

# Ilya Musin: A Life in Music

By Brenda L. Leach

We know his former pupils – Yuri Temirkanov, Principal Conductor of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra, and Principal Guest Conductor of the Royal Philharmonic; Valery Gergiev, Principal Guest Conductor of the Metropolitan Opera, Music Director of the Mariinsky (Kirov) Theater in St. Petersburg, and Principal Guest Conductor of the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra; Semyon Bychkov, Music Director of the WDR Symphony Orchestra; Sian Edwards, Yakov Kreizberg, and Arnold Katz. The list goes on to include many of the twentieth century's finest conductors. We also know the work of the contemporaries with whom he was associated including composer, Dmitri Shostakovich, and conductors, Nikolai Malko and Evgeny Mravinsky. So, who was this legendary conductor, pedagogue, and mentor who was revered in Russia, yet hardly known in the West until after the fall of communism?

## EARLY YEARS

Ilya Alexandrovich Musin was born on December 24, 1903 (according to the old Russian calendar) or January 7, 1904 (Western calendar) in Kostroma, a provincial town on the Volga River. His mother died when he was six years old, but his father, a watchmaker and lover of music, encouraged his creative interests. As a child, Musin loved to draw, but his father insisted that he also study piano – even sitting by his side while he practiced. The small village of Kostroma was a great distance from Russia's major cultural centers; therefore, as a young man, Musin's musical education comprised piano study and listening to the local

women singing traditional Russian folksongs. His family did not own a radio, so he had no opportunity to hear concert music. One day, Musin heard someone playing a piano reduction of Tchaikovsky's great opera, *Eugene Onegin*. Hearing this music was a turning point for the young musician, and he informed his father that he wanted to pursue a career as a pianist.

In 1919, shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution, Musin moved to St. Petersburg (later Petrograd and Leningrad – now St. Petersburg once again). He enrolled as a piano student at the prestigious St. Petersburg Conservatory of Music with which many of Russia's most distinguished musicians have been affiliated – Anton Rubinstein, founding director of the conservatory and outstanding pianist and composer; Peter Ilyitch Tchaikovsky, one of the conservatory's first graduates; and the legendary composers, Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Dmitri Shostakovich, and Sergei Prokofiev.

As a student and throughout his career, Musin worked with many of the twentieth century's towering musical figures. Musin said, "The first person I met at the conservatory was Mitya Shostakovich and we became friends." (*The Sun*, p. 4E). "Mitya" was of course the thirteen-year-old Dmitri Shostakovich who had enrolled in the conservatory on the same day and in the same class as Musin. As classmates, they exchanged ideas about music. Musin would often play through sketches of the composer's latest works on the piano. In fact, he was one of the first people to hear Shostakovich's First Symphony, play-

ing through the first and second movements of this work (four-hand piano) with the composer himself. Musin later conducted the second performance of Shostakovich's Symphony 7 "*Leningrad*."

The winter of 1919 was the second hard winter after the Great October Revolution. Many institutions shut down completely during those bleak years because of general chaos and a severe lack of basic supplies and fuel. It was largely due to the efforts of the conservatory's director, Alexander Glazunov, that the school remained open at all. Although the conservatory continued to function, food and fuel were in extremely short supply. Students were fed cabbage soup and watered-down porridge, and the conservatory itself was completely without heat. Musin recalled "There was a small iron stove in the classroom, and every student was required to bring something for the fire." (*The Sun*, p. 4E)

Despite the brutal living conditions, music always sang out from the conservatory's icy practice rooms, and the city itself maintained an intense artistic life. The newly formed "Petrograd State Philharmonic," (now the St. Petersburg Philharmonic), gave ninety-six concerts in this, its second year, while a civil war raged across Russia. During these years, Musin attended many rehearsals, operas, and concerts and observed many of the world's finest conductors. He saw Fyodor Shalyapin in *Boris Godounov*, as well as early performances of Stravinsky's *Firebird* and Prokofiev's *The Love of Three Oranges*. He reflected on this period of his life saying, "All the negative factors were like a stimulus for my development. The conservatory was so cold. So everyday I went to the Philharmonic building to listen to rehearsals. The fighting was going on all around the city, but we still had lessons. And going to the Philharmonic gave me a chance to get acquainted

with all the great musical literature." (*The Sun*, p. 4E). "I became absorbed in new impressions. I went to the theater, to concerts, and to rehearsals so often that I had no room for politics, and I endured the hunger and cold of these years." (*St. Petersburg Times*, p. 11)

