

# NIKITA KOSHKIN

*There was a time when the Russian guitarist-composer Nikita Koshkin found it difficult to travel abroad. The restrictions imposed on him lent even more glamor to the shadowy figure that had composed the startlingly brilliant *The Prince's Toys*; so much so that a kind of competition began to see who would who would be the first to succeed in bringing him to Britain. Chris Kilvington won that particular event, and Koshkin duly appeared at the 1992 Cambridge International Guitar Festival. This interview by Chris is a direct result of that occasion.*

*Nikita Koshkin's subsequent appearances outside his own country have been numerous, and invariably the result of efforts by individuals who believe in him and his work. It was Frank Koonce who brought him to the USA, arranged concerts for him and set up the process whereby his first recordings were made and issued. Thus it is no longer difficult to meet Nikita Koshkin. Instead of the myth we have the man; and it is more than a fair exchange. His expansive presence, his capacity for hard work and his demanding musical standards make him a prominent figure at international guitar festivals and competitions everywhere. He has taken his rightful place among the outstanding composer-guitarists of history, a line generated by Sor and Giuliani and continuing to our day in musicians like Leo Brouwer and Roland Dyens. CC*

**Chris Kilvington:** *You have never repeated the formula of *The Prince's Toys*, thus avoiding a tempting trap to which others have been more susceptible. Later works have all had their own particular identity; yet, in spite of all the different personalities of *Three Stations on one Road*, *Usher Waltz*, *The Elves Suite* and much more, your compositions still retain your own distinctive voice. How closely is that connected with your harmonic language?*

**Nikita Koshkin:** My harmony is quite traditional, a tonal language which derives from Prokofiev and Shostakovich. Inside the tonal language you are very free, not confined. If you think that tonality represents chains, then by all means cut them to be free — but you will not have real freedom because you are already not able to use something. Tonality can go in all possible directions.

As far as the architecture of the piece is concerned, I need a big solid foundation to keep the house in order. Tonality is that bedrock. I notice that many composers today are coming back to tonality, but I never went away from it. Take the tonality of C major. It does not mean you have only seven steps; you have twelve, all with equal weight. Every step is independent. My harmony is based more on intonation than on classical rules, founded on the melody and the feeling of the harmony.

Chromatic moves give a sense of drama, development and movement. It makes all the ingredients such as melody, harmony and rhythm very mobile. If you use chromatic steps quite infrequently, then this occasional intrusion gives more tension to the piece. It's the same with my 10-string guitar; I employ the basses

economically, and then there is the possibility that every appearance of a bass note will be beautiful. I don't want a chromatic salad. The use of chromatic movement, its rate and quantity, depend entirely on the piece.

I cannot feel harmony as something that is independent of melody — they are a single unity. I never write a melody and then harmonize it; always the two come together. Never once have I done otherwise.

You need aesthetic proportion. If you go beyond it, then it stops being art. Forte, double forte, fortissimo, all prolonged — where next? After a while it's just a noise, and the logical conclusion is the breaking of strings. It's a question of discipline. If you shout perpetually, the other person will not hear you. It starts to be boring.



Photo by Al Abrams

*Your work seems to bear out in architectural form what you say about proportion. What do you feel about musical shape?*

It's very easy to make a sculpture, or so it is said. You take a piece of basic stone and cut away what is not necessary. It's a little bit like this in composition. When a composer is confronted by a problem of shape, it's best to cut away rather than add. When I have some problems I let the music run in my head many times until I feel whether it's correct or not. It's not mathematics, but musical sensitivity. Every piece of music is a sort of life which you are creating, and each one has specific forces unique to itself and its development.

When I begin a piece I have no idea how it will end. Often I find that in fact I have started in the middle. Various details arrive, I start to feel how it will conclude, and from where it will arrive. I might feel that three balanced movements would be right, only to discover that one is enough, that the work is complete. So why say more? I'm not a complete slave to an original idea. Science makes us think, life makes us feel and art allows both things to happen simultaneously. In composition this just happens, and I cannot find an exact frontier between the two things. I do believe that my music is a very sincere work.

*We spent some time previously discussing ensemble music. Might this be a future development for you? It seem to me that your sense of line, harmony and rhythm could offer the ideal components for a quartet, for example.*

Well, certainly, for me ensemble music is a very attractive and promising possibility. It's a sort of geometric progression. Two guitars do not literally double the possibilities of one, but they do represent a dramatic widening of opportunities.

I will take up your suggestion. I will make a quartet, especially with my ideas for students. Students are not stupid. If they are to grow well, they must start with excellent examples of music. I am far from saying that I am excellent, but at least I can do my best. If they see someone trying, and also try themselves, then we play a part and something will come of it. Beginners must not start with silly music. Your idea is a very provocative one. I can see that it is vital to get a good balance across the parts; not difficult, but not empty. Students, according to my experience, like to have interesting music where they can feel the results, so the separate parts must be as interesting as possible.

Guitar ensembles usually have short pieces or transcriptions. A string quartet finds it perfectly possible to have just three pieces in their concert program. Two or more guitars can surely stand very important music.

*Do you feel your writing to be orchestral in nature?*  
Certainly. My musical education in Russia was anything but specifically centered on guitar. The composers I really appreciate are not guitar composers. I particularly enjoy the symphony orchestra, which can produce virtually anything. Nevertheless, the guitar is a rich instrument, with so many colors — a really diverse palette. Some of my own pieces, such as *The Prince's Toys*, *Piece with Clocks*, *Usher Waltz*, have an orchestral flavor in their sound, but transcription would be impossible. They are for guitar only, for specific use of guitar colors.

