

A TRIP TO VLADIMIR

(Seven days in a Soviet pianist's life)

*Extract from Hervé Gicquiau's
"Les tribulations d'un pianiste en URSS"*

Saturday, 12 February 1983, Moscow - Vladimir

7:30 a.m. The alarm clock rings. A quick breakfast and I leave for 8:30 for the Yaroslavski railway station, popping into a laundromat on my way.

9:20 a.m. The station is crowded at this hour and I have to wait in a long queue to get a ticket to Vladimir. All tickets have been sold out when I finally get to the counter, but meanwhile I discover that the timetable has been changed.

The man at the information desk says that all trains for Vladimir have been transferred to the Kurski railway station and the next one doesn't leave until 2 p.m.

The problem is that yesterday we decided to meet at 10:00 by coach n°4 of the train to Vladimir and it is already 9:35 and the train has been transferred to the other station. I catch a taxi and rush to Kurski Station, which luckily is not too far from here.

10:05 a.m. Kurski railway station. I run to the ticket office. There is a train leaving right now at 10:17 and the first information clerk didn't know it.

10:15 a.m. I jump onto the train and it leaves. Everyone is here: Marina and Boris, our singers, and RVG (Raisa Vladimirovna Glezer), our musicologist and boss who **have** engaged us for a dozen concerts in Vladimir and Murom, the old historical centres of central Russia. We are so-called *Concert Brigade*.

The train is full, and many people have to stand, as there is nowhere free to sit.

1:30 p.m. Vladimir. The local manager takes us to the hotel. The building is new, and we have single rooms, quite comfortable, but without a telephone and there is a problem with hot water too, which is a real pity with all this snow outside. Anyway... We must be downstairs at 5:00 p.m.

5:00 p.m. Everybody is here. The local manager drives us to our first concert. We are going to a sort of nursing home for workers of an advanced age. 50 km. Here we are. The landscape is lovely, but the premises are really poor, just a few dirty houses. There is nothing like a lounge, nor even an entrance hall. A lonely upright piano "Kaluzhanka" is waiting in the corner of the corridor. We change our clothes in the director's office, while the personnel are putting chairs out in the corridor. Slowly, the pensioners take their places. They are old, with expressionless faces, a few of them are in wheelchairs.

7:00 p.m. The concert begins. RVG talks about 15 minutes and then I accompany Marina. She is so nervous that she has finished her aria a page before me. As she was always nice to me, I do the same and finally we get to the end of it together.

Unexpectedly, the keys begin to lock and by the end of Marina's performance a dozen of them are out of use. Then it's my turn: Prokofiev, *Pictures ("Pictures from an Exhibition" of Mussorgsky)*. When RV announces the *"Ballet of Unhitched Chicks"*, someone from the audience exclaims: OK, and now we get to dance! Applause. And here comes Boris, singing as if he is at a big football stadium. Great success. My fingers hurt and "Kaluzhanka" has won this round. Doesn't matter: we have already had our first concert.

We are invited to the canteen. The personnel are trying to do their best, they give us some sausages with pasta, cheese and tea. At the end they give us some special home-baked bread.

Back to the hotel!

11:30 p.m. Too tired to read. Good night!

Sunday, 13 February 1983, Vladimir

This night was not the best. It was so cold that I woke up in the middle of the night, put my jogging pants, pullover, and my coat over the blanket and tried to go to sleep again. I had a headache, my nose was blocked, impossible to breathe in this icy air.

9:00 a.m. -15°C outdoors. The car is waiting to take us to a local rest home for workers. A morning concert is planned there.

10:00 a.m. The big hall of the resort is full. Everybody is wearing warm coats and boots except us. We have to put on evening clothes for the concert. I completely lost control of my hands because of the cold and I nearly twisted my wrist with a broken key. The audience are middle-aged and quiet. After the concert we are invited to the canteen. It's cold there too. The only place to warm oneself is inside the car.

We leave for another rest home and we are nearly blocked by the snow on the way, but thanks to our driver who is used to driving during the long Russian winters, finally we get to our destination.

2:00 p.m. We get out of the car. Drunken girls with portable radios are lying down on the snow as if they were on a Black Sea beach in August.

