

Interview: Nikolaj Znaider

The Danish-born musician on his move into conducting, and how his Jewishness shapes his view of performing

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Znaider with his violin, previously played by the great Fritz Kreisler

Some musicians are content to tour the globe repeatedly performing the same handful of concertos. And then there is Nikolaj Znaider.

The 35-year-old, Danish-born violinist has everything a top international soloist could desire - phenomenal technique, fine-honed musicality, good looks, charisma and a Guarneri del Gesù violin that once belonged to the great Fritz Kreisler..

Znaider's deep-thinking performances and gorgeous violin tone are a compelling combination, but apparently they are not enough to keep him satisfied, for he is gradually turning himself into a conductor. The influence of his two mentors in that field is obvious: his hair is beginning to resemble the mane of Sir Colin Davis, while his accent is an intriguing hybrid that bears some similarity to Daniel Barenboim's.

I caught up with Znaider in Manchester, where he was appearing with the Halle Orchestra. He immediately launched into an explanation of his quest for musical perfection.

I want to be a real conductor, I want to do it right

"I want to reach the point where the goal is the moment itself," he says, "the joy of being on stage, making music. I think Saul Bellow said that Mozart reminds us something should be done easily or not at all. We should be doing this effortlessly and without any strategic aim to achieve something else."

Znaider was born in Copenhagen to Polish-Jewish parents in 1975. His father had originally emigrated to Israel from Poland, and his mother's family had settled in Denmark before World War II. "In Denmark, the Jewish community is very small, so maintaining a Jewish identity can be a struggle," he says. "Our parents used to get together with other Jewish families to celebrate the holidays; they made sure it was always an important part of our life."

"Being Jewish is part of my identity, though I'm not ultra-religious. What I do care about very much is the human experience. I'm trying to make sense of this, but I'm not having much luck!

"I've seen passages in scripture that avoid giving answers and instead give us the choice to make out of life what we want. In other words, the joy is a reward in itself - the God-given ability to enjoy the fruits of our toils. That's very much in tune with what I think about life."

Learning, curiosity and joy all feed Znaider's music-making, but there is still room for a bit of old-fashioned good luck. In 2006 he was trying out different violins and had virtually decided on a particular Stradivarius when a dealer in Vienna introduced him to the Guarneri del Gesù. It was not quite love at first sight, although Znaider was struck by the violin's beauty and the size of its sound. But after a few months he borrowed it to try again. "After a few days it just opened up," he recalls. "I was soon completely in love with this fiddle, and I still am. Now I can't imagine changing it. It's like finding my voice." The Royal Danish Theatre owns the instrument and loans it to him.

It was not until the end of 2007 that a friend's research revealed that this must have been the violin Kreisler used for the premiere of the Elgar Concerto in 1910. Znaider already had plans to record the work and soon found that "the concerto and the violin felt like a match made in heaven. Then I realised I should make something special out of the centenary anniversary, as I had Kreisler's same violin." A major commemorative Elgar tour has taken up much of Znaider's year.

Physically and artistically, though, Znaider is very different from his eminent forerunner.

"The violin fitted Kreisler, but that didn't mean it would fit me," he says. "He was a very elegant player and not very physical, and yet this is one of the most powerful violins I've ever encountered: extremely strong, yet with tremendous beauty and sweetness of sound. Kreisler once wrote that he would never find another violin as beautiful as this one, and I see exactly what he means."

Given the rapture with which he plays the concerto on this astonishing instrument, his fans may be anxious that he might leave the violin behind in favour of conducting. He insists, though, that his newer career strand will not interfere with his violin playing. Rather the opposite.

"I want to be a real conductor, not a conducting soloist," he says. "If I do it, I want to do it right and be able to conduct everything - operas, Mahler and Bruckner symphonies... But I don't want to stop playing. When I return to the violin after conducting, I must say, it's a relief - finally, everything I want to hear I can try to create myself, directly."

Next year he will be turning his attention to Bartók's Violin Concerto No 2, a challenging 20th-century masterpiece.

"Until now, either it escaped me or I escaped it," he jokes, "but somehow I haven't played it before and it's going to be very exciting."

Elgar's Violin Concerto in B minor played by Nikolaj Znaider, conducted by Sir Colin Davis is released by RCA Red Seal