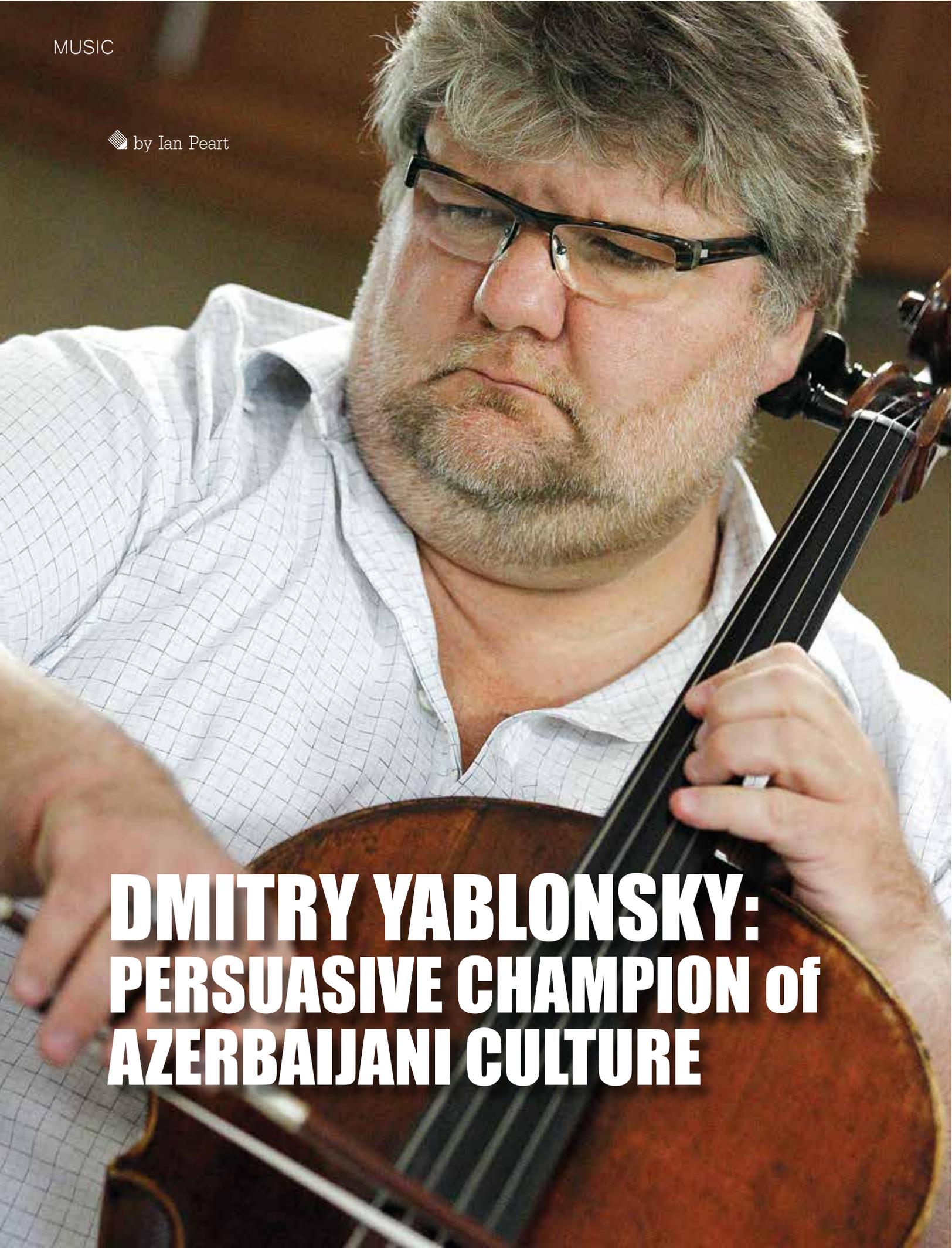


MUSIC

 by Ian Peart



**DMITRY YABLONSKY:
PERSUASIVE CHAMPION of
AZERBAIJANI CULTURE**

Look through back issues of *Visions* and the name Dmitry Yablonsky crops up more than once. So what is a Moscow-born, Juilliard-educated, world-renowned cellist and conductor doing in a journal about Azerbaijan? Well, the CD review that follows this interview is part of the answer, as are the Qabala International Music Festival and Beltmann Pianos.

The country weaves its magic over a significant number of visitors who find themselves unable to break the spell. Dmitry is by no means a passive recipient of the charm, though; it is fair to say that he has more than fully returned the favours bestowed on him.

As co-founder and co-artistic director of surely one of the world's most enjoyable festivals, he has cast his own magic over five summers of music in Qabala.

Before that, he came up with an idea that feeds body and soul in that town overlooked by the majestic Caucasus. The Beltmann piano factory commenced production in 2009 with Dmitry as general director. Now that the factory is up and running, and sales outlets are established in Baku and Germany, musical performances make a greater claim on his schedule. He still harbours ideas, however, of forging links with the Bayreuth-based Steingraeber company.

RECORDING

Performing music is at the heart of our conversation as we sit under a chilly February sun in Maiden Tower's shadow, sipping a glass or three of warming tea.