Nobody meets us there. The hall doors are closed. RV goes round the corner to look for the director or someone who might be in charge of the entertainment here. The landscape is beautiful, but the people are somehow strange, everybody's drunk. These are day visitors coming to spend their weekend here, to drink and meet girls. We knock at the door. None. We knock louder. Suddenly the door opens and a woman with uncombed hair and a creased coat appears. She seems to have just woken up. Yes, she is the person in charge here. No, there is no concert this afternoon. She lets us into the hall. It seems that our concert was refused, and she doesn't understand what we are doing here.

Boris keeps his self-control and suggests writing an explanatory letter to our office in Moscow. I'm afraid that this time we are not going to get paid.

3:40 p.m. WHY IS MY ROOM SO COLD?

I watch a documentary about Japan on TV. They show us how to make teapots and bells.

6:30 p.m. We are going to the local workers' hostel. The heating is not excessive in this hostel. The person responsible has an electric heater and we wait in his office keeping our coats on. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see a letter on the table:

"... Comrades Ivanov and Petrov in a state of alcoholic intoxication used the elevator as a toilet. I ask you to punish them with extreme severity."

The man in charge comes in. There are about 20 people in the "Red corner", he says. "The Red Corner" (*place of propaganda all over the USSR*) is an enormous space with a big window and, of course, badly heated. Next to the window stands an upright piano "Vladimir". There are a few women sitting in the "Red Corner", in their bathrobes and hair curlers. Little by little the others come in. Men are drinking because it's Sunday. My fingers feel icy. I dream of a very hot bath, but no hot water in our hotel. By the way, there is no bathtub either in my room.

10:00 p.m. Back home. I'm sitting in my room, wrapped in blankets. This evening we have a new receptionist, a very nice girl and she gave me an extra blanket. Now I'm writing. It wouldn't be a bad idea to write a diary about concert tours in the USSR.

Monday, 14 February 1983, Vladimir

10:00 a.m. I slept badly last night. It was cold and I have a strong headache. I have to be downstairs by 10:30. I shaved, ate some dry fruits and went down. The small bus "Kuban" is waiting to take us to a military factory. This bus is really amazing. I just wonder who created it. The engine is inside the cabin, noisy and stinking of petrol, it is dead freezing in winter, but in summer it gets so hot that you can hardly breathe, even with all the windows open.

11:00 a.m. The military factory. They check our passports and we sign a few papers promising not to reveal state secrets. Anyway, we can't see anything but a long corridor without windows. An officer accompanies us to the "Red Corner" where I find an upright piano "Red October". The workers have only one hour for lunch, so our concert barely lasts 25 minutes. Marina sings a couple of love songs, I play a Prelude by Rachmaninoff (yes, the one in C sharp minor, of course!) and Boris ends with his favourite "successful" songs. My poor fellow singers! As the piano was completely out of tune, they didn't know which key I was accompanying them in.

The concert wasn't too long, so everybody is happy. The workers can have their lunch and we can go back to the hotel and be free until our evening concert.

1:00 p.m. I watched a film about the Leningrad Hermitage museum while eating my lunch and then we decided to go out for a walk.

The weather is sunny, but cold. The white snow makes the town look clean and bright. Boris goes to the local concert agency. Everybody trusts his open, honest face which inspires confidence. So far, he is the best person to negotiate with the local managers.

We walked awhile and then entered a shopping center to get some hot tea or coffee.

10:00 p.m. The evening concert in the workers' hostel was not bad. Certainly, it was cold, and I got warmed up only at the end of the concert. Marina and Boris sang a duet from a musical: he was a policeman and she... Funny, I have already forgotten...

We are at RV's place to celebrate Marina's birthday. A bottle of red Bulgarian wine, sausages, potato "pirozhki", some fish and my dry fruits. Boris brings a real 100% alcohol and dilutes it with some water.

In fact, RVG is a well-known Soviet musicologist. She is Jewish and I suppose her life has not always been easy and joyful. Russia is a very anti-Semitic place. I discovered this at eighteen, when I came to Moscow for the first time and witnessed a few shocking scenes in the street. I had never seen it before in Georgia.

End of the *soirée* and we return to our rooms. We must wake up early tomorrow. We leave for Murom.

Tuesday, 15 February 1983, Vladimir - Murom

5:45 a.m. The receptionist wakes me up. She checks my room to see that I haven't broken anything or stolen towels or sheets and then lets me leave.

6:00 a.m. I have my breakfast in the hotel canteen: coffee, some sort of unknown salad and yoghurt. In front of me two guys have a bottle of cheap red Bulgarian wine and two sausage sandwiches. Even the smell of this wine makes me feel sick. I go downstairs. Everybody is there and we go to the bus station.

