

Interview: Gil Shaham

The Israeli virtuoso violinist performs concerts with his sister, hires his wife to make records, and considers his Stradivarius a close relative

By Jessica Duchon, May 6, 2010



Gil Shaham set up his own record label after he was told there was no market for what he wanted to play

It is hard not to fall in love with Gil Shaham's violin playing. Whether he is giving recitals together with his sister, the pianist Orli Shaham, recording for his own CD label or exploring the violin concerto masterpieces from the 1930s - which form his chief project this season - generosity and warmth emanate from his tone.

This month, the 38-year-old virtuoso is visiting Britain to perform some of those 1930s violin concertos - including Samuel Barber's - with the Philharmonia Orchestra. Later in the summer he will play the Barber again, at the Proms. What exactly has drawn him so intensely to the music of these few troubled years?

"Really, it's an excuse for me to play some of my favourite pieces," says Shaham, speaking from his home in Manhattan.

"There is a striking confluence of concertos by great composers coincidentally written within just eight years, 1931 to 1939. It's a staggering list of names that reads like a "Who's Who" of composers - Stravinsky, Bartók, Prokofiev, Schoenberg, Berg, Britten, Walton, Barber, Szymanowski, Hindemith, Milhaud. And I'm leaving out many - Bloch, Hartmann and Korngold also wrote violin concertos within those eight years. These works are so different and so diverse that it seems astonishing they should all have come into being in the same brief period."

My sister and I avoided playing concerts together — we didn't want to look like Donny and Marie Osmond

The Philharmonia concerts will also feature the concerto by William Walton in a Royal Festival Hall performance on May 13. It will be dedicated to the memory of the composer's widow, Lady Susana Walton, who died earlier this year.

Barber's concerto, meanwhile, remains oddly neglected in concerts despite its beauty and vitality; this concert, and the Prom in August, will be a welcome chance for audiences to experience it.

"I remember Hugh Wolff [who's conducting the Walton concerto during the tour] talking about the final movement of the Barber," says Shaham. "He remarked that when you listen to it you really hear urban America at the time - the skyscrapers being erected, the jazz age, the traffic noise. It also strikes me that the slow movement suggests the sound of rural America, the lament of the dust-bowl farmer, in that beautiful oboe solo."

Shaham's 1930s concertos project is the latest in a string of exploratory and enterprising endeavours. In 2004 he founded his own record label, Canary Classics, well before such a route onto disc had become as widespread as it is today. Previously he had been signed to Deutsche Grammophon, for whom his recordings included an exquisite account of the Barber and Korngold concertos. But when he told the company about his desire to record sonatas and chamber music by Gabriel Fauré, the response was not as he had hoped.

"They said that there would be no market for it," he says, "so they couldn't possibly do it. We decided to do it anyway and we put it on Canary as our first release. We were successful, we made enough profit to make our next recording - and we reached the charts with it as well. It's a wonderful time to be a musician now. Technology has really set us free."

Forthcoming releases on Canary Classics also include a recording by Shaham's wife, the Australian violinist Adele Anthony. "It's a small family business," Shaham says, smiling.

The duo with his sister, who is five years his junior, keeps it all in the family, too. "Orli and I used to play together at home when we were kids, but we didn't give concerts together until we were in our twenties. We avoided that for a long time because we were afraid it would look a bit too much like Donny and Marie Osmond! But finally we tried - and we loved it."

Shaham was born in the US, but from the age of two spent his early years in Israel - his parents, both scientists, had been in the US to study for doctorates. He started playing the violin at seven, after overcoming some initial resistance from his mother. "She was dead

against it," he says. "She used to say that little kids playing the violin made her cringe, as it sounded like fingernails on the blackboard. So they gave me 'time to think about it'. We went back to America for a short sabbatical and I was still asking when we came back, so that was when I started."

At the age of 10 he made his concerto debut with the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra and soon afterwards with the Israel Philharmonic. After he won the prestigious Claremont Competition in 1982, the family moved to New York, where he was able to pursue his studies with Jens Ellerman, Dorothy DeLay and Hyo Kung, with whose orchestra, the Sejong Soloists, he is now planning to record concertos by Haydn, plus the Mendelssohn Octet, for Canary Classics.

His big break came when he was 17. Itzhak Perlman had had to withdraw from some concerts with the London Symphony Orchestra and Shaham was invited to replace him at extremely short notice. He was at school at the time. "I remember being on the phone and thinking it over for about a millisecond. It was a choice of going back into the English class or heading for the airport," he says.

The airport won, of course - he flew to London by Concorde and went straight into the first rehearsal with conductor Michael Tilson Thomas. The concerts were so successful that he found his life transformed. "Before that, I had four or five concerts lined up. Afterwards, it was 50-60." He has never looked back. Today, though, he restricts his concerts to no more than 50 a year - he and Adele have two small children, Elijah and Ella Mei, and time with the family is a major priority.

And there is one more vital "family member" - Shaham's violin, the "Countess Polignac" Stradivarius, of which he has been the proud owner for about 20 years. It was made in 1699, and its history is romantic. "The Countess Polignac was an extremely influential patron of the arts at the French court of Louis XIV," Shaham recounts, "and she was also very much involved in Venetian musical life. She was responsible for many of the commissions of Vivaldi and was the first to bring The Four Seasons out of Italy to Paris.

"I'd like to think my violin might have had something to do with that."

Details of Gil Shaham's UK performances are at www.canaryclassics.com