



KOLOSOV PORTRAIT: IVAN BUSHUEV; KOLOSOV TEACHING: COURTESY RINAT IBRAGIMOV

# Memoirs of a

To celebrate his half-century of teaching, Russian double bass pedagogue Evgeny Kolosov spoke to his former pupil RINAT IBRAGIMOV about favourite students, period performance, and why musicians should have higher concerns than simply earning money

**RINAT IBRAGIMOV** Congratulations on your 70th birthday and your 50 years as a teacher. How did you start to teach and who influenced you?

**EVGENY KOLOSOV** I was a third-year student at the Moscow Conservatoire when it was suggested that, as an advanced pupil, I should finish the last two years of the course in a single year and then start to teach there. At that time I was playing in the Moscow Symphony Orchestra, and I had to leave that job in order to complete my studies. After finishing the course, I was allocated my first students. Turning to influences, the first person to mention is my professor, Andrei Ivanovich Astakhov, with whom I started learning the bass at the age of 14.

**RI** What about the big names? You worked with artists such as Richter, Gilels, Oistrakh and Rostropovich. Who had the most influence on you?

**EK** All of them. Musical life in the Soviet Union was hugely influenced by all those fantastic musicians, and I could not escape their influence. Mstislav Rostropovich influenced me



Kolosov teaches from the piano – Ibragimov (seated) looks on as Andrey Feigin performs in 1982. Far left: Kolosov today

# bass master

through the enormous scale and daring of his musical ideas, and Svyatoslav Knushevitsky through his very touching musicality and the extraordinary beauty of his sound. Sergei Shirinsky was an amazing cellist – a member of the legendary Beethoven Quartet, soloist, and principal cello of the USSR State Symphony Orchestra – and he influenced me in a more practical way. I used to send my ideas about posture to the cellist Galina Semyonovna Kozolupova, for her thoughts. She would send some things back to me for revision – I suppose it was as though she was my editor.

I often visited classes given by David Oistrakh. He was constantly in a creative process with his students, one based on mutual respect. He never used authoritarian methods in his teaching, and instead helped students to develop their own concepts and find their own musical ideas. Of course, his teaching also provided his pupils with a complete technical ability, in order to realise these musical ideas.

My teaching commitment wasn't huge in the beginning. I had pupils of average abilities and worked with them mostly on the

technical aspects of their playing. But every year my teaching hours increased: in addition to newly recruited students, I also had pupils coming to me from other teachers.

At the start, I was quite inexperienced as a teacher, but my love for music, my desire to comprehend the secrets of pedagogy, and my own playing abilities – which were quite good – helped me to overcome difficulties and achieve good results.

A year later, when I started teaching at the Moscow Central Music School (a school for exceptional young players), I had three of my own students from the very beginning: Lubov Tyurina, Anatoly Grindenko and Ivan Kotov. I was very lucky, as all three were extremely talented.

Anatoly Grindenko was an unusually musical student, and by the end of his studies at the Moscow Conservatoire he had perfectly mastered the viola da gamba. He became a leading performer on this instrument in Russia. Ivan Kotov was the first Soviet bass player to win an international competition. He was awarded first prize at the Geneva International Music Competition in 1973. He studied with me for five years >

at the Central Music School, and later for five years at the conservatoire. He was able to translate my ideas into playing, and also encouraged me to find new ones. We always had a very close creative relationship. Unfortunately, he died very young.

**RI** I remember finding your lessons very special because you were always on the side of the student, and you always became part of their world. When I was taking my first steps in music, you were with me, trying to understand my vision and encouraging me to make musical images of my own. Nothing of my individual identity was taken away.

**EK** But this is the main goal of the teacher – for the student to discover themselves, their world of imagery, their instrumental experience. You should not dictate or force your ideas on them. You must have interaction. Of course, my goal was also to provide the student with a solid technique with which they could express their soul. They should be free to express their musical ideas without interference. And then, of course, everyone works according to their own talents.

**RI** Which qualities do you most value in students? And how do you choose your students?

**EK** I do not choose students – I take everyone who wants to study with me. The most interesting students for me are those who have their own vision, an ability to hear, and conviction. Students who argue, defend their point of view, resist me and accept what I say only when they are convinced that I am right – those students are always involved in a creative process, actively thinking, and wanting to find something on their own. The most important

thing is to find a language of interaction, so that you can help them to achieve more. An authoritarian approach is suitable only for very average students, and only in extreme cases. I always try to get all my students to think creatively.

**RI** When the first experiments in period-instrument playing began in the USSR, many students, including some of yours, had a great interest in that style. But almost all professors in Moscow reacted with anger: ‘What? Playing without vibrato?’

**EK** But vibrato isn’t shaking your fingers – it’s more the fluttering of the heart. This is the soul – this is vibrato.

**RI** But in the early 1980s you were faithful to that movement, and when your students tried to play in new ways, you didn’t mind – although you did not show a great interest yourself. I’m asking this because many of your students, including myself, have a great interest in historical performance.

