

*Singing and Eating in my Homeland*  
A Concert Week with the Odessa Philharmonic

March 2009



As we descended the staircase of our commuter flight from Vienna onto the tarmac in Odessa, we saw a man wearing a suit and an official ID tag holding a sign that said "Michael and Martha." We smiled and waved, and as we walked towards him he started chattering at us in Russian. We continued to smile and nod, but I finally got out "ya nye ponyumayu pa Rusky" I don't understand Russian. The man was Anatoly Nitschenko, a representative of Ukrainian Airlines sent to meet us by Hobart Earl, music director of the Odessa Philharmonic. He whisked us away in a VIP van, and shepherded us through customs, while his five young assistants retrieved our checked bags and loaded them into our waiting car. On the other side of passport control, we were handed off to beautiful and capable Anya, who spoke English, and Sergei, the driver, who did not.

My husband Michael and I were in Ukraine to do a concert with the Odessa Philharmonic. We were guests of Hobart Earl, who was a classmate of mine at Princeton and Michael's first conducting student. Hobart has become quite a celebrity in Odessa since coming there in 1992. He has turned the orchestra into one of the leading arts organizations in the country and the pride of the city. Unfortunately, he was guest conducting in South America this week, and left us in the care of Anya, his personal

assistant, Zhenya, his new young concertmaster just returned from five years playing in the London Symphony Orchestra, and Yegor, a dreamy pianist, and his mother Svetlana, who managed the apartment where we stayed. They all spoke English, unlike many of the other people we interacted with that week.

Michael was a bit apprehensive about rehearsing the Russian speaking musicians in English, but excited to conduct this wonderful orchestra. I was hoping that my Russian diction would be up to snuff when I sang Prokofiev's *Ugly Duckling*. As always I was looking forward to rehearsing and performing with Michael. I was also excited to be in the childhood home of my Grandmother and piano teacher. Martha Sigal, my mother's mother, lived in Odessa until she was 12 or 13. In 1905 she came to the US and settled in R.I. Essie Einstein, my first piano teacher and close friend of my mother's family, came from a well known family of musicians. Her husband came from a family of cantors. Essie and Arthur came to RI from Odessa in 1923, but kept in close touch with their relatives left behind. Part of my mission this week, in addition to rehearsing and performing, was to find out what I could about these family ties.

After we settled into our lovely small apartment and had a short nap, Anya came to fetch us and show us around the neighborhood. The apartment was on the second floor, up a gracefully curving outside staircase overlooking an inner courtyard off the busy Derybosivskaya Street. Inside our quiet courtyard, trees and small gardens nestled next to the Lotos Mira book store (Anya said it had "philosophical books", we saw adds for Yoga classes) and the On/Ona Tattoo Centr, (We figured it was a brothel, Zhenya confirmed it was a "sex place.") During the course of the week we saw much more business for the book store than the tattoo center.





Out on Derybosivskaya Street, LCD screens displayed high fashion commercials accompanied by pop music. The MacDonalds across the street beckoned passersby with competing audio. Meanwhile, the strains of traditional accordion music floated amidst the cobblestone streets and ornate 19<sup>th</sup> century building facades. As evening approached, neon lights illuminated the trees lining the streets and the entrances to casinos and restaurants. In the summer, Odessa is apparently a swinging beach resort. On this mid-March afternoon it was cold and damp.

Even though it was 7pm on a Saturday, we found a place to change our dollars into hryvnya, and proceeded to our first wonderful eating experience of the week. Anya took us to Kumanets, a traditional Ukrainian restaurant richly decorated to look like a country village. The costumed waitresses all looked like characters in Alfonse Mucha's Slav Epic. Brightly colored needle work and painted pottery adorned every nook. Vines festooned with varenyky, the popular local dumplings, hung from the ceiling. The extensive menus had English translations, but Anya helped us choose from a mouthwatering array of delicious possibilities. We started with some rich dark bread, accompanied by what looked like herbed butter, that Anya said was more like lard. Michael had a traditional fish stew, a clear golden liquid, reminiscent of the most comforting chicken soup, with vegetables and tender chunks of three kinds of fish floating in it. I had the local borshch which the guide book assured me was Ukrainian, not Russian or Polish. It tasted amazingly like the recipe I make from Jane Brody's *Good Food Gourmet*, earthy, hearty, delicious. Michael then had another bowl of warming liquid, this time, a veal stew, tender, flavorful, satisfying. I had a wonderful cold chicken

