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Valery Vorona: “Without great teachers, there can be no great performers”

Valery Iosifovich Vorona is widely known as a talented musician, conductor, and rector of the M.M. Ippolitov-Ivanov State Musical Pedagogical Institute. His entire life's work is devoted to preserving Russia’s musical heritage and fostering musical culture at large. However, experts believe that today we are experiencing a certain crisis in the music education system: as teachers leave, the standard of the Russian school of performance, which is of global significance, is declining. How much of a threat is this to our national culture? V.I.Vorona, Honored Artist of the Russian Federation, Professor, answered these and other questions in his interview to BM.Moscow Foresight.

- What does the institute you lead mean to you: is it just a workplace or perhaps a second home?

- The Ippolitov Institute is my fate! I came to this place 45 years ago, but I never planned to become its rector. And when I was offered to head the Institute in 2004, I resisted for a long time before accepting. At that time, I was engaged in extensive social activities under the auspices of the Russian Performing Arts Foundation, founded by us in 1992. I only came to the institute a few times a week to teach students. I hadn't even set foot in the former rector's office. Two candidates from the provinces were sent to replace the rector in the elections: one was a retired colonel, and the other was an athlete. I remember we were all terrified at the institute back then, and they started coaxing me to run for election. In that situation, I couldn’t refuse my colleagues, even though I was absolutely sure I wouldn’t be elected. When the election results were announced, I was simply

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dumbfounded. I went outside and stood like a statue on the corner of Ippolitovka for twenty minutes, thinking with horror: what happens now? This is a completely different lifestyle, a colossal responsibility! And I left my performance and creative ambitions, as well as my concert life, outside the institute.

And I have been the rector of the M.M. Ippolitov-Ivanov State Musical Pedagogical Institute for 22 years.

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- What do you enjoy more — being an administrator, teaching, playing the violin, or conducting?

- Teaching has always been the main thing in my life. No matter how great a mentor is, or who they associate with, their students are always their closest companions.

Shostakovich once said: “There are no generals in music. We are all its soldiers”. Here at the Ippolitov Institute, we are all united. We create, build, and innovate as one. We uphold the principle that there are no superiors and subordinates, but rather friends, associates, partners, and defined spheres of responsibility

I don’t feel like a rector or a leader. I am part of a common creative process and a collective mind.

- Can an orchestra play without a conductor?

- An innovative experiment took place in Moscow in the early 1930s. The first conductorless symphony orchestra was called “Persimfans”, which stood for “First Symphonic Ensemble”. This experiment did not last long.

Musicians can play without a conductor in principle, but it would feel like artificial intelligence — completely soulless.

- Some skeptics claim that being a musician in Russia isn't as prestigious as it used to be. Would you agree?

- Despite the Russian Civil War raging in the 1920s, our founder, Mikhail Mikhailovich Ippolitov-Ivanov, who was then the Rector of the Moscow Conservatory, continued to create and establish new educational institutions, including our institute. He laid the foundation for the national system of musical education, which is now recognized as the best in the world.

During the 1990s, music culture found itself sidelined in the public eye. As the economy crumbled, the profession lost its status, leading to a decline in young people entering the field of music pedagogy. This is a rare profession. It’s hard to compare it to anything else in terms of the time, energy, and intellectual effort required to master it! The thread of time has snapped. In our profession, experience is passed down exclusively by word of mouth, and that is our greatest vulnerability. Not a single link

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in the chain of generations can be lost. Otherwise, the school’s centuries-old heritage might just disappear right in front of us.

It must be understood that great performers are born of great teachers. Likewise, without a great interpreter, we cannot truly grasp the composer's genius

Today, only a few professors of the outgoing generation maintain world-class standards in the country!

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- Isn't there any solution to tackle the growing crisis in our national music education?

- The main recipe lies in recognizing, across all levels, that musical culture is a fundamental element of the national cultural code. In 1992, we established the “Russian Performing Arts” Public Charitable Foundation, with the legendary Mstislav Rostropovich serving as its Honorary President. Our mission was to unite the musical community to preserve and develop the great traditions of the Russian school of performing arts.