Musin the man endured, but Musin the pianist did not. After several winters of practicing in unheated practice rooms, bundled up and exposing only his fingers to the frigid air, he developed a severe case of tendonitis. This caused so much permanent damage that he was forced to abandon any hope of a career as a pianist; however, this did not end his career as a musician. He transferred to the Department of Theory and Composition for a short time, but was clearly headed for a career in conducting. Musin had spent hours in orchestra rehearsals, studying scores, and observing the work of numerous distinguished conductors, often accompanied by this classmate, Dmitri Shostakovich.

He had also participated in musical salons – informal meetings of musicians and intelligentsia in private homes. Frequently those who gathered played orchestral repertoire on the piano, and on one impromptu occasion, Musin was asked to conduct.

In 1924, Nikolai Malko (who had been a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov), Principal Conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra, endowed a professional chair of opera and symphonic conducting at the conservatory into which Musin enrolled in 1925. Prior to this, conducting had only been offered to composition students as a secondary area of study. Under Malko's leadership, it became a major school for training professional conductors, and his book, *The Conductor and His Baton*, became an important treatise on the education of conductors. Here Musin began the complex study of gesture and its impact on



orchestral color and sound, which would become the basis of his work for the next seventy years. Musin became one of Malko's star pupils and his assistant. He graduated in 1930 and began teaching shortly thereafter.

Meanwhile, Malko emigrated to the West in 1929 and was succeeded by Fritz Stiedri, a great conductor and musician, who had escaped from Fascist Germany and settled in Leningrad. Musin served as his assistant as well from 1934 to 1937, at which point Stiedri left Russia. Musical politics determined that Musin would leave Leningrad as well in order to pave the way for Evgeny Mravinsky (1903-1988), who had been a classmate of Musin's at the conservatory, to succeed Steidri as Chief Conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra in 1938. Mravinsky had recently won the All-Union Conducting Competition in Moscow and had appeared as a guest conductor with the orchestra conducting the first performance of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 in 1937.

In 1937 Musin was "invited" to the conduct the Minsk Philharmonic Orchestra in Byelorussia in preparation for a tour in Moscow. He was subsequently offered the position of Chief Conductor of this orchestra and Professor of Music at the music conservatory there. Minsk is near the border of Poland and far away from the intense cultural activity of cities like Leningrad and Moscow. World War II began while Musin was working in Minsk, and he and his wife and son were forced to flee when the city started being bombed. They traveled by foot to Voronezh, dodging German attacks. Musin's colleagues at the Leningrad conservatory managed to track him down by telegram and requested that he resume his duties at the conservatory, which had been evacuated to Tashkent, the capital of one of the Asian Republics of the USSR. Musin joined his colleagues there until the end of the war. Once the war was over and Musin had finally returned to Leningrad, he realized, "I decided that I would have to live without the Great Hall of the Philharmonic and concentrate on my teaching." (*Lessons of Life*) Musin served on the faculty at the conservatory until his death in 1999 at the age of 95.

In addition to teaching, Musin guest conducted many orchestras of the former Soviet Union and conducted occasional concerts of the Leningrad Philharmonic, sometimes on very short notice; however, he was never appointed to a major Russian orchestra. Many people have speculated about why he never held such a position. Some suggest that it was because of anti-Semitism; others suggest it was due to rivalry with Mravinsky and perhaps other conductors; still others point out that he was a humble, gentle man by nature and simply did not participate in the sometimes-brutal politics that often accompany a major career on the podium. That Musin turned his energies to the art of teaching was indeed a great gift to many of the twentieth century's most gifted conductors.