**EK** When I first heard ‘authentic’ players trying to restore the principles of phrasing and musicianship from the books of earlier times, I knew they were largely right. But for me, they remained musical archaeologists. Despite their knowledge and skills, they were more like theorists than true musicians. They were curious, yes, but small-minded, soulless. It was only later, when I discovered recordings by Anner Bylisma and John Eliot Gardiner, that I began to listen more closely and discovered lots of interesting things about vibrato – using it very selectively rather than mechanically, and bow vibrato for example – as well as more detailed phrasing, and a bigger role for a dance-like character in music. Then I happily accepted things that way. I even started using those principles in my own playing – again I was learning something from my students.

**RI** In the West, the most common formula is that the teacher is also a concert performer. To be offered a teaching position in a good college, you either have to be a well-known player, or you have to be auditioned – to play a recital and give a masterclass. Can you only be a good teacher if you are a performer?

**EK** In my opinion, the teacher should first of all be a listener. Certainly, at some stage in your development, you also have to perform and learn all the technical skills and know how to express yourself. But above all, your role as a teacher is to be a listener – to be able to hear the student and understand the ways in which you can mould them. The listener must also be able to recognise and understand a talented performer, and then apply a sculpting technique. That comes with experience. I learnt it only after ten years of teaching. The relationships I built with my first students were based on joint creativity, but later, that sculpting technique allowed me to move on and pinpoint any technical problems and to decide how to treat them.

But to return to the idea of the teacher as performer, everybody knew the outstanding



In Kolosov's perfect conservatoire, students would not have to work to live

ANDREW BISHOP

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teacher – Yuri Yankelevich. He could demonstrate anything he wanted to show his pupils beautifully on the violin, but he couldn't deal with the pressure of being on stage, so he never became a top performer. And Abram Yampolsky was a teacher of genius, but a soloist? No.

### RI What would be your idea of a perfect conservatoire?

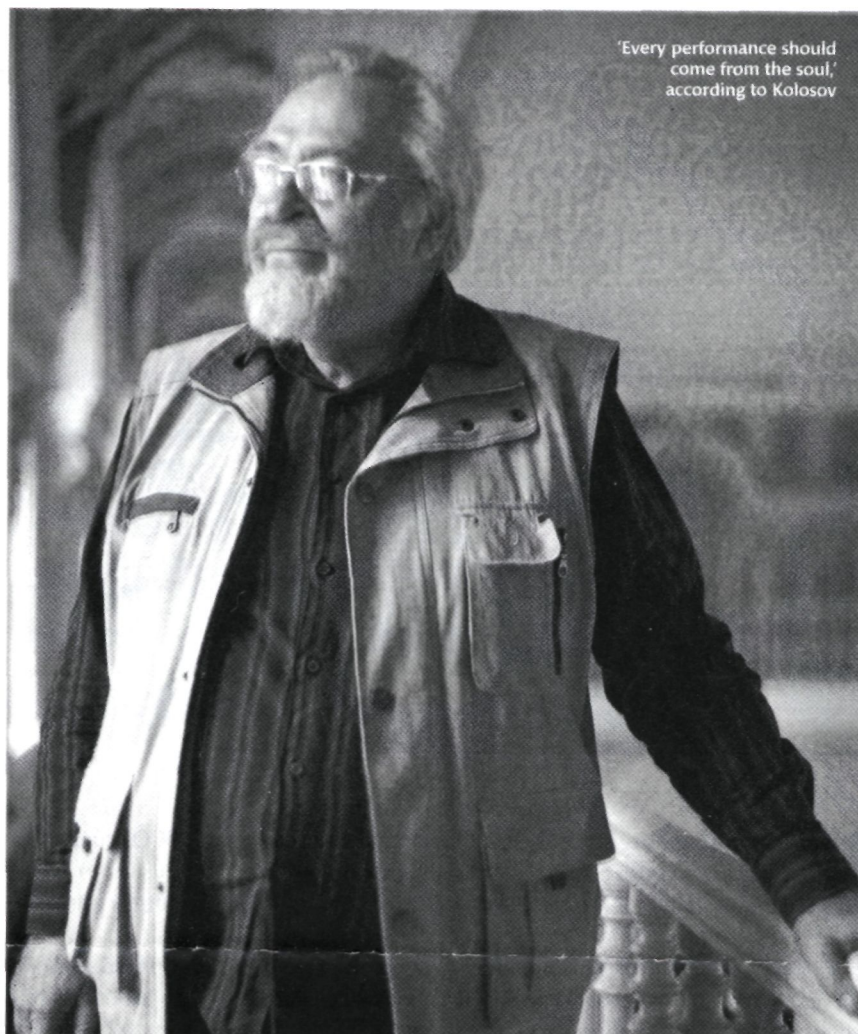
**EK** First of all, it would be a conservatoire that provides students with sufficient scholarships, so that they do not have to work to live, and do not have to apply for jobs for at least the first two or three years of their studies. Of course, they also need to eat in that time!