Dmitry is understandably pleased to have copies of his latest CD recording – of Qara Qarayev's *Seven Beauties* and *Path of Thunder* suites (note that Kara Karayev is a transliteration of the Russian form of his name). This is the fourth album of Azerbaijani music that he has recorded for the Naxos label; it was preceded by *Azerbaijani Piano Concertos* (also with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under his baton), Fikret Amirov's *Shur* and Qarayev's *Third Symphony* (these last two featuring the Russian Philharmonic Orchestra).

Dmitry talks energetically of extending this catalogue up to 20 albums and the possibility of a series of concerts to ensure that the Qarayevs, Amirovs, Hajibeyovs, Quliyevs and others make their way onto the world's repertoires and playlists. The Qabala Festival has already introduced top orchestras to the country and its music, with the Royal Phil-

I feel hurt, I take it personally, when I see that Azerbaijan is known only for its fantastic produce – Dmitry Yablonsky

harmonic appearing twice and playing Azerbaijani concert works in London. Dmitry is also engaged on a project sponsored by The European Azerbaijan Society to create digital scores of the great classical works, to make them easily accessible to orchestras wanting to add Azerbaijani strings to their bows.

It is a surprise for those of us who come across these works for the first time that they are not already well-known and played. On the most basic level, Qarayev's waltz from *Seven Beauties* has such a catchy theme that it has almost become a cliché in the former Soviet area, but not to western ears. For our Russian Azerbaijani patriot, there are two explanations.

He [Qarayev – ed.] was probably a nice man; he lived in Baku, was loved by his students and he kept to himself. Also, the country could do more to promote their culture.

UNAPPRECIATED

Previous visits to his office in the Beltmann factory had made clear that Dmitry's love of the culture extended beyond music, as I walked across a dozen carpets to reach his desk. But there is frustration that their creators too are still largely unknown and unappreciated:

I feel hurt, I take it personally, when I see that Azerbaijan is known only for its fantastic produce. I feel hurt that these carpets are called Caucasus carpets. Where is that? These are Azerbaijani carpets! It's a huge misunderstanding.

Of course, there are many calls on public funds, many political priorities, and the almost overwhelming weight of the problems consequent to the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh. The years of Russian and Soviet cultural domination may also have led Azerbaijanis to take their own culture for granted, so its promotion has been a late starter. Hence the impatience of foreigners who are amazed to find such gems tucked away unheeded at the back of a drawer – and the desire to yell, *Hey, just look at this!*



Dmitry Yablonsky with composer and pianist Farhad Badalbeyli, rector of the Baku Music Academy



Discussing music and Azerbaijan at the foot of the Maiden Tower

CREATIVE PARTNERSHIP

He muses again, on the possibility of a combined art and music event, then: *Baku is like my second birthplace...*

And this born-again Azerbaijani owes that rebirth to the rector of Baku's Academy of Music, pianist and composer Farhad Badalbeyli, who first brought Dmitry and his pianist mother Oxana Yablonskaya to Azerbaijan on tour. A creative friendship developed and soon bore fruit:

He showed me the music of Qara Qarayev and I immediately made a CD – in 2007 (the Third Symphony mentioned above – ed.).

As joint artistic directors of the Qabala Festival and with joint concerts abroad, they continue their mission to spread the word, the scores and the sounds of Azerbaijani music.

FESTIVAL PIONEER

The festival brings top-notch classical musicians to broaden the local audience's experience and enthral them with accessible programmes (and all for free). A *mugham* evening is also now a fixture; certainly popular with Qabala people, it offers the international performers a chance to encounter the indigenous culture.

Two years ago, this exchange of experience moved to a new level when the Festival featured a piece commissioned from Russian composer Alexander Tchaikovsky. *Khajaly Requiem* produced probably the most moving moments of the Festival's five years, as Yuri Bashmet's *Moscow Soloists* orchestra played into the night, with Badalbeyli and Yablonsky on piano and cello and Sahib Pashazade contributing a plaintive tar.

Farhad Badalbeyli, rector of the Baku Music Academy, shows Dmitry Yablonsky around the Teze Pir Mosque



Still anxious to record the piece, Dmitry will, meanwhile, take it abroad as he conducts the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra through their 2015-16 tour.

Farhad Badalbeyli and Dmitry Yablonsky continue their mission to spread the word, the scores and the sounds of Azerbaijani music

As for this year's Qabala Festival, from 22 July to 1 August, he is

hoping to have a major orchestra from an exotic location, but details are yet to be confirmed.. Go to the gabalamusicfestival.com website to make sure you don't miss out.

Did I tell you I've become music director of the Kiev Soloists, a wonderful chamber orchestra?

And we wonder how long it will be before their repertoire too is expanded.

The teapot may be drained, but Dmitry Yablonsky's wellspring of ideas flows on; a ballet in Paris, or New York, a filmed musical tour of the country, TV, websites – anything to share the joy of the music he loves to make. We leave warmed by the tea, his genial enthusiasm, the anticipation of an evening with *Seven Beauties* and the promise of summer sounds in Qabala.

