

PASSION AND SURVIVAL

The Russian bassist Rodion Azarkhin, who died earlier this year, left a great legacy for players everywhere.

DONOVAN STOKES tells his story

The birth of Rodion Mikhailevich Azarkhin on 22 March 1931 in Kharkov, Ukraine was a happy day for his Russian Parents, Mikail and Alexandra Azarkhin. Alexandra, a singer trained at the St Petersburg Conservatoire, and Mikail were now the proud parents of a young boy and they looked forward to a life of promise for their family as Mikhail held a solid job as a government employee. A series of unexpected disasters, however, soon struck the family. In 1935 Mikhail Azarkhin was assassinated during Stalin's 'Great Purge' under suspicion of belonging to an anti-communist group. Alexandra

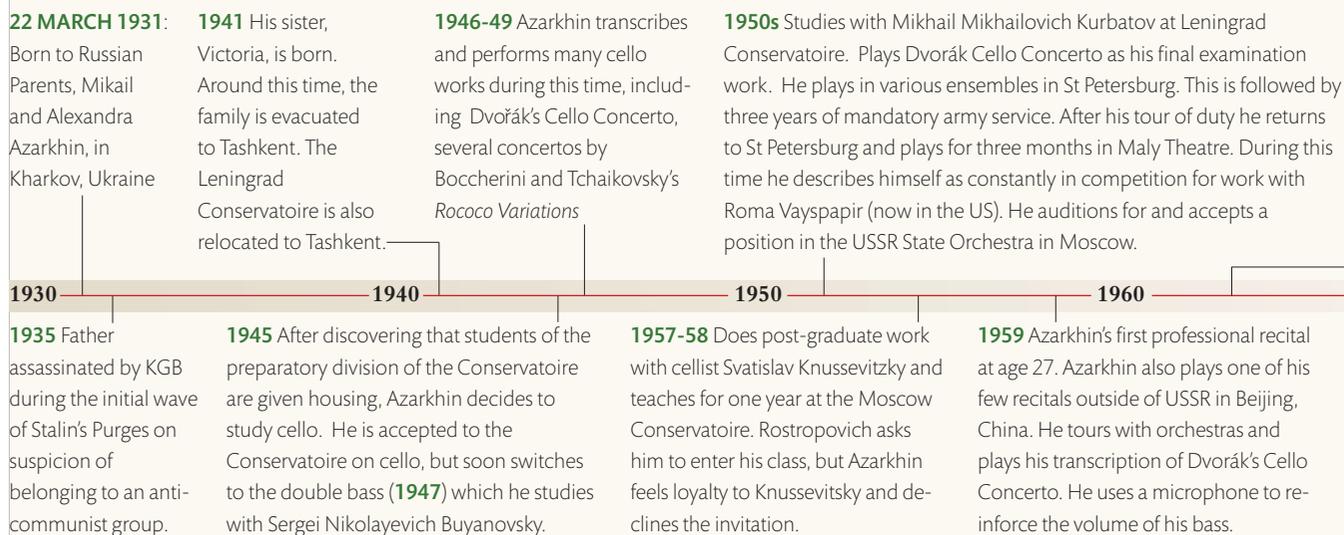
was also imprisoned for six months during the course of the 'investigation'. The dust had hardly settled from this event when in 1941 the Siege of Leningrad began and young Rodion (aged 10), his mother, and younger sister Victoria evacuated to Tashkent, then part of the USSR and now the capital of Uzbekistan.

Life in Tashkent was arduous for the small family. The Azarkhins were soon homeless and living in an outdoor cinema. They watched movies during the day and huddled in the projection booth, which had a roof, at night. Relief was nowhere in sight. Eventually another family took them in to live in their home, but the promise of earlier days had been long forgotten.

As fate would have it however, a portion of the Leningrad (now St Petersburg) Conservatoire had also relocated to Tashkent in the early 1940s. Although Azarkhin's mother had been a trained singer, Rodion had no musical experience aside from listening to the radio and music at the cinema. This mattered little to him after he discovered that students at the preparatory division of the Conservatoire were given free housing. Azarkhin immediately became resolved to enter the Conservatoire and provide housing for himself, and relief for his mother and sister. He soon obtained a cello and studied with great fervour. In 1945, at the age of 14, he was accepted into the Conservatoire.

After only a year, however, the professors determined that he was 'too old' to be just starting the cello and informed him that, if he wished to remain at the Conservatoire and continue to receive housing, he must switch to bass. Reluctantly he did. Refusal would have meant dire circumstances for him and his family.

RODION AZARKHIN TIMELINE



For some of us the choice to pursue music, and the double bass, is made from many available options. Others of us seem to be born with a love for the sound of the bass which draws us in. Still others seem to just 'fall into it' over time. For Azarkhin, it was a life raft for a young boy in a sea of poverty and despair. The double bass was not only a chance for a better life for himself in the future, but it provided very real, and immediate, financial relief to his family. As a result, Rodion's initial reluctance to give up the study of cello quickly subsided and he attacked the double bass with a fury that few of us can fathom.