6:30 a.m. Murom is not far from Vladimir, barely 3 hours away. An accordionist sitting next to us is going to Murom too. He says he managed to get concerts in all the music schools there. Where shall we give our concerts?

We arrive.

9:00 a.m. Murom. The hotel is not good at all. The rooms are without toilets and without hot water. There is only one single room with a toilet, and we offer it to RVG. Marina has no toilet but, on the other hand, she has a TV. I share a room with Boris.

The local concert manager has already arrived, and we go down to the hall. We are going to do only 5 concerts, as there are not enough places for concerts in this town. I think that the accordionist we met in the bus took all the best places and nobody wants us, not even the workers' hostels. The good news is that the local cultural office must attain a quota of their cultural obligations so our manager will count five concerts as ten. Yippee! We are free today.

At last, I can read "Danilov, the altoist".

7:00 p.m. Marina wants to call her daughter, but there is no telephone in the hotel. We decide to go all together to the post office.

There is a long queue to make national calls. Marina has found a free phone and is speaking to her daughter. Suddenly her voice changes, obviously something is wrong. She puts down the phone, her face looks a little crazy. Marina has a temporary permit to live in Moscow, but her boyfriend doesn't have one and he lives there illegally. She rents a small room in a big communal flat in Moscow with a dozen neighbours and undoubtedly someone has denounced him to the police, so they came and ordered the place to be emptied right away in spite of the fact that there was only a 12-year-old little girl and nobody else. Luckily, her boyfriend was not there.

Her daughter has a serious disease, I don't know what it is exactly, and Marina wants to leave immediately for Moscow. RVG keeps silent and I feel that she is clearly not enjoying it, but Marina is no longer able to think about concerts. She cannot leave her daughter alone and wants to set off as soon as possible. I tell her that she is welcome to stay at my place in Moscow, while looking for a new apartment.

She tries to call her daughter again, but the phone gets out of order and we go to another phone booth. We stand in line, then a guy tries to take our turn, and I begin to lose my temper. He feels it and goes away, sits on the next bench and never stops making comments about us. Finally, Marina gets hold of the phone, but it stops working. At the end of all this crap, I accompany the ladies who are in quite a hysterical state to our hotel.

9:00 p.m. Boris calls a local manager and asks him for a night train ticket. And it works! We have to be at ticket office n°3 at 10:00 p.m. We call for a taxi and I accompany Marina to the railway station. The train comes and Marina gets on. I go to the station bar and order a double Armenian cognac to relax. I think that honestly, I deserve it.

10:30 p.m. No more busses, no taxis. I walk back to the hotel. It is -13°C outside. Thank God, the winters are dry in Russia, but all the same it's so cold... You feel it piercing your bones.

11:40 p.m. Back to the hotel. RVG and Boris are waiting for me. How nice! A cup of hot tea is all I need now. We try to organise our programs. There are only two of us, Boris and me to carry on the whole concert, so RVG has to talk a lot to fill the time. All the same, she cannot resist and drops a few comments about Marina who is a really good-looking and charming girl but totally unable to choose the right man. Goodbye hugs. I move to Marina's room with a TV, but her room is as cold as mine was.

WHY DON'T THEY HEAT?

Wednesday, 16 February 1983, Murray

I dreamed of Spain last night. The old fortress on the rocks and a blue-turquoise sea down the hill. I took a path getting to the sea and walked on the green and smooth moss. I was barefooted and my feet drowned in this velvety carpet.

8:30 a.m. I wake up with a huge headache. It is so cold in my room that I can see my breath. I wear trousers, a pullover, a blanket and my coat over them.

Cockroaches running on the floor. Anyway, I have never been to Spain. Nowhere, in fact.

I get up, shave and decide to go to the shower in the corridor. The hot water isn't ready yet. It takes 2 hours to heat the water in the boiler and there is only one shower in the hotel.

11:15 a.m. The car arrives and takes us to a school. To an ordinary Soviet school. The Assembly hall is full of teenagers from 12 to 17. Their eyes are empty as if nobody were on stage or as if they were sitting in front of a big brick wall. I play *Pictures*, *Rachmaninov*, Boris sings, RVG talks and the concert is over 45 minutes later. Exhausting.