salad with carrots, apples, and fresh apricots. Anya also had an interesting cold salad with Calamari. The whole meal for all of us was less than \$40. Unfortunately, we were too full for desert, but on our way out we were treated to shots of Ukrainian Vodka, which slid down our throats like warm butter.

We spent most of Sunday preparing the orchestra parts Michael had brought from Princeton for the first rehearsal. This included venturing out on our own to buy paperclips at a stationary store that Anya had told us about. We found the store and the paperclips and managed to pay for them, hurray! We even navigated the supermarket across the street from our apartment. Michael and I have now shopped for apartment groceries in French, Italian and Czech. We were definitely getting better at reading Cyrillic, and bought, water, bread, cheese, herring, pastry, and a bottle of the vodka we had tasted last night. Of course this apartment had a whole set of small shot glasses. Late in the afternoon, Anya came to take us for some sight seeing and a meal. The weather was cold and rainy again, but the fog and wet streets gave the city a certain romantic atmosphere. Anya, like most of the young attractive women we saw, was wearing spike heel boots with three inch heels. How she could walk on the cobble stoned streets and crumbling sidewalks was a mystery, but all the women seemed to do it with ease.

We walked past the Opera house that glistened and sparkled in its newly restored opulence, unlike many other beautiful buildings in desperate need of a face lift. We continued along the Prymorsky Boulevard and saw the statue of Pushkin and the lovely pink City Hall building. We admired the statue of Richelieu and walked down the famous Potemkin steps.



It was too cold and windy to continue across the road and out onto the pier. We would save that for another day. So we climbed back up the steps and walked to the western end of Prymorsky Bul and saw the Vorontsov Palace with its beautiful colonnade overlooking the port and the Black sea beyond. We couldn't see much though the twilight fog, and were too cold to cross the "Mother-in-law Bridge" so we returned to the square at the top of the Potemkin steps and took refuge in the welcoming warmth of the Odessa Restaurant.

Decorated as an homage to the Odessa of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the entrance lobby displayed old photos, posters, and advertisements from the years when my grandmother lived in this lavish and elegant city. The dinning room was a recreation of a garden gazebo, with delicate lattice work laden with flowering vines, and ornate wrought iron tables, chairs and gates. The costumed waitress brought us menus in English that offered another huge selection of local delicacies. This time I had the fish soup and Michael had grilled mackerel fillet, locally caught. I had a plate of potato pancakes, smooth clouds of potato topped with a silken mushroom sauce. Not to overdo the carbs, but Michael couldn't resist getting potatoes "Odessa style" a delicious cross between home fried and scalloped. Anya, who was tiny and probably didn't eat much ever, had only a salad, in keeping with the Ukrainian tradition of taking a bigger meal at mid-day. When I tasted her dish, a chicken salad over a bed of citrusy Jell-O with crunchy nuts and vegetables, I was carried in a time warp back to the taste of my mother's Thanksgiving mold. This famous Jell-O concoction was somewhat of a family joke: lime Jell-O with almonds and celery over slices of pink and white grapefruit! What an odd combination. Was it some 1960's creation from Betty Crocker, or did it descend from an Odessa tradition? Anya said she didn't think hers was a local dish, but I wonder.....