### MUSIN'S CAREER AS A PEDAGOGUE

Musin played a major role in the development of conducting as a true profession with a thorough method and system for learning. He wrote two treatises on the art of conducting – *The Technique of Conducting* (1967) and *The Education of a Conductor* (1987). His writings, which to date appear only in the original Russian, include exercises, diagrams, symphonic and operatic extracts, and in-depth analyses of the conductor's movements and gestures. His focus was always on non-verbal communication – how to **show**, not tell, the orchestra what and how to play. His ideas on technique teach the conductor how to create different kinds of articulations, phrasing, dynamics, tempi, color, musical character, left and right hand independence, etc.; however, he was steadfast in his belief that technique is always at the service of the music.

Musin said that the art of conducting lay in "making music visible with your hands." (*New York Times*, B7). His approach requires a physical relationship with the music as though one were sculpting sound. He often told his students to create an event, evoke an emotional state of mind. Over the years, Musin drew upon some of the ideas of the legendary founder of the "Method Acting" technique, Constantin Stanislavski, whose artistic ideas emphasized emotional truth and inner motivation. In his classic book, *An Actor*

*Prepares*, Stanislavsky wrote “An actor is under the obligation to live his part inwardly, and then to give his experience an external embodiment... That is why an actor... is obliged to work... both on his inner equipment, which created the life of the part, and also on his outer physical apparatus, which should reproduce the results of the creative work of his emotions with precision.” (7) (Stanislavski, pp. 15, 16).

Similarly, Musin taught his students to develop gestures that emerge from the emotional nature of the music. “You have to feel the music, you have to express its character and its emotion,” he said, “People say, ‘if you want to know about technique, go to Musin, he teaches technique.’ I do not. I teach the technique within the music.” (*St. Petersburg Times*, p. 12) According to Musin, conducting requires one to “pick up” the sound and lead the sound from the first note to the last in a piece of music, similar to Stanislavsky’s concept of the “unbroken line.” It’s about line, shape, phrasing, and defining the inherent architecture of the music. His students worked with and without a baton in order to create a broad range of nuance and expressiveness. His concepts are direct and seemingly simple, yet as with any art form, it takes years of dedication to develop the skills necessary to realize his ideas.

In an interview with Evans Mirages, Semyon Bychkov described Musin’s approach.

He paid attention to everything, from your posture to the way your arms moved and how your eyes looked. But the primary concern was the expression itself. First he would challenge someone’s musical idea. Often, the way he saw it, there would be no musical idea. So it would have to be formed. For example, where does this phrase go? What is its central point? Then he would demonstrate it. There was a constant juxtaposition, as Musin always encourages his students to search for comparisons. For example, what happens if you do it this way, and what happens if you do it another way? Which is more convincing? He would consider several different ways of expressing things. The method of comparison was the most vivid one, because the problem that every conductor faces is: how do you actually develop if you have no one to conduct? Essentially you are alone with your

score. To commit it to heart, to send it through your mind, isn’t actually enough. So, how does one do it? Musin would demonstrate various physical possibilities, explaining what each one would give in terms of expression itself. So the two dimensions were always connected: the expression and the way to achieve it... It was fascinating for everybody to observe how Musin dealt with (these) two subjects: firstly, the music itself – its expression; secondly, how to translate this expression through physical application of a conductor’s arms, body, eyes, and mind. This is of course something that transcends the purely physical aspect of conducting. (Bychkov Interview)

Musin held most of his classes in Room 27 on the third floor of the conservatory. A typical class would begin with Musin greeting each of his students with a handshake. The tradition at the St. Petersburg Conservatory is that of a masterclass in which all of his students, as well as interested visitors, would be present at all lessons. Pianists would be seated at the two baby-grand pianos in the room and the class would begin as the first student took the podium. The exceptional pianists were trained to respond strictly to what and how the students were conducting. The students also had regular lessons and rehearsals with the St. Petersburg Conservatory Orchestra, which was established specifically for the training of young conductors. This tradition of teaching continues at the conservatory today, and several of his former students are on the faculty there.