KARA KARAYEV

The Seven Beauties; The Path of Thunder – Ancient Accents Heard to Magical Effect

Review by Michael Quinn

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra / Dmitry Yablonsky
Catalogue number: Naxos 8.573122



With the centenary of his birth in 1918 moving ever closer, the music of Qara Qarayev (Kara Karayev) is beginning to reach a wider audience outside his native Azerbaijan, thanks, not least, to the persuasive championing of conductor Dmitry Yablonsky.

He has previously recorded Qarayev's *Third Symphony*, the symphonic poem *Leyla and Mejnun (Majnun)* and the suite derived from his score for Grigori Kozintsev's 1957 film adaptation of *Don Quixote*. Yablonsky – a co-artistic director of the Qabala International Music festival and a teacher at the Baku Academy of Music (amongst his other responsibilities mentioned in the article above) – turns his attention here to the ballet suites *The Seven Beauties* and *The Path of Thunder* in this fourth volume in the enterprising *Azerbaijani Composers* series on Naxos.

Born in 1918 in Baku – a city he eulogised as “an enormous, multi-voiced symphony” – Qarayev's musical education began with his accomplished amateur pianist mother, continued with the prominent Azerbaijani composer Uzeyir Hajibeyov and ended as a student of Shostakovich in Moscow. A prolific composer, he wrote nearly 110 works in virtually every form – operas, symphonies, chamber music, cantatas, instrumental pieces, music for theatre and film, and songs – his style is distinctively his own and makes expressive use of traditional Azerbaijani folk melodies and harmonies (drawing particularly on the improvisatory *mugham*). Those ancient accents are heard to often magical effect in the two ballet suites on this new disc.



Inspired by the 12th-century poet Nizami Ganjavi (whose poems also inspired *Leyla and Mejnun*), *The Seven Beauties* ballet suite was composed in 1949 and depicts the legend of Shah Bahram Gur and his seven beautiful wives who lived in seven ornately decorated pavilions. Four years later, Qarayev expanded the suite into a full-length score, from which this recording is taken.

It's a work characterised by vivacious colours, exotic harmonies, a sweeping sense of romance and an almost

Qara Qarayev's style is distinctively his own and makes expressive use of traditional Azerbaijani folk melodies and harmonies

palpable physicality perfectly attuned to the needs of ballet. Nizami's poem provides ample excuses, too, for Qarayev's eclectic compositional signature, each

of the seven beauties receiving their own musical portrait with appropriate hints of their ethnic origins.

Where 'The Indian Beauty' is depicted by a sensual solo flute accompanied by lilting percussion, 'The Slavonic Beauty' revels in a recognisably Russian folksong melody,

'The Maghrebian Beauty' a fiery bolero with crisp castanets and traditional sultry Spanish harmonies. 'The Most Beautiful of Beauties' boasts an achingly romantic grandeur, spot-lit by glistening harps, yearning clarinets and a sublime oboe melody.

Owing something to Prokofiev, the concluding 'Procession' is an energetic march that echoes the vigorous opening 'Waltz' and the spirited *scherzo* of 'The Dance of the Clowns'.

Yablonsky conjures all of these portraits and commentaries with painterly precision. The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra responds with nuanced attention to detail, displaying a real feel for the beauty of Qarayev's music.

Premiered in Leningrad in 1958 – the same year that Qarayev received the Stalin prize for *Leyla and Mejnun* – *The Path of Thunder* quickly established itself in the repertoire of the Kirov (now Mariinsky) Theatre and was awarded one of the Soviet Union's most prestigious accolades, the Lenin Prize, in 1967.

Dedicated to the memory of Prokofiev, it was inspired by a novel by the South African writer Peter Abrahams, which had been published nearly two decades earlier just as the *apartheid* system of racial segregation was introduced. It tells the story of a forbidden love between a mixed-race teacher and the daughter of an Afrikaner patriarch. Forced to elope to escape the prejudice that would keep them apart, the young lovers are eventually discovered and murdered.

The Path of Thunder is one of Qarayev's most accomplished works and draws upon what the composer described as "the characteristic intonations and rhythms of African folklore". With a more obvious debt to Khachaturian, those influences are discreetly employed throughout, the notable emphasis here on emotion and drama.

Those qualities find Qarayev producing one ravishing melody after another in his depiction of the plight of the ill-fated lovers, violin and cello personifying the luckless pair in 'Scene and Duet' as glowing strings forlornly herald a new day.

That brief moment of hope is echoed in the lilting 'Lullaby' before the murderous denouement of 'The Path of Thunder', a passage of tremendous drama shot through with menacing rhythms on piano, as flutes and strings lead a dissonant militant march that calls to mind Tchaikovsky at his darkest.

Taken together, these suites reveal Qarayev as a composer of eloquent and easily accessible music with Yablonsky driving the Royal Philharmonic into playing of utter conviction.

About the author: Michael Quinn is a music journalist contributing to publications in the UK, United States, Australia and Ireland. He has previously been deputy editor of Gramophone magazine and an associate editor with the-classicalreview.com.



Qara Qarayev's *Seven Beauties*, performed by the Azerbaijan State Opera and Ballet Theatre at the Silk Way Festival in Sheki, 2013