Monday morning, after a delivered breakfast from Svetlana of brown bread, slices of cheese and meat, juice and yogurt and a sweet poppy seed roll, we were picked up by Sergei and driven to the hall for the first orchestra rehearsal. Many people greeted us warmly in Russian as we arrived: Ivan Ivanovich, the general manager, was a soft spoken man with gentle brown eyes. Tatiana, from the office, often called me Martushka as the week went along. Irina, the senior librarian was energetic and bouncy, and happy to try the few words of English she knew. Her older assistant, Viktoria, was more quiet and serious, but both were eager to be of help. Viktor, the personnel manager was a tall and impressive trombone player who Michael decided was one of the finest musicians in the orchestra. Boris, the principal oboist, welcomed us in English. He was not playing this concert, but we would see him again later in the week. Finally, in a cloud of golden dust, Zhenya, the concert master, arrived and took charge of Michael and all he needed before the start of the rehearsal. Michael breathed a small sigh of relief to have someone close by who spoke English. Zhenya proved heroic at translating Michael's instructions and comments, leading the string section and helping to manage what needed to be rehearsed, and playing beautifully himself. After a few introductory remarks, Michael launched into the *Hansel and Gretel* overture and accomplished a great deal using Italian and German musical terms and demonstrating with his voice. The orchestra sounded beautiful reading this music they had never played before.

