

✓ ST. DAVID'S HALL, CARDIFF
(May 21st, 1984)

PHILHARMONIA ORCHESTRA

Boris Belkin (violin). Valdimir Ashkenazy (conductor).

In a review that I wrote for this magazine a short time ago, I introduced some comments on recordings and I would like to continue that train of thought for a moment and to couple it with the name of Viktoria Mullova, the brilliant young Soviet violinist of whose playing I have also written.

It seems to me that Ms. Mullova's playing was akin to the sound of digital recording. That is it was brilliant distinct . . . technically close to perfection yet musically unengaging. Similarly, for all their (artificial) brilliance of sound digital recordings do not draw the listener into the music and (for those who have heard fine analogue recordings on high quality audio equipment) the hard edge to the sound ultimately makes you want to turn it off.

Not so analogue recordings, and Boris Belkin is to analogue what Viktoria Mullova is to digital. Despite their technical imperfections analogue recordings at their best reproduce the most life-like portrayal of musical sounds, performances that can draw you into the performance. All other things being equal you do not want to . . . no, cannot . . . turn off a fine analogue recording — you have to hear it through to the end of the side. So it is with every note that Boris Belkin plays. His violin draws you into his musical world and you find yourself hanging onto his every phrase, hoping that the performance will never end.

Mr. Belkin's technique is nothing like the virtuoso wizardry that Ms. Mullova so clearly displays. Indeed, when his first recording (of Paganini's *Concerto No. 1*) appeared I wondered at the time whether his poetic rubatos were in fact forced upon him in order to fudge the difficult bits. But it does not matter. Like Schnabel, Cortot and Kreisler before him, he is a superb example of the triumph of musicianship over technique.

All of this was evident from the very opening notes of the Shostakovich *Violin Concerto No. 1* performed at the concert under review. This magnificent work dating from 1947 to 1955 shows the composer at his most colourful and intense best, displaying both the economy of means and the almost casual daubing of orchestral and tonal colours of a master of his craft. The composer seemed to have brought a lifetime of strife and experience to the music of the 1st movement and Belkin in turn brought an almost unbearable intensity to his playing of that haunting and inconsolable music. By contrast he then seemed to excite the very atoms of the hall itself to dance to the rhythmic verve of the 2nd movement.

Certainly the music has the whole orchestra as though frolicking with mirth amongst the clouds.

This is not easy music to play, as the sight of several members of the orchestra counting bars and beats testified, but the orchestral contribution under Ashkenazy's direction was both sensitively phrased and brilliantly performed.

In his struggle with his instrument and with the emotion and meaning of the music, in his lack of concern for just playing the right notes, in his deep commitment to the communication of the meaning beyond the notes, Boris Belkin created a memorable achievement and showed, as he has in other concerts and on his recordings, that he is one of the foremost musicians of our day.

Not for nothing, as violinist and orchestra brought the work to its cosmic dance of a finale, was there a palpable sense of elation in the hall and foyers afterwards.

The programme opened with a neatly played performance of Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 18 in B♭, K456*, the most striking aspect of which was the sensitive playing of the lovely, aria-like, *andante*. One incongruous note, however: Vladimir Ashkenazy conducted the orchestra from the piano (with its top removed) facing the orchestra, but without playing the *tutti* . . . a sort of schizophrenic authenticity if you will.

Anything after the Shostakovich was liable to be an anticlimax, and in the event the music of Dvorak's *Symphony No. 8* did seem more (musically) banal than usual, but it was superbly performed by the Philharmonia with a lush quality of string tone that I have not heard in St. David's Hall since the USSR Symphony Orchestra performed here as part of the last Cardiff Festival. Ashkenazy led a large-scale, lyrical reading that was lovingly phrased but that was also not without heft.

IFAN PAYNE.