In 15 minutes another one for kids. They are between 10 and 12 and ... And it is amazing. The kids sit without moving, eyes wide open, you can even feel them listening to music for real. For a (very) short instant, I forgot that I have a broken "Vladimir" and not a Tchaikovsky concert hall's "Steinway" in front of me. Afterwards a talk with the school's director of general economic problems in our country and how to resolve them. Luckily, the car arrives and takes us back to the hotel, where at last, I can continue to follow altoist Danilov's fantastic adventures!

9:00 p.m. Tea with RVG. She suggests I play Brahms's concerto with Rostov orchestra. Which one, the first or the second? Choice is mine. Too good to be true. *Qui vivra, verra.*

Thursday, 17 February 1983

The first thing that I will do in Moscow is take a very, very hot bath!

11:00 a.m. The local school of music. The Assembly hall is full of kids and their teachers. I discover a well-tuned "Estonia" on the stage, and I play "Dumka", Prokofiev and Chopin. For the first time during this trip, Boris sings something about Lenin. Why, does he really have to? At the end of the concert pioneers in red ties bring us flowers.

1:00 p.m. After a lunch in our hotel's restaurant RVG has a good idea to drink right now the alcohol Marina left us. A pure 90° medical alcohol diluted in water

becomes an ordinary vodka. It makes our feast less disgusting and reminds me of my military service when the soldiers bought a kind of cheap Russian *Eau de cologne* in the local village shop and drank it. Of course, not a French one. Amazing, the variety of liquids containing alcohol that a human being can absorb and digest.

2:00 p.m. Back to the hotel and we leave immediately for the cinema.

RVG and I wait for Boris downstairs, but he never comes. Fifteen minutes later I go upstairs to look for him. His room is empty, and door is closed. Strange decomposition of our group. It seems to me that it will be just the two of us to finish our last concerts. We go to the cinema without Boris.

Agatha Christie's "The Mirror Crack'd". Liz Taylor doesn't look too fresh, but Angela Lansbury is great as Miss Marple. Green lawns, houses with roses... Lights on, we find our Boris sitting behind us. But he hadn't been here before! Where had he been? Strange...

5:00 p.m. On the way to the hotel, we see an advertisement of another film and decide to see it. "Blue Abyss", an American film, large screen, Technicolor, 3 hours with Jacqueline Bisset. I don't think I have seen a film as stupid as this for the last five years. We take a taxi to get to the hotel.

23:00 p.m. The receptionist gives me an extra blanket!

Friday, 18 February 1983

I cannot say that I suffocated from the heat last night, but all the same, I slept rather peacefully with my two blankets.

9:00 a.m. A long meditation for my brains and some exercises to wake up my body and I am ready for a morning tea with RV and Boris.

10:30 a.m. Breakfast at RVG's. We have already done the complete round of local cinemas and have seen all the worthwhile films in this town. Our last concert is in the evening and then, at 11:15 p.m. we take a train back to Moscow. After the breakfast I have to work and try to translate at least five or six pages of Gerald Moore's "Am I too loud?"

6:00 p.m. It becomes more and more cold outdoors, about -22° C. I put on two tee-shirts, a huge woollen pullover and over all that a white shirt with a black tie. A pair of pyjama pants under my trousers and double woollen socks. I look in the mirror – rather fat, this guy, but you cannot imagine how little I care about it. The point is not to be killed by this inhuman cold. You feel it piercing your bones!

The car is waiting.

7:00 p.m. The residence for future teachers. At least they are supposed to be cultured. 15 people. It seems to me that everyone hibernates in winter here. Have to come here in spring. Meanwhile, they are listening for real. I always feel the difference. The keys of “Red October” are frozen, and I cannot feel them. Looks like playing on an icy keyboard. I am in a sort of trance and while accompanying Boris I don’t even hear what he is singing. The concert is over, flowers for everybody. Where do they get these flowers from?

Very nice, they prepared for us some tea and cakes. We talked about literature, cinema, about the last film of Tarkovsky, about poetry.

11:50 p.m. Generally, the trains are well heated in winter. I am lying on the upper bunk, RVG and Boris are already sleeping.

I cannot sleep. I listen to train sounds.

I try to remember the details of my trip but the further the train moves from these places, the more this trip was washed from my memory.

In three days, I am playing the Schubert 1st Trio and the “Forellenquintett” with my favourite musicians in the Small Concert Hall of Moscow Conservatory, the next day a recital with Mozart, Beethoven and Mussorgsky in the House of Culture “Avtozavodskaya” and the day after, I leave for 25 concerts to Vladivostok-Sakhalin-Kuril Islands; one month on the other side of USSR.

I still can’t sleep...