In the 2000s, the Foundation provided financial support to young musicians, educators, and cultural figures. To this end, it established scholarships, prizes, and grants awarded on a competitive basis to the top students and teachers of music institutions. This had a positive impact on identifying a new generation of young musicians.

It is crucial to fine-tune the system of passing knowledge to future generations and to live up to the standard of our great teachers, who invested so much in us.

Russian performing arts are a priceless cultural heritage of the country. The Russian school of performance represents an entire era in world culture. Its creation is the result of centuries of 'crystallizing' the very best and most valuable aspects of global experience.

Russia possesses undisputed authority in musical culture, and losing it is not an option. It would be unethical, indeed criminal, to our great predecessors and to generations to come.

- How does music education compare in other countries—take China, for example?

- The Chinese authorities consider music education a top priority. In recent years, the country has placed a strong emphasis on developing cognitive abilities, which experts believe is primarily fostered by music education.

The Chinese have taken children's musical education very seriously. Drawing on Soviet experience, Beijing is implementing universal music education, and it has already become prestigious.

Everywhere in China where I’ve given masterclasses and performed with the Moscow Youth Chamber Orchestra, magnificent

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concert halls have been built and continue to be constructed, boasting excellent acoustics and high-tech equipment.

The Chinese aren't simply creating classrooms for musicians; they're building cutting-edge high-tech hubs. They are way ahead of us in this field.

- Western outlets are highlighting that the Japanese government is now prioritizing the integration of academic culture into the lives of its citizens ...

- A decade ago, our youth orchestra toured Japan. Despite being unknown there, we performed to full houses at every venue.

I asked the organizers how they manage to fill the halls and where all these classical music lovers come from. “In our country, - the Japanese told me, - employers encourage attending classical concerts by providing employees with free or discounted tickets. They understand well that exposure to high-quality music fosters personal growth, which in turn has a positive impact on career advancement”.

Tokyo alone has 10 conservatories with 2,000 students each! That’s three times more than in Moscow, where people already feel there are too many.

In Russia, every city with a population of over a million is expected to have its own opera house, symphony orchestra, and music college or conservatory. If we use that as a benchmark, then Moscow, with its 15 million people, should have at least fifteen conservatories!

Young talents from the provinces flock here to receive world-class professional polishing. Without it, they won't reach the global stage.

In the meantime, our expertise is under the international spotlight. Our methods are being widely embraced, and our teachers are in high demand abroad, receiving generous offers.

I asked some fellow teachers in Tokyo if all conservatory graduates work in their field. They told me that employers from all kinds of industries literally hunt for people with a musical background. It's believed that they are creative thinkers with faster

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reflexes, better imagination, and stronger intuition.

Education in Japan is expensive, but I’ve been told that most students don't study music to become professionals—they do it for their own personal growth.

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- Valery Iosifovich, you once said that “Sadly, the vast majority of Russians are cut off from classical music”. Is that still the case today?

- If fifteen years ago classical music concerts across the country saw half-empty halls, today the situation is changing for the better.

Not long ago, our scholarship recipients were actively performing in remote areas, where entire generations had grown up without ever seeing classical musicians. I was told they were received with standing ovations! It was hard to believe. I soon decided to visit and play at the local music school. Imagine my surprise when the crowd of classical music fans was so huge that they had to move the show to the town's biggest 600-seat venue. It was packed to the rafters! It just goes to show that people are hungry for genuine art.

However, the fact remains that the bulk of the Russian population is disconnected from our academic cultural achievements, as they receive little coverage on federal TV channels or in the media.

- Have you played any concerts in 'unfriendly' countries as a conductor or violinist since February 2022?

- Yes, I have performed with my orchestra and a small group of soloists in many countries, including 'unfriendly' ones like France, Austria, and Italy. We gave concerts dedicated to the 80th anniversary of the Great Victory, the jubilee of Fyodor Chaliapin, and the 300th anniversary of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Once again, we saw for ourselves that Russian culture is 'indestructible'!

- Do you believe there is a shift in the general European perception of Russia?

- Just a year ago, everything Russian was treated with caution, if not outright hostility, in Europe. Many of our artists were being "turned away," but things have improved now. Even Pope Francis was inspired by our concerts and Russian music, stating: "The unification of nations must begin from below!" He wanted to receive us at the Vatican, but unfortunately, he didn't have the chance—he passed away.

