in 1945, the quartet which was to become the most prestigious in the entire Soviet Union had already given its first performances.

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Yes, he was a member of the world-famous BORODIN QUARTET from its birth in 1945 and he was a member until 2007. He was the only Quartet member to have played in it from the beginning. Under the supervision of an inspirational professor, Mikhail Terian, Berlinsky took his place as cellist alongside first violinist Rostislav Dubinsky, who stayed until the 1970s, and - as second violin and viola respectively - Nina and Rudolf Barshai. The group originally came together in 1945 with Mstislav Rostropovich on cello; however, after a couple of weeks Rostropovich found he was too busy and nominated Berlinsky in his place! They signed an oath of allegiance in their own blood which Berlinsky retained. The naming of the quartet was deliberate; a homage to the composer of the most wonderful specimens in the Russian quartet repertoire, Alexander Borodin.

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The other great composer in which the quartet had special affinity was Shostakovich. The quartet first met Dmitri Shostakovich in 1946 and became his faithful interpreter of so many complex string quartets. Indeed, the group was known for its performances of all 15 quartets in the Shostakovich quartet cycle at concert halls around the world, including in 1994 at Alice Tully Hall in New York City. Berlinsky maintained a complete log of their many performances. His own diaries were compiled and edited by his granddaughter, Maria Matalaev, and his biography published in "Valentin Berlinsky: A Quartet for Life" (2018). He said about the Shostakovich quartets: *"We always presented the quartets to him before we played them in public, just to have his final blessing. He never spoke about the meaning – but we were 100% sure of what we were playing. It makes me smile when I hear many western quartets playing Shostakovich – they don't seem to have the slightest idea of what's beyond the notes they're playing."*

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The long list of other premieres includes important works by Moisei Weinberg, Lev Knipper, Boris Tchaikovsky and Alfred Schnittke – whose 1st Quartet the Borodin Quartet recorded in 1967 (only to meet with official opposition!).

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The quartet was one of the Soviet Union's best known in the West during the Cold War era, through concert performances in the United States and Europe and through distribution of their recordings. As one of the most revered groups during the Communist era, the quartet performed at the funerals of both Joseph Stalin and Sergei Prokofiev, who both died on the same day - March 5th, 1953.

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Their foreign tours had started as early as 1955, two years after they played at Stalin's funeral. Berlinsky's conviction and philosophical insight certainly helped to fuel the ultimate challenge – the cycles of Shostakovich and Beethoven quartets.

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After 20 years with the same line-up big changes came in the 1970s: Dubinsky emigrated to the West in 1976 and the second violinist, Jaroslav Alexandrov, retired through ill-health. Having recruited replacements, Berlinsky insisted that the ensemble spend a full two years out of sight until the Borodin sound had been fully recovered.

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Berlinsky was a very loyal Russian, in fact, there have been veiled criticisms of his alignment with the Soviet authorities, but that is beyond the scope which I wish to touch upon today. In 2000 he said: *"I have never condemned those who left. It's difficult to describe in words why I stayed, but for me it was nothing to do with cheap patriotism. It was just that Russia is my fatherland; I couldn't imagine living anywhere else."*

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Berlinsky had also partnered most of the great musicians of his generation, but with a long career at the top he continued to work as an equal with a younger generation – not least when, in the quartet in 1996, the first violinist Ruben Aharonian and the viola-player Yegor Naidin, 46 years his junior, joined Berlinsky and Andrei Abramnikov, second violin since 1974.

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Since 2001 Berlinsky served as President of the Borodin Quartet's Charity Fund of, which supports young gifted musicians. He was also Chairman of the Trustee Committee of the Russian Performing Arts Fund.

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The cellist's 75th birthday week was marked not only by a homage from students at the Gnessin Institute, Moscow, where he was teaching – but also alongside a whole host of all-dancing, reciting and singing tributes. After celebrating his 80th birthday while STILL a member of the ensemble, he gradually gave way to his pupil Vladimir Balshin, and stopped appearing in public in September 2007. But he still remained the group's mentor!!

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Berlinsky died at age 83 in December 15th 2008, in Moscow, after a long illness. A farewell ceremony was held at the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall, Moscow. He had one daughter, Ludmila Valentinovna Berlinskaya, an important musician herself.

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Apart from a performing career Berlinsky moved straight from study into teaching himself – a distinguished parallel career which he maintained until his death. For much of his life he taught at the Gnessin School of Music in Moscow, nurturing many talented young players. Berlinsky remained a mine of information about Shostakovich's corrections or decrees on work in progress (there is a splendid glimpse of his personality among the interviews of Elizabeth Wilson's *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*).

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I would like to point those who do not know his sound to a couple of examples:

“Borodin Quartet” - Borodin String Quartet No 2 in D

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOcinyJE4vI>

(the wonderful slow movement at 13’ 20” if you haven’t got time to hear it all, but you should try to!)

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Beethoven Quartet Op.18/No.4

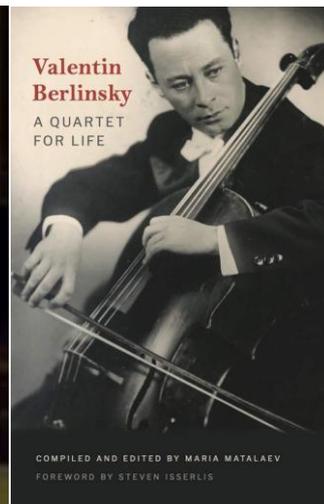
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=STkhzmDN2vM>

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A most interesting and worthy cellist to remember.

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