

Cellists' Corner

Brief Career Details of Important Cellists

prepared by David Johnstone from public information

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SPECIAL FEATURE on LEV GINSBURG

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Birth: 28th January, 1907 - Mogilev, Russia

Death: 21st November, 1981 - Moscow

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Lev {Solomonovich} Ginsburg was a multi-talented cellist, Soviet music scholar, and pedagogue. He was equally a musicologist, a cello teacher, a historian and the author of more than twenty books and hundreds of articles related to all aspects of music and instrumentalists. He was born in Mogilev, which today is found in East Belarus. His parents were both physicians but amateur 'music loving', so at the age of eleven he started on the cello with Leopold Yushdevich at the local Mogilev Music Studio.

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His progress was rapid. Within four years he had moved to Moscow where he studied for a year with Abraham Mogilevsky at the Alexander Glazunov Music School, and then on to advanced studies Mark Yampolsky and Semon Kosolupov at the Moscow Conservatory. At the Moscow Conservatoire he specialized in cello, chamber music, and music history - and from that time he developed an amazing interest for the world of the cello and its history.

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He graduated in 1931 and almost immediately started a professional performing career, but later wrote a dissertation for a special degree on the subject "Luigi Boccherini and his role in the development of the art of cello playing" (first published in 1938); and later still (in 1947) he obtained a Ph.D. with the extended essay "The art of cello playing from its origin to the end of the XVIII century".

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As mentioned, Ginsburg began his professional career at the age of 25, with a richness of experience of professional playing. He performed as a soloist and in chamber music ensembles, and was the assistant principal cellist of the Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra from 1932-1934. In 1936 he joined the faculty of the Moscow Conservatoire, becoming a full professor there from 1950. During World War II Ginsburg was a member of a military "concert brigade," which participated in more than 500 concerts in hospitals and military units. Although he continued teaching cello until 1969 he gradually shifted his chief interest to musicological research.

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From the 1950s onwards he became a well-known judge at many cello competitions (for example, those in Vienna, Prague and the Casals Competition in Budapest), and he lectured throughout Europe on aspects of musicology. In 1961 he was invited by Pablo Casals to participate in the Festival in Prades. He made friends with most of the well-known cellists and other musicians of his generation, and had an extensive collection of interesting memorabilia. He developed several courses of cello study which became implemented into the curriculum of the official Soviet Conservatories. He was awarded the title "Honoured Artist of the RSFSR" by the Soviet regime in 1966.

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Amongst his important publications were "Istoriya violonchel'noy iskusstva" (History of the art of cello playing) Vols. I and II, published in Moscow and Leningrad in 1950 and 1957; and Vol. III in Moscow in 1965). His other works included monographs on Casals (Moscow, 1958; 2nd edition 1966), on Ysaye (Moscow, 1959), on Rostropovich (Moscow, 1963), and on Tartini (Moscow, 1969). However, there were other collections of articles and essays. He wrote extensively too about the history, theory and aesthetics of musical interpretation.

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In the English-speaking world his iconic work is considered "The History of the Violoncello" - it has 384 'action-packed' pages in length, and was published in 1983 by Paganiniana Publications, translated from Russian by Tanya Tchistyakova, and edited by Herbert R. Axelrod. This book is a history of violoncello persona and technique covering the 19th and 20th centuries, and it is full of illustrations, both in colour and black and white. The biographies begin with Bernhard Romberg, and end with the Japanese School of the late 20th century. Ginsburg also includes an extensive introduction to 20th century composers and their works for the cello. This is one of the most important books ever published about the history of the cello, and cellists, and would be nice to have in the library of every cellist - alas, it is currently now out of print, and second hand copies are very expensive indeed! Anyway, if Mr. Ginsburg were to have lived in the twenty-first century he would have been a giant in the internet world, and put my feeble attempts to chart cello history into shame ...so I certainly 'take my hat off' to him!!

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