Being compelled to switch to the double bass was a defining moment for Azarkhin.

From that moment on, and until the end of his career, he would attack the instrument with a fury. For the rest of his musical life he would approach it as if his very existence depended upon it, which, in his early days, it did in a very direct way. While talent and education always play a part in a musician's success, Azarkhin's triumphs were also the product of his passion, will and persistence.

At the Conservatoire, he was extremely competitive. Whatever the other bassists did, he did more: if he was assigned one hour of scale study, he would do two. For every assignment there was much more at stake than a juried performance or audition, there was survival and family

dignity to consider as well. Simply put, in Azarkhin's mind he had to be the best.

He first studied with Sergei Nikolayevich Buyanovsky and later Mikhail Mikhailovich Kurbatov, whose former students include Roma Vayspapir, Misha Krutz and countless other professionals. All of the bass students attended double bass masterclasses, but Azarkhin also attended the weekly classes of the cellist Georgy Stepanovitch Mikhalev. He also studied with the celebrated cellist Svyatoslav Knushevitsky in 1957-58 at the Moscow Conservatoire. A loyal student, when Rostropovich asked Azarkhin to join his class there, he declined, preferring to continue with Knushevitsky. His access to



ALL PHOTOS: TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

1961 Azarkhin marries his first wife Elena (now Elena Alexandrova).

1966 August 2 His daughter Natasha is born. Also in 1966 he transcribes Sarasate's *Ziguenerweisen*.

1976 (circa) Azarkhin begins adding metal weights and a 'clarinet'-style key to his bow.

1978 Azarkhin's book *Kontrabass* is published.

1982 Interviewed by Lev Ginsberg for his *The way they play* series. He appears in Volume 12 of the series.

1991 Collapse of Soviet Union. Azarkhin plays a last-minute recital at ISB Mittenwald Convention

1989 Takes early retirement from State Orchestra and moves to St Petersburg to care for his mother..

1999 Azarkhin's mother dies. Azarkhin moves to Moscow with no plans to continue in music. Three large boxes of recordings and numerous manuscripts are given to Donovan Stokes for archival purposes.

1970

1974 Soviet publication of *Kontrabass: History and Method*. Azarkhin's Article, 'Modern solo playing on the bass' is included in the compilation.

1980

1975 Columbia Records releases Rodion Azarkhin: *Incredible Virtuoso Performances on the Double-Bass* in the US.

1983 After his first marriage dissolves, Azarkhin takes a second, common law, wife, Uffa.

1990

1986 His granddaughter Katya is born.

1988 Last official public solo recital.

2000

2005 Due to declining health, Azarkhin enters a full-time care facility in Moscow.

2007 March 26 Azarkhin dies of a stroke in Moscow, Russia at the age of 76.

The double bass was not only a chance of a better life for Azarkhin, it provided very real, and immediate, financial relief to his family

◀ such excellent professors, combined with his exceptional drive, caused his technique to progress at breakneck pace. His final graduation work from the Leningrad Conservatoire was the Dvořák Cello Concerto, a work that was the focal point of an extensive concerto tour in 1959.

His fascination with the cello repertoire (and later that of the violin) was also a pivotal factor in the development of his instrumental technique and musicality. When referring to the transcription of violin and cello works he told me in an interview: 'I used all five fingers in all parts of the bass, and would use any tuning that the music demanded. I would do whatever the music demanded, the music always comes first.'

After his conservatoire days, the beginning of his professional career encompassed the wide variety of venues typical of many young, aspiring musicians. Living in St Petersburg, Azarkhin played in a cinema orchestra, a jazz combo in the Hotel Astoria, Stage Radio Orchestra and the Philharmonia. This multifaceted musical life was interrupted by three years of mandatory army service. After his tour of duty for three months in the Maly Theater in St Petersburg, before he accepted a position in the USSR State Orchestra in Moscow. Azarkhin continued with this orchestra, for the bulk of his career as principal bass, until his retirement in 1990.

In 1959 he began giving annual solo recitals professionally. These quickly became regular broadcasts on Radio Moscow. As a soloist, Azarkhin was fearless in his transcriptions and musical interpretation. His 1975 recording of Sarasate's *Zigeunerweisen* was eye opening for players and the general public. His daring



performance set a new standard in virtuosic playing. As a result of Azarkhin's pioneering transcription, *Zigeunerweisen* has become part of the standard repertoire for classical double bass virtuosos. Recordings by Edgar Meyer, Gerd Reinke, Joel Quarrington, and DaXun Zhang come to mind.

With transcriptions such as the Chaconne from Bach's Partita no.2, (BWV1004), Azarkhin shocked many in the musical community. What some saw as heresy, others saw as prophetic. In the case

of the Chaconne, it turned out to be visionary, and today, more than 30 years later, there are a number of bassists, including Diana Gannett and Frederick Charlton, who regularly perform Bach partitas. Once again Azarkhin pushed the boundaries of our instrument and showed us that our limitations were usually self-imposed and false.

