

ST. DAVID'S HALL, CARDIFF
(May 7, 1984)

ROYAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Okku Kamu (conductor):

Viktoria Mullova (violin).

The indisposition of Boris Belkin, the brilliant and individualistic young violinist who had been scheduled to participate in this concert, diverted the attention somewhat from music to personality and politics. The violinist's replacement, Viktoria Mullova, is the even younger (twenty-four years old) Russian violinist who shot to international prominence over her defection last year to the West. A brilliant protegy, she had won both the Sibelius and the Tchaikovsky competitions. Miss Mullova currently lives in the United States and has begun to build an international concert career on this side of the Iron Curtain.

It takes most of us mere mortals two weeks to recover from jet lag, but Miss Mullova flew into London five days before this concert as a replacement for an indisposed Shlomo Mintz and now she was here in Cardiff coming off the substitute's bench for the second time, and in the process switching to the Sibelius *Violin Concerto* for the programmed *Concerto No. 1* by Prokofiev.

Following an out of tune opening note by the orchestra to the concerto, the tall and exceeding slim young Russian made an immediate impression with her staggering technique. The violinist's first entry ends with a rising scale of arpeggios which she tossed off at the tip of the bow with all the fullness of tone that one might have expected from the middle of the bow. It transpired that this passage did indeed display her two greatest technical strengths: the phenomenally clean and controlled bowing at every speed and pressure, and the richness of her tone. This latter is aided by the wide and attractive fore-arm vibrato that she predominantly employs and her obvious love of playing in high positions on the G string so that her tone is often viola-like in its rich darkness.

Such is the power, brilliance and cleanliness of her playing that Jascha Heifetz came to mind as a violinist to whom she could be compared.

Technique is far from being everything, yet I have written not a word about this young lady's musicianship. This is because, unlike another brilliant young violinist who recently performed in St. David's Hall, Nigel Kennedy, it's not the musicianship that one notices first. Indeed, she turned the Sibelius concerto, that is normally conceived as a rather sparse, Nordic statement, into a large-scaled full-grown romantic statement. There is nothing wrong with this, except for the fact that for all her beauty of tone and dazzling technique, there was not a phrase in the performance that truly grabbed the attention.

One was left at the end — contemplating with envy the obvious gifts of Viktoria Mullova — with a string of questions. Does she have real musical ability? Or is she still playing what she was taught to play and not what she has herself learned to play? This goes with the next question: given a phenomenal technique, is it all too easy? or is there the struggle that is all important for the (re)creative artist? And, finally, given that the more 'comfortable' Sibelius was substituted for the more 'provocative' Prokofiev, does she have a socio-cultural conscience? That is, will she use her talents to forward creativity and the music making of today, perhaps even playing works by composers who are actually still alive? Or is she

just another keeper of the archives, polishing off the Brahms and the Beethoven and the Tchaikovsky to a bright, bland surface sheen?

Only time will tell. I, at least, look forward eagerly to hearing her again. Perhaps when the jet lag has worn off, she will capture the musical and creative imagination as well as our amazement at the prolific technique.

The concert opened with a careful and pallid interpretation of Prokofiev's *Symphony No. 1* in which the orchestra, especially the strings, played as though they had not seen each other nor the music for several weeks, and closed with a rumbustuous, yet attractive and well played performance of Saint-Saens's *Symphony No. 3* to which the audience responded with a roar louder than the music itself.

IFAN PAYNE.