



Aleksey Semenenko, *violinist*

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New Artist of the Month: Aleksey Semenenko

Rebecca Schmid | MusicalAmerica.com | March 1, 2015

BERLIN – The tension was high at the first International Boris Goldstein Violin Competition in Bern last January. As it turned out, all but one of the winners were students of Zakhar Bron, himself a living legend for having trained soloists such as Vadim Repin and Daniel Hope. (At least one pundit found this scandalous, since Bron was on the jury.)

But there was one player who, at least for this listener, blew the others out of the water in terms of musical sensitivity. In an afternoon of only Mozart Violin Concertos, Aleksey Semenenko managed to make the Fifth fresh and exciting.



The opening Allegro aperto conveyed a childish joy without overindulging the melodies' spritely qualities. The inner Adagio combined melting climaxes with a searing bittersweetness. In the closing fast movement (Tempo di Menuetto), Semenenko had no problem soaring above and even distracting from the wayward horns of the Zakhar Bron Chamber Orchestra.

The 26 year old is not for a moment pretentious. His eyes radiate a glowing warmth, only to recede into a profound introspective gaze.

“It is not easy for me to play Mozart,” he tells me when we meet at a Berlin café. “But he has nevertheless been my favorite composer since I was a child. The music is so pure and at the same time brings out feelings in me that are otherwise scarcely possible to connect with – every time.”

The competition carries a particular meaning for Semenenko, who emerged as one of the two First Prize winners. The event's namesake, Boris Goldstein, a child prodigy who remained confined to the Soviet Union for most of his life, was born in Semenenko's native city of

Odessa, Ukraine. As a student of the Stolyarsky School, Semenenko stands directly in a tradition that includes not just Goldstein and Bron (his current teacher) but also David and Igor Oistrakh.

Goldstein's daughter, the pianist Julia Goldstein, who sat on the competition's committee of honor, says she was struck by Semenenko's ability to carry forth this schooling while also integrating a contemporary, highly personal sensibility. “I find it fascinating that at his young age, he has such a distinctive sound. It reminds me of past times. The sound has a certain intensity – something absolute, something out of this world. There are not many violinists who are able to create a bridge between the past and present.” Semenenko began playing his instrument at age six and looks back with gratitude that he fell directly into the hands of Zoya Mertsalova – also the teacher of Yuri Bashmet – with whom he studied for 11 years at the Stolyarsky School. “She always said that balance is the most important thing for a good musician,” he recalls. “Intelligence and humility are particularly strong values. One has to have sovereignty and confidence and trust in oneself onstage, but not be cheeky or show off: One has to enjoy oneself, but always in the right proportion.”

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It took time to cultivate this balance, however. In the early years, pressure came largely from his father, a clarinetist in the Odessa Symphony Orchestra. "I didn't dream of playing the violin [professionally], or practicing most of all," Semenenko recalls. "He had me under his control. He always took me to rehearsal."

At only 15, however, Semenenko was suddenly forced to stand on his own when his father fell ill and passed away. "It was very sad, but it carried me further at that time," he says. "I had to decide that I wanted to become musically independent because I was no longer under his eye."

Although the word never escapes Semenenko's lips, his development up until then counts as prodigious. At age seven, after winning the local children's festival *Starlet*, he made his first appearance with orchestra, performing Vivaldi's Violin Concerto in A minor with the Odessa Philharmonic.

He made such an impression that, three years later, conductor Hobart Earle invited him to tag along with the orchestra on a U.S. tour. Upon playing in a Russian restaurant in New York accompanied by quartet (which included his godfather on clarinet), Semenenko met someone who would become a friend and patron: Ed Wilson, a sports equipment heir who immediately insisted on buying him a bigger and better violin.

Semenenko currently plays an 18th century Carlo Ferdinando Landolfi instrument on loan from the German foundation *Musikleben* as well as his own Bernardel, which Wilson acquired for him at a London auction. Since winning first prize in the Young Concert Artists International Auditions in 2012, he has returned regularly to the U.S., performing in venues such as Merkin Hall and the Kennedy Center to enthusiastic reviews from the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. He returns on tour next fall.

"It is like a fairy tale," says Semenenko. "Then when one wakes up when one is back to reality."

Thanks to the Boris Goldstein Competition, he is also scheduled to appear at the Festival Musical Olympus in St. Petersburg in June. Meanwhile, he will continue to reside in Cologne, where he is enrolled at the local University of Music as a student of Bron, and pursue masterclasses with his teacher in Interlaken, Switzerland.

While he remains strongly connected to Odessa and its rich artistic culture, he feels obliged to follow the opportunities where they are. "We only live once," he says. "I don't see why I should sacrifice my life, although some people wouldn't agree. I don't know what it will be like for the next generation. All the good teachers and students are emigrating, but that is understandable."

In May, Semenenko will participate in the Queen Elisabeth Competition, where Boris Goldstein famously took a prize at age of 14. Although he finds it difficult to calm his nerves in the throes of such an event, he is in his element once onstage.

"One feels the connection to the audience, this channel of energy, and then it is worth it," he says. "After the performance, if it went well, one feels as if in heaven."