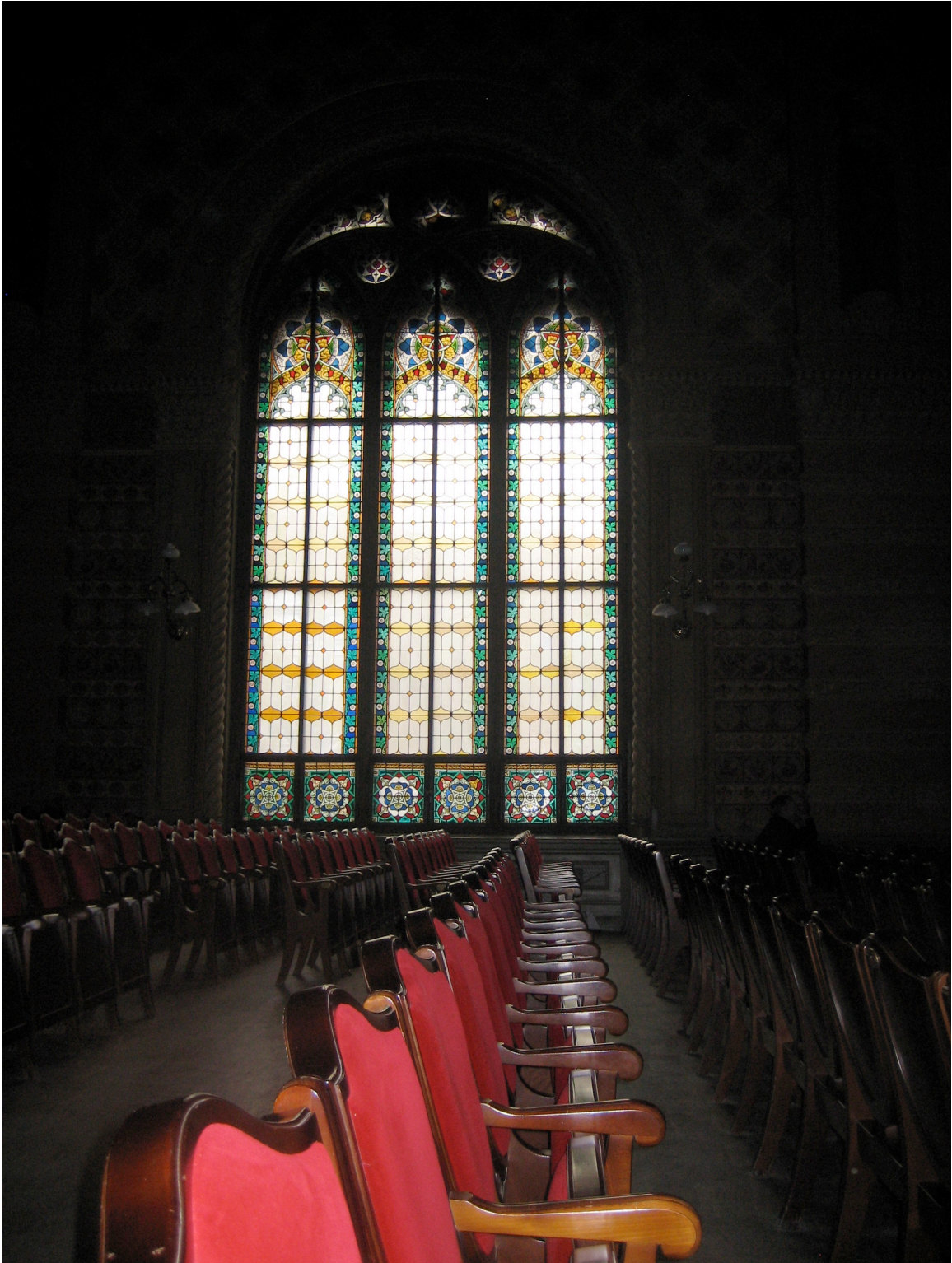


After an hour and 15 minutes, the orchestra took the first break of the day. Zhenya led us around to the administrative suite and upstairs to the inner sanctum of Hobeys office where tea and cookies awaited us. This became a favorite indulgence during the week. We were sad that Hobeys wasn't here, but glad to see how well loved and revered he seemed to be, from all the pictures, posters and memorabilia displayed throughout. Zhenya was young and enthusiastic and fascinating to talk to about politics, the economy, life in Ukraine, music making here and in London, and of course orchestra shop talk. It seemed to both Michael and me that the default playing mode of the orchestra was a creamy, dark, rich, legato. It took more work and pestering to get them to play with detached and rhythmic articulation. It took particular reminding to get them to listen for ensemble, so the strings could coordinate with a contrasting rhythm in the winds, or so the brass would not lag behind the strings. They could do it, if you asked them. As the week went along, rhythmic characterization became more defined and clear. That rich dark legato was always available when needed, and it was amazing!

We also learned, as the week went along, that the orchestra was fond of chatting, like middle schoolers, throughout the rehearsal. It took many measures after Michael asked to stop, for everyone to finish playing and listen for instructions. By then half of them had started chatting, or practicing other passages. Some of them even chatted as they played. Michael was too polite to snap at them. That was not his way normally, and certainly not as a guest, especially in a foreign language. Zhenya was exasperated with this behavior, especially after playing in the LSO where silence and attentive decorum was expected. London orchestras have limited rehearsal time so they have to be extremely efficient. Here, we had a luxurious amount of rehearsal time. Unfortunately, a lot of it was used up with translating back and forth and waiting for everyone to be quiet. Zhenya assured us that the orchestra members were not being disrespectful or hostile, it was just their habit. He thought it may have been a holdover from the Soviet years, when members of a group were not used to being individually responsible for their behavior, but expected an authority figure to yell at them and tell them what to do. On Wednesday morning, after a particularly frustrating time in Tuesday's rehearsal, both Zhenya and the personnel manager let the orchestra have it about being quiet and paying attention. The chatting didn't disappear completely, but things were better after that.

Michael usually rehearsed *Gadkii Utyonok* last, so I spent the morning rehearsals either warming up in our little green room, listening in the hall, or, my favorite, sitting on stage behind the violas and cellos. From here I had a good view of both Michael and Zhenya, as well as all the chatting and interacting of the players at the back of the lower strings and horns. When all is said and done, orchestra musicians are similar in all languages and cultures. It felt familiar to watch them, as I have over the years with the Princeton University Orchestra, the New Jersey Symphony and many others. I also enjoyed sitting out in the beautiful hall. With its intricately carved wooden ceiling, painted frescoes, stained glass windows, and polished wooden seats covered in rich red velvet, the hall looked as magnificent as it sounded. It is well known that an orchestra owes much of its characteristic sound to the sound of its hall, and this was certainly true here. We had heard Hobeys complain about the cold Black Sea wind blowing right through those beautiful windows, which towered over the back wall of the stage and all along one side of the house. Fortunately, the windows had been repaired and resealed in

the past few years. Contrary to what we had read about in the papers earlier in the winter, Odessa had gas for heat, this week at least.