What I think helps me is that I also perform on the guitar. I think that those who do not are often incapable of treating various lines with equal importance, and the result is that the guitar sounds like a not very nice instrument. Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Rodrigo, Ponce, all produced good guitar sounds without being players, but they are fairly rare examples.

*You mentioned the impossibility of transcribing your works. What about transcription generally?*

I do prefer original works for the instrument, because so often when we transcribe music we lose so much. There are exceptions; Albéniz found a second life for his music through the guitar. And Bach; his work lies in musical meaning rather than orientation towards a specific instrument. Ultimately, it lies in how it is made, in its excellence.

*You have stated a preference for non-guitarist composers. Which ones do you most appreciate?*

I admire Tchaikovsky for his fantastic melodies, which are built upon excellent orchestration. There is a great mastery here, which is hidden within the score; great mastery of development, of the ability to create real drama. Prokofiev has a very fresh harmonic language. Shostakovich has excellent feeling of shape. Stravinsky's fine rhythms are marvellous; his approach to music was unusual in his time, and is still fresh. He could have achieved a more traditional melodic development, but chose not to do so. I love his music, it's absolutely great. And Mussorgsky too. I also very much appreciate the French impressionists, Ravel and Debussy, for their colorful scores; beautiful, aesthetic music. They certainly influenced me. Charles Ives I was shocked by, but I enjoyed his original ideas,

so different from what I was used to.

*Which guitar composers do you like?*

Well, Giuliani and Sor, naturally, and Villa-Lobos. And I love Britten's *Nocturnal* and the *Bagatelles* of William Walton. What a pity that he wrote nothing else; those Bagatelles are beautiful.

*What about guitar music composed more recently?*

Shostakovich said that a composer must not be afraid of being not modern, of using clear melody. He must believe in himself, in his ideas and work. If I need clear harmonies, I use them. I am not afraid of not using a so-called modern style. Some people are afraid of working directly; they work in a mist, and the result is hidden in a cloud of false notes, many of them completely unnecessary.

*Your opinions are generally strongly formed. Can I assume that your musical education provided you with a foundation upon which to build them?*

Well, certainly the Russian conservatories are of a very high level. The approach is wide, but not at the expense of quality. In the secondary schools it is absolutely obligatory for anyone studying music to study conducting as a specific discipline. The guitar can belong in the tradition of instruments such as the balalaika and domra, and our players of these instruments are excellent, but it is necessary to follow other

courses. Certainly, not every guitarist will become a conductor, but you are teaching how to work with music without touching an instrument. This is very important. Also in the Institute you must continue to develop your conducting skills for a further two years. Conducting really helps you to think properly as a soloist.

*You appear to have a liking for the waltz form. Can you say something about that?*

At first I was surprised myself. I didn't realize how much I was using it. The waltz is very attractive, not simply for dancing. In a traditional Russian waltz it is customary to present something deeper than simple dancing music. Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov can provide you with examples. We have a tradition of the concert waltz; there is the possibility for great expression with this rhythm. 3/4 is much softer and smoother than 4/4, which is square in movement, strong and strict. 3/4 is less exact and fixed, more sensitive. But to be honest, for me it just arrived naturally along with melody and harmony. Rhythm has an exact musical meaning; it's not merely a pulse, but also contains an image within it. When we hear it, just a beat, we also hear music arriving. Melody, harmony, rhythm, all arrive together. And I might also add that the changing of time signatures within a piece of otherwise strict rhythm makes for a promising conflict, and can create a lot of tension.

*In Voronezh during February 1992 I heard many young guitarists from your country. What did you think of them?*

This was the first real opportunity to see the young players from all over the ex-USSR. We did have some competition, but only between players from secondary schools, and only Russians. And the guitar was only part of the whole business, along with all the folk instruments. Frankly, I was very surprised and delighted — as I think you were yourself — at the high level of performance. It was an occasion that revealed not only fine students but also fine teachers.

*As readers of this magazine will know, a favorite subject of mine is teaching the early learning of the upper fingerboard. Have you any thoughts about that?*

It is an excellent idea. I have always been meeting the problems of wide frets, distorted left elbow, undue pressure, and so on. The only thing is that we do not yet have the pieces, and I will start now and support your idea. We can collaborate if you wish, and begin to make a new repertoire for a new school of tuition. According to my experience, it looks a very attractive



Courtesy Classical Guitar Magazine

idea. It is so hard for little children to start in first position. Now we must stop talking, and I must write music.

*...And he did. Within hours he had composed four cleverly written pieces. The following day he wrote the first short movement of a work for my guitar duo. He was rarely without a guitar in his hand, and with several days free in Cambridge after the Festival he also finished for me a solo piece that had first seen the light of day in a hotel room in Voronezh. He works very quickly. He has a mercurial character which spans more than the usual emotional extremities, and as a Gemini myself I can understand this. Whether motivated by sparkling sunny inspiration or by a dark melancholy, he appears capable of writing music of high quality virtually at will. Is this the 'Russian soul' he speaks of? The artistic nature of a descendant of Turgenev? Or simply Nikita Koshkin himself?*

**CK**