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At the same time, Zelensky is on every subway monitor in Rome and on every billboard. In other words, anti-Russian propaganda is everywhere. Yet, people living in the West still treat us like family. They truly love Russian music in Europe.

The tour of our youth orchestra in Algeria and Dubai, supported by the Moscow City Government Department for External Economic and International Relations (DEEIR), was a triumphant success. It featured a concert of classical masterpieces alongside a multimedia performance showcasing Moscow’s grandeur as a major global musical capital.

Our artists were welcomed like cosmonauts! The stage was decked out in Russian flags, and the crowd was chanting 'Russia! Russia!'. They wouldn't let the musicians leave the stage for fifteen minutes. Tears welled up in our eyes — we felt like representatives of a truly great country!

I don't recall such a roaring reception for musicians from Russia, even back in peaceful times.

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- Do you have a lot of international students at your institute today?

- We're seeing a lot of interest from Eurasia right now. Most of our students come from China, the CIS, and even African countries.

Even before the pandemic, we were visited by the president of an American university. As it turns out, our degree is highly sought after everywhere because the Ippolitov-Ivanov Institute holds the status of a lead federal music-pedagogical institution. Internationally, having a pedagogical degree is a very strong advantage. The Americans were even interested in creating a joint program with us; perhaps a time will come when this prospect becomes relevant again.

- How many future musicians are studying at Ippolitov-Ivanov Institute?

- We currently accommodate about 700 students, but the demand is much higher. To meet this need, we are looking to expand our property assets and acquire a dormitory.

- Excuse me, but where do out-of-town students live?

- For now, they have to find housing options on their own …

Originally, the Ippolitov-Ivanov Institute was a municipal institution under Moscow's authority and catered only to locals. Consequently, the building plans failed to incorporate a dormitory or a professional-grade concert hall.

Today, we are a university of federal significance. As Rector, I often host foreign guests who view our institution—named after Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov, one of the founders of the Russian musical education system—as the "Russian Harvard".

They'll finish their tea in my office and then go, "So, where's the institute anyway?" (laughs). They mistake it for my private office or just another admin building.

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The 100th anniversary of our institution was recently celebrated across the nation. The Institute has written glorious chapters in the history of our country's musical culture, producing numerous stars and national icons. However, figuratively speaking, it has long outgrown its old clothes. The time has come to bring its facilities and infrastructure in line with its status as one of the country's leading musical universities.

Today, as the world faces a new civilizational choice, the significance of Russian culture and education is growing dramatically. Furthermore, maintaining the leading position of the Russian performing arts school requires embracing the revolutionary transformations in digital technology. In this regard, the field of music education is in urgent need of an innovative platform to explore and implement new technologies within the learning process. Without this, we will be unable to maintain our leadership or expand the influence of Russian culture and music education.

- In your opinion, what is the best way to assist the institute?

- To achieve the goals set by the state and our related strategies and plans, it is essential to consolidate society as a whole and support the initiatives of all individuals and organizations concerned about the fate of the country and its culture.

Given the nature of the times we live in, we've adopted the 'sink or swim' DIY approach (laughs). We're focused on rallying public resources to fuel our own initiatives.

- Valery Iosifovich, have you considered actively developing ties with Moscow?

- We have long-standing ties with Moscow. It's worth noting that from our founding until the mid-1980s, our institution was under Moscow's jurisdiction.

We have developed the concept for the "Russia: A Musical Superpower" program, which includes projects designed to reflect the significance and mission of Moscow as a major global cultural capital.

This program includes the creation of the Moscow Musical Hall of Fame, the establishment of an International Award on behalf

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of Moscow and Russia to honor top achievements in global musical culture—an initiative we previously implemented with the legendary Maestro Rostropovich—and the development of the "City of Arts" cultural, educational, and outreach cluster. This cluster will bring together the capital's finest creative talents and serve as a major hub for education and leisure, connecting youth, residents, and visitors with the greatness of Russian culture. It will showcase the very best of Moscow’s creative community.

If we succeed in bringing this project and our forward-looking strategies to life, we can say that our time in this world was not spent in vain.

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