When it came time for me to sing, I was in heaven. Having performed the piece in Russian with piano several times before, I felt prepared musically and vocally. I was also healthy and not too jet lagged, an added bonus! It was an incredible luxury to be able to rehearse with the orchestra five days in a row, and help them discover an unfamiliar work by Prokofiev. They seemed to know the Hans Christian Anderson story, in contrast to the Grimm tale of Hansel and Gretel which they did not know, and even seemed to understand my Russian. By the third day, the principal cellist started singing along in some places. I did get a few diction notes from Zhenya and one of the other violinists. I guess my "t" was a little too wet sounding in "utyonok" possible confusing the "soft t" sound. Americans also have a tendency to add an unwanted diphthong: "Tateeana" instead of "Tatyana" or "uteeyonok" instead of "utyonok." I had gotten that correction from Ignat Solzhenitsyn when I first tried to sing in Russian at Marlboro in 1992. A sweet blond lady violinist even drew a pronunciation chart for me complete with cartoon drawings of a duckling. Seeing as the word in question here was the title of the piece, I wanted to get it right. When I got home and told a Russian speaking friend about this, it turned out that my diction actually had a "Moscow" accent. The correction I received was a softer Ukrainian pronunciation. So, my Russian was too Russian for them, hmm.

After Wednesday's rehearsal, Zhenya walked with us a few blocks away from the center of town to find the main synagogue. As we approached, the building looked strangely new. Zhenya talked to a guard who directed us to a secretary in a small office off the main entrance hall. They spoke in Russian for a bit and then the woman slid into beautiful English and addressed us. Zhenya had explained that I was looking for records of Arthur Einstein's father, one of the cantors in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The woman recounted how after the war, the Soviets had removed all traces of religion from everywhere. Records, artwork, artifacts, were gone, or perhaps stashed in some government office somewhere. The building, originally completed in the 1860's, had been turned into a gym. The balcony galleries, where the women had sat, had been sealed off into a second story of offices. The main sanctuary had been turned into a basketball court! She even showed us photos of basket ball hoops hanging where the ark should be, and the beautiful parquet floor painted with foul shot lines. When Ukraine got its independence in 1991, plans were made to restore the building. Renovations were completed in 1996, so that's why the building looked so new. We were fortunate to hear this amazing story from such a knowledgeable and generous guide. We thanked her for her time and information and headed to the kosher restaurant around the side of the building.





As we walked in, a waiter cruised by with a plate of rolls that smelled exactly like the challah I make. We sat down to a lunch special of soup and kasha. The borchsh, was again fantastic, but what they called gerkin soup, was transcendental – like the most exquisitely clear and golden chicken soup with perfectly cooked vegetables floating in it. The rolls were indeed just like the challah I make, and the kasha took me back again to a dish my mother used to make. What comfort food! Zhenya revealed, in a somewhat uncomfortable disclosure, that his mother was actually Jewish. Having been born in 1980, however, (yikes, he is so young!!!) he grew up without any religious identification at all. It was a non issue in that time and place. Michael tried to explain how Americans feel compelled to find their family roots because most everyone in the US came from somewhere else originally. This was as strange a concept for Zhenya as it was for us to consider his completely different situation.

As we left the restaurant, we found Sergei waiting for us with the car, ready to take us to the famous Privoz market, the largest open-air farmers market in the former Soviet Union. When we drove by it on our way into town from the airport, we saw the surrounding sidewalks filled with truckloads of net bags of cabbage and potatoes. This afternoon, the streets were choked with traffic and the ever present wild dogs and cats in this much more run down part of town. Zhenya navigated and told us to be mindful of our wallets. Outside, the sidewalk venders sold clothing, shoes, hand bags, and other cheap items. Inside, we came first to the meat room where platter sized livers and bloody slabs of who knows what set out on un-refrigerated tables. It was cool today, but we cringed at the smell and the thought of a hot summer afternoon and moved quickly into the main