Azarkhin is known for attaching metal weights – an additional 210 grams – to his bow and using a 'clarinet'-style key on the frog to aid with the execution of accents. ▶



◀ He began experimenting with these modifications as early as the 1970s. Although his key mechanism never took hold with other bassists, there are present-day exponents of a heavier-than-standard bow (usually 230–260 grams) worldwide. The use of denser woods, such as ironwood, has helped to refine the practical application of the concept, which no longer requires the addition of metal to the bow. Some of the most noted advocates of a ‘heavy bow’ are followers of the New Dutch School, based upon the work of Hans Roelofsen and Silvio Dalla Torre.

Azarkhin was more than simply a virtuoso bassist, however, and the 1970s saw him delve into bass pedagogy and history. The 1974 Soviet publication of *Kontrabass: History and Method* included Azarkhin’s article: ‘Modern solo playing on the bass’ and 1978 saw the publication of his own book *Kontrabass*.

Kontrabass addresses a wide range of topics related to the double bass, including its construction, historical development, available repertoire, pedagogical issues, key historical figures, and much more. In the various pedagogical passages of the book, Azarkhin advises the use of a bent endpin, the use of all five left-hand fingers throughout the range of the instrument and the addition of weight to the standard bow. *Kontrabass* is particularly valuable for its documentation of the Russian and Soviet lineage of bassists, up to 1978, and was the first publication to attempt any such compilation of names. Although not a work of serious scholarly rigour by today’s standards, *Kontrabass* marks an important historical point in Russian-language literature on the double bass just as the three volumes by Raymond Elgar mark a milestone in English language writings on the subject.

Azarkhin retired from the USSR State Orchestra in 1989 and soon after, his quality of life sharply declined. He had retired from the orchestra so that he could move from Moscow to St Petersburg and care for his ailing mother, who had been paralyzed from the neck down due to a series of strokes. In 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed, and the devaluation of the rouble soon followed, causing Azarkhin to again be faced with a life of poverty. His apartment in Moscow, which he had attempted to rent for extra income, became the target of thieves. As a result of the theft Rodion lost everything of value, including his double bass. Also in the early ‘90s Azarkhin’s Marfan Syndrome, a condition that affects the body’s connective tissue, began to take its toll. His extraordinarily large hands, characteristic of the Syndrome, had provided some advantages when it came to playing the double bass, but the long term effects outweighed any perceived benefits. His last years were to be as cold and hard as his early ones.

After the death of his mother in 1999 Azarkhin lived simply and in 2005, due to his declining health, he entered a full-time care facility in Moscow. He ultimately succumbed to a stroke in Moscow on 26 March 2007, at the age of 76. His daughter Natasha and granddaughter Katya survive him.

Azarkhin saw the potential of the double bass as boundless, and constantly pushed himself to new levels of technical and musical achievement. By doing so he ‘raised the bar’ for the rest of us. He was a multifaceted performer, arranger, composer, innovator, historian, chronicler and pedagogue. He was a musician driven by a survivalist passion that had been

instilled in his youth and which serves as a model for every musician.

As with all artists, Azarkhin’s style cannot please everyone – faults can be found in every musician. However, as Azarkhin himself stated when speaking of the Russian bassist Iosif Gertovich ‘We don’t value great musicians for their shortcomings, but for all the positive things they do. Everything new and fresh they brought to the instrument is what is to be valued from these musicians.’ Azarkhin brought as much new and fresh to the double bass as any musician before him and the impact of his work is evident worldwide. He constantly strived to reach greater and greater heights, and he never allowed himself to grow complacent. We, as bassists, are fortunate to be able to lay claim to his legacy. ■

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

ART OF RODION AZARKHIN VOL. 2

Melodiya, MEL CD 10 00921
Release date: 2005 (includes re-release of material from Melodiya M-33593/ Columbia Masterworks (U.S.))

ART OF RODION AZARKHIN VOL. 1

Melodiya, MEL CD 10 00883
Release Date: 2004 (re-release of Melodiya 33 C10-06417-18)

RODION AZARKHIN PLAYS HIS FAVORITES/ RODION AZARKHIN: INCREDIBLE VIRTUOSO

PERFORMANCES ON THE DOUBLE-BASS (U.S. TITLE)
Melodiya M-33593/ Columbia Masterworks M33593 (U.S.)
Release Date: 1975 (U.S.)

ANDREI ESHPAI EDITION VOL. 2/ MUSIC OF ANDREI ESHPAI 2

Albany Records, Albany Troy 341
Release Date: 1999 (re-release)
Recording Date: 1974

THE YUDINA LEGACY VOLUME XXXIII [HINDEMITH SONATA]

Performers: Rodion Azarkhin, Maria Yudina, and Vitali Buianovsky, Melodiya
Original Release date: 1966

BEST OF RODION AZARKHIN

Melodia VIC9041-2 [LP]