Although Musin always clearly articulated his ideas, he never taught in a dogmatic fashion. He demanded that students make music in their own ways. This is clearly evident in the work of some of his best-known former pupils. Musin said, “Temirkanov and Gergiev are both very good conductors, and they are completely different. I should tell you that my students are all different, but all of them carry my stamp because I teach them to deeply understand the emotional content of the music they conduct and be able to express it with their hands. This is done by each one in accordance with his individuality... both are wonderful conductors and very typical of the great Russian conductors who bring temperament and imagination to music.” (*The Sun*, p. 4E).

The acclaimed music journalist, John Ardoin, recently published the book, *Valery Gergiev and the Kirov: A Story of Survival*, which takes an intimate look at the Mariinsky (Kirov) Theater and the great artists who work there. In an interview with Gergiev regarding his musical training, Gergiev, said that Musin “was one of the greatest teachers of the century.” All his obituaries said this when he died in 1999. He made the Leningrad Conservatory one of the world’s centers of music. Although Shostakovich taught there, and it had many important piano and string teachers, none of them so consistently produced fine students, as did Musin, from the late 1920s until his death.

He had great wisdom. He was a living history, a brilliant narrator of important events in Russian music and in the musical life of Leningrad. He described for us, for example, the premiere of *The Love of Three Oranges* at the Kirov, and he told us why Prokofiev made changes in the orchestration of *Romeo and Juliet* when it was first played at the Kirov. Musin could speak of these things with authority because he was there. I never saw Otto Klemperer or Bruno Walter conduct, but Musin did. He attended their rehearsals with the Leningrad Philharmonic and heard Walter do *Queen of Spades* at the Kirov and Klemperer [do] *Carmen*. And he talked to them about tempos, rehearsal techniques, the German traditions of conducting, and he passed all of this along to us. He made me feel as if I had heard and talked with them as well.

Musin’s career as a conductor was never a big one like Mravinsky’s because he had no interest in communist politics and wouldn’t play the game. He also openly criticized the way Mravinsky made music. They didn’t like each other, and Mravinsky kept him from conducting the Leningrad Philharmonic. But then Mravinsky did not like many other conductors. He was a great musician, but he was a dictator, a man of implacable will. It was the same with all strong men in the Stalin era. (Ardoin, pp. 21, 22).

Alexander Polishchuk, who was a student of Musin in the 1980s and is now a Professor of Conducting at the St. Petersburg Conservatory of Music, Chief Conductor of the Novosibirsk Chamber Orchestra, and Principal Guest Conductor of the Novosibirsk Philharmonic Orchestra, recalled his first experience with the

great mentor. Musin had been invited to conduct the Kiev Philharmonic at the invitation of its Artistic Director, Fedov Glushchenkom, one of his former students. Polishchuk remembers observing Musin as he rehearsed the second movement of Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 4. He recalled how Musin’s gestures and expression had such a powerful impact on the music. Polishchuk was struck by Musin’s uncanny ability to evoke from the orchestra the subtlest nuances of articulation, color, and shading, communicating with the orchestra so clearly through his gestures. “It was like hearing this music for the first time,” he said. (Polishchuk Interview)

Musin could teach any music, any composer. His former students describe both his teaching and his conducting as clear, intimate, sincere, and emotionally powerful. Musin was specific about what he sought in prospective students. “I look for someone who is truly a musician inside, who is able to transfer inner feelings and tensions to an orchestra through art and hands. It’s simple.” (*European Magazine*, p. 13) In speaking about some of his former pupils, Musin said, “What impresses you now with these conductors is what we have been continuing in Russia throughout this century. Basically it is emotion. The music is very deep in performance; there is...heart in it. That is the essence of music.” (*European Magazine*, p. 13)