hall. Here, in rows and rows of stalls, we saw fresh fruits and vegetables, dried fruits and spices, sacks of seeds and grains, baskets of herbs and jars of relishes and compotes in a wondrous display. My favorite place was the dairy room where we could sample a huge variety of freshly made cheeses, again, un-refrigerated. A round babushka of a woman sat amidst tubs of fresh cream and drizzled some on the backs of our hands. We slurped it up greedily, not very sanitary, but delicious. I bought some halvah made from sunflower seeds. I didn't want a lot, so the lady gave me several handfuls of broken pieces for about \$.50. It looked like a bag of dirt, or crumbled cement, but tasted heavenly, especially with afternoon tea and a flaky pastry filled with sour cherries from the supermarket.



Several more memorable meals deserve mention. We went back to Kumanets by ourselves one night and had delicious herring, chicken shashlik, potato varenyky, and kvas, a local brew that tasted like non-alcoholic sweet dark beer. Once again we were too full to try the cherry varenyky for desert. Another night we went to Kasylysa, the Russian restaurant next door, run by the same owner. The attractive decor, (including huge, friendly rabbits hopping around all evening) costumed wait staff, and traditional music was all Russian this time, and the food was again delicious. Michael had an amazing stew of sausage, chicken, vegetables and a spicy dark sauce. I had a warm mug full of some sweet rich honey cider and a plate of pancakes filled with cheese and cherries, topped with sour cream that brought tears to my eyes. They tasted just like the cheese blintzes that my mother and grandmother made. We tried one more Ukrainian restaurant on Deribosovskaya street and were greeted by a live band of costumed folk musicians as we



walked in. They were young and talented and we bought their CD before we left. This place was also attractively decorated with traditional folk crafts. We were treated to brown bread and shots of cold vodka as we looked over the English menus. We had more wonderful salads, cabbage rolls stuffed with mushrooms, grilled and spiced chicken, and potato pancakes. It was a feast for eye, ear, and palate. As a friend of mine observed, I am genetically programmed to love this food, and I certainly did!



During a break in Wednesday's rehearsal, I got up the courage to try to speak with some of the string players about Essie's brothers. Leonid, the principal second violin, spoke some English, and looked at the list of names I had brought with me. He recognized the family name Furer, Samuil, the violinist, and Leonid the cellist, and said he would try to ask around for more information. The next day, he told me that Boris, the oboist, knew a lot about the famous violinist brother, and would bring me some information at the second break. Boris, an older Jewish man who also fancied himself somewhat of a historian, arrived right on time with copies of photos, a CD burned from an old LP, and two articles he had written about Samuil for Ukrainian Jewish publications. This was the jackpot. Boris shared an amazing story involving Stalin and the Moscow competition. When I told my mom about this she remembered that Essie had always had a large red vase on her piano, supposedly a valuable relic from the Czar, and the actual prize Samuil had won in that very competition. In one of the photos in the magazine articles, the face of my piano teacher seemed to gaze out at me. My mom also thought it was Essie when she saw it. Boris said the woman in the picture was Leonid's



wife, but with most of the people who could really tell long gone, we will probably never know for sure.

Samuil was a student of the legendary violin teacher Stylarsky, who from his Odessa school produced such musical giants as David Oistrakh, David Milstein, Emil Gilels (pianist) – sort of a Dorothy Delay of that time and place. After the rehearsal, we walked over to Yekaterynynska square and easily found the Stylarsky school by following moms and kids carrying violins and cellos. Inside, it was a familiar scene and we saw the poster for our concert prominently displayed on the events bulletin board. Up a flight of stairs we found a wall of photos of famous graduates of the school including Oistrakh and Gilels and pianist Rosa Fain. No Samuil Furer that we could see, but we felt that we had made a pilgrimage to the seat of this great string tradition and made a connection to my family roots. The next day a local TV station filmed some of the end of the rehearsal and then interviewed both me and Michael, with Zhenya translating of course. I spoke about how moved I was to be in the city of my family ancestors and my musical ancestors.