The Moscow Conservatoire during the Soviet era worked very well, and the state provided financial security, more or less. The music halls were not hired out in order for the conservatoire to survive, but instead were given over to students for concerts and classes. Every student had an opportunity to play in the Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatoire, which has a really good concert acoustic. It is so important to play in a good acoustic. Indeed, our instrument is not just the bass, but also the hall in which we are playing. All players need to learn to understand the acoustics of a hall and be able to interact with them. Every student should get plenty of solo performing opportunities, and should play in good halls as often as possible.

### RI What would the learning process be like in an ideal conservatoire? What kind of disciplines would there be, and how often would lessons take place?

**EK** Instrumental lessons would happen twice a week, and students would be able to play with an accompanist every time they needed to. There would be compulsory solfège, harmony and analysis, even at the expense of orchestra classes. An understanding and vision of form is invaluable – especially today, when playing is very often over-refined and over-detailed, but students miss seeing the whole picture.

Classrooms with good acoustics are essential. Practising in bad rooms creates bad habits: in dead acoustics,



'Every performance should come from the soul,' according to Kolosov

ANDREW HARRIS

students begin to force the sound, and the reverse is true in boomy rooms. And there should be 60 per cent humidity, especially in winter. In Russia, this is a very urgent problem – instruments are being destroyed because of temperature changes.

### RI You taught in London and regularly gave masterclasses in Europe. What do you think about the idea that Russian performers are often technically more advanced but musically less versatile, whereas the opposite is true for musicians from the West?

**EK** There is a certain standardisation in musicians from Russia, which was quite prominent in Soviet times. There were idols who were imitated, and who held dominant positions in musical life. For example, I think Sviatoslav Richter, despite his enormous contributions to music, did some harm as well. He standardised the way of performing the music of many composers, especially Beethoven. And so great interpretations by musicians such as Konstantin Igumnov, Emil Gilels, Heinrich Neuhaus, Yakov Flier, Yakov Zak, Mikhail Yudin and many others went by the wayside. Among violinists, the absolute idol was David Oistrakh. Nobody else had the ability to play the violin like him. However, teachers still tried to create little Oistrakhs. But there were also great musicians like Leonid Kogan or the wonderful Igor Bezrodny who were different from the others and had unique interpretations. >

Kolosov celebrates his 70th birthday concert at the Moscow Conservatoire



COURTESY RINAT IBRAGIMOV

**RI You have now taught for half a century. What has changed in musicians' minds? Where is music going?**

**EK** Technologically, of course, we are now on another level. But spiritually we have lost a great deal. However, it could not be any other way when money is the god and music its servant. Music no longer delivers to its listeners what it should, and it doesn't have the effect on people's souls that it did half a century ago.

Music should not depend on business, nor become a business. Instead, business should serve music. It is essential that musicians, soloists and conductors are not too concerned about earning money, and instead are able to concentrate more on performing, so that they can have greater inner and spiritual perception.

**RI And what about teaching methods?**

**EK** They have become more superficial. Yes, there are good technical results, and young people are more fluent in all techniques and do not experience discomfort when playing, as happened before. But somehow it has become impersonal. Tempos are speeding up everywhere. Often, musicians don't seem to sense musical time, instead running ahead and losing depth. It's a shame. But it also seems that there are signs of Romanticism returning.

**RI How important are the human qualities of a musician? Do they influence music?**

**EK** Let me give a couple of examples. Shostakovich was a very nice, harmless person, yet his music is full of darkness. Prokofiev, on the other hand, was very sharp, over-confident and uncomfortable as a person, but his writing comes directly from God. There are many similar cases.

**RI But what about ordinary players? Are the spiritual qualities of the performer reflected in their playing?**

**EK** Of course. If someone's inner world is not developed, the musical results will be miserable. One's playing depends entirely on this.

**RI If this is so important, do you feel entitled to interfere with a student's inner world, or even try to change it?**

**EK** I would try instead to guide it. Of course, a student's inner world needs to develop, and be encouraged and directed. I can recommend reading certain books, and visiting exhibitions, plays, good concerts and other things. Students need a good understanding of the arts in general, especially expression through poetry, architecture and painting. It will then be easier to understand the importance of sound as a means of expression for performers, and how important it is to master sound—its richness, quality, intensity, colours and so on.

**RI With regard to your pupils, you started by speaking about Ivan Kotov's victory in Geneva, and at the last International Serge Koussevitzky Double Bass Competition, the winner, Grigory Krotenko, was also your pupil. That forms a kind of triumphal arch over 50 years, with many other victories. But were there also failures, and difficult or awkward students?**

**EK** Of course. There were some who thought that my demands were unjustified and picky, and who didn't want to change. It was very important to learn from those students how to overcome this resistance, to reveal what could be their trump card. For some, it was a pictorial way of thinking and a good sense of form, and for others it was technique. There were also some who had a beautiful sound, which of course I value more highly. After all, the performer on stage is like a hypnotist. The trance he puts the audience into comes from the sound that carries his feelings, the turmoil of the soul. Every performance should come from the soul, and appeal directly to the soul. ■