When I visited Musin’s apartment to interview his son, Edward Musin, shortly after his death in 1999, I noticed many original paintings hanging on the walls. When I asked about the paintings, Musin’s son told me that his father was always engaged in creative process whether it was jotting down ideas that would help one of his students or painting, which is something he continued to do throughout his life. He was always seeking new ideas, developing analogies to real life, and learning from other art forms. He loved music and he brought his whole life to music. (Interview with E. Musin)

By nature, Musin was a gentle, reserved man of great humor, who was very helpful and accessible to his students, even providing quiet financial sup-

port to some particularly gifted young conductors. However, he had only the highest expectations of those who studied with him. Robert Trory, a former violinist with the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House in London and former Musin student, said “He knows how and why conducting works, and teaches it with such humanity and humor and forcefulness. The better the talent you have, the harder he is on you. He won’t let you get away with anything. He makes the best of the best and does it with such integrity for the music.” (*European Magazine*, p. 13) Musin had the same high expectations when he was standing on the podium. As a conductor, he was uncompromising and demanding, always working with a great sense of responsibility to the composer – to the music.

## LATER YEARS

Although Musin had guest conducted in many cities of the former Soviet Union, years went by before he conducted in his own city of St. Petersburg once again. In 1994, Temirkanov invited Musin to conduct the St. Petersburg Philharmonic to honor the great pedagogue and mentor on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday. Both the orchestra members and audience were familiar with his exceptional students; however, it had been forty-two years since Musin, himself, stood on the podium before this orchestra. People who were present at this concert describe the response of the orchestra and audience as nothing short of ecstatic!

Musin’s first engagement as a guest conductor in the West came in February of 1996 when, at the age of ninety-two, he conducted the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London. Polishchuk traveled to London with Musin and described the experience as “thrilling.” At this concert, Musin conducted Mozart’s *Symphony No. 40*, Prokofiev’s *Symphony No. 1*, and Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Capriccio Espanol*. He also conducted several encores as demanded by the audience, which gave him a fifteen-minute standing ovation. During the final years of his life, Musin continued to travel in Europe, Japan, and Israel giving masterclasses and

conducting concerts to critical acclaim.

Even in his later years, Musin’s approach to life and to music was like that of a young man. His most recent students remember the powerful demonstrations he would give on the classroom podium through the last lessons he gave just days before his death. These young conductors described these demonstrations as combining the wisdom and experience of a ninety-five-year-old with the exuberant vigor and strength of a twenty-five-year-old. One student spoke of the incredible energy he gave his students. He said that when Musin was walking to the conservatory, he seemed to carry himself like an elderly man; however, after a day of teaching, he would take on a youthful, spirited step on his way home! Musin loved young people. He loved his students.

Musin lived near the conservatory in an apartment complex that had been designed specifically to house artists from the Mariinsky (Kirov) Theater and the Music Conservatory. The study in his apartment clearly reflected his extraordinary life in music. It was filled with scores, books, and photos of his students, as well as many of his own paintings. It was the place where he spent time with his family as well as his students whom he treated like family.

In addition to his two treatises on the art of conducting, Musin also wrote a book of memoirs, *Lessons of Life*. Music was his life. He continued to teach at the conservatory until just three days before he died, and his students revered him. In his memoir, he wrote, “I conduct at the Kirov through the hands of my pupils.” (*The Sun*, p. 13). In 1997 he said, “I feel some sort of satisfaction that I’ve made some contribution to the art of conducting, especially in classroom education. I’ve been working and thinking about it all the time.” (*The Sun*, 4E).

Musin’s influence is still profoundly felt by those with whom he worked. The knowledge and wisdom that he imparted to his students during his long lifetime of teaching continues to have an impact on music making around the world.

Although he was brilliant at articulating his depth of musical understanding and his clear ideas regarding technical issues, his work went far beyond words, as does the art of conducting. Polishchuk sums this up saying, "Musin taught a style of understanding...and he made music from his soul." (Polishchuk Interview) The music does, indeed, continue through the hands of his students.

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