The concert Friday night was exciting and wonderful. As we waited in our green room, a very attractive woman arrived with a lint brush and a shy "costume?" Michael enjoyed this extravagant bit of pre concert grooming. He said he was tense during the opening *Hansel and Gretel* selections, but felt more relaxed once I came out for *Gadkii Utyonok*. I sat on the little landing, a few steps below the back of the stage, with Mykola the stage manager, and listened to the Humperdinck. The orchestra sounded terrific and

the horns nailed all their choral sections. How wonderful to listen to music about the power of nourishing food and family love after having been so nourished myself this week. Singing the Prokofiev was a lot of fun. The acoustics of the hall felt somewhat dryer with people in the seats, and it was a bit harder to project the low sections, but overall, I was pleased with how it went. The audience fell into rhythmic clapping very quickly – the iron clap they call it – and we offered an encore by Gershwin. After I announced that I wanted to share some music from my country and Zhenya translated, a woman in the audience yelled out that Gershwin was from Odessa! Zhenya later said that when the audience starts calling out to the stage, you know they are really enjoying themselves. Our easy arrangement of "Embraceable You" featured a well played jazzy trumpet solo and those amazingly creamy legato strings. It was delicious to sing.

I changed for the second half and sat out in the house. Michael did a large chunk of ballet music from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* including the new "happy end" music found by Princeton's Simon Morrison. It was interesting to see the orchestra's reaction when Zhenya translated Michael's explanation of Prokofiev's original intent for the ballet. They irrupted into a tangled chorus of laughter, grumbling disbelief and outright indignation: "It is Russian, it has to be tragic!" "What about the families?" They eventually warmed to the new music which was a fascinating reworking of familiar tunes from the rest of the ballet into a heavenly Rosenkavalieresque waltz for the lover's final pas de deux. In the concert the orchestra played heavenly as well, and the emotional music for the death of Tybalt, or balcony scene was truly tragic and wrenching. The dark sumptuous sound of the strings came from the depths of their Russian (or Ukrainian) souls and they played their hearts out, unlike what you hear from most American orchestras. Michael was transported by the sound of the orchestra, and they responded ardently to his conducting. The audience seemed to appreciate the collaboration as well.

Back at our green room all our new friends were assembled with flowers and congratulations. Yegor and his mom had gotten a big bouquet of roses for me, even though he had had a concert himself that afternoon. Anya was happy to see us again, since we hadn't seen her since last Sunday. Tatyana and Ivan Ivanovich smiled broadly and didn't need English to convey their enthusiasm. Zhenya had performed passionately and was flying high with adrenalin. The librarians magically collected and assembled all the parts we had to take home with us and Michael had a heartfelt moment of thanks and congratulations with Viktor the trombone player. We very reluctantly packed up all our scores and flowers and said a sad and sweet goodbye to Zhenya. Anya and Ivan treated us to one more meal of post concert munchies at Hobey's favorite Greek restaurant, but we didn't really notice the food because at last we let ourselves enjoy cold glasses of silky vodka.



“Ivan, Zhenya, Marty, Michael, Anya, Svetlana, Yegor, Tatyana”

The next morning Anya and Sergei picked us up and took us to the airport. Back in NJ, savoring the delicious vodka and halvah we had somehow managed to get through customs, we felt a gentle longing for Odessa. I made two batches of cheese blintzes, but the cherries in Shoprite were sweet, not sour, and the chicken salad I made with apples, carrots and apricots, didn't quite taste the same as it had in the "old country." Yet, Michael and I will always cherish the memories of eating and making music in the land of my ancestors. When the ugly duckling first sees the swans and realizes who he truly is, he feels a sense of recognition and belonging to his people. Prokofiev's music for this is luminous, rapturous and tender. I certainly felt a luminous rapture singing it, especially in the land of my people. Being in the city I have heard about my whole life, I had a warm and tender feeling of recognition and belonging in my homeland.