*Everything in Motion and Flow*

The Journey of German Tcakulov – A Portrait by Florian Olters

A soulful sound, earthy and warmly grounded, yet mysterious and dark, expansive and profound, extraordinarily rich in color: this describes the viola tone of German Tcakulov in a most distinctive and uniquely personal way. He seems to literally sing and speak with and through the viola. In his playing, certain colorations predominate—fir green or brown—colors that prevail in his homeland: the Caucasus. He comes from Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia-Alania. True to its name, this major city rules over the Caucasus.

**Origins in the Caucasus**

The Caucasus—that dramatic mountain range stretching between Europe and Asia, with its towering peaks, endless expanses, and dense forests, extraordinarily rich in languages and cultures—this is where German grows up and finds his way, through various paths, to his instrument: the viola. As so often happens, this journey leads through the violin first. "Actually, I wanted to play viola from very early on," German confides, "but in Russia, there's no viola instruction for children like there is in Western Europe, at least not at public music schools."

At the very beginning, though, there is the piano. "We had a piano at home, and my mother always enjoyed making music. At seven years old, I took piano lessons with her former teacher. But I soon found the instrument rather boring, too mechanical. It didn't bring me joy."

Alongside these lessons, German attends concerts with his mother at the Vladikavkaz Philharmonic—a venue he still raves about today. "It was an old German Lutheran church that had been converted into a concert hall during Soviet times. Its acoustics are among the best in all of Russia." In this remarkable setting, young German listens to the Vladikavkaz Philharmonic perform. One day, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony rings out. "When the fugato began in the first movement, I could feel the chairs vibrating beneath me. I was especially fascinated by the deeper sounds, the vibrations and resonances."

Visually, too, German finds the string instruments captivating. "I absolutely didn't care whether it was violin, viola, cello, or double bass—as long as it had strings. The sight of bows moving across strings impressed me immediately. I was eight years old, and from then on I dreamed of playing a stringed instrument myself."

Soon German learns that his grandfather had played several instruments. "My mother told me that we also had a violin at home. I discovered it somewhere and claimed it for myself." The violin had no strings, no bridge, nothing—just the body and a bow. "But I found it beautiful, an old German instrument from Saxony. I would stand in front of the mirror and pretend to play. No sound came out, but I moved the bow back and forth through the air. I became so obsessed that I desperately wanted to play violin. I completely wore down my parents, saying over and over again that I wanted to play violin. But I had already started piano and quit after two or three months."

**Piano – Violin – Viola**

So, his mother waits, expecting her son to forget the violin—just as he had the piano before. But shortly after, his father intervenes because his son engages so intensively and continuously with the violin. "In my free time, I crafted violins from paper, also cellos, various instruments—a small orchestra made entirely of paper." Private lessons? Not even to be considered, far too expensive for the family.

His mother promptly takes her son to the state-funded and therefore free Music School No. 1 in Vladikavkaz—the same school she herself had attended. "The director asked me a few questions: what I wanted and why I wanted it. I told her about the concert and the violin without strings." The director is astounded. "You know, in forty years of professional experience I've never encountered a child who voluntarily wants to play violin," she tells German's mother. "You must speak with the department head. She's the best violin teacher in the Caucasus."

Two days later, they visit an elderly lady who, though she no longer typically takes new students, says to German: "Give me your little hands." She examines his hands, plays notes and taps rhythms that little German should imitate. "My mother said I sang incredibly off-key. Really terrible." She even apologizes for German's singing, but the teacher replies curtly: "Oh, boys are always slower in development."

So, violin lessons begin, but from the start the teacher is convinced that German will eventually switch to viola. She brings this up repeatedly. "She was very pragmatic," German reflects today. "A good violist will always find employment, she would say. There are many good violinists. She told me that I should choose viola at every opportunity. Perhaps I became a violist partly because she said it so persistently."

And then comes the pivotal moment: At a concert during intermission, German sees a viola up close for the first time. "I secretly plucked the open strings, and from that moment on I only wanted to play viola." To help him become better acquainted with the viola's voice, his teacher gives him recordings of violist Yuri Bashmet. German is immediately captivated by one recording: Alfred Schnittke's Viola Concerto. "This impression completely overwhelmed me and has remained in my memory to this day." The depth, the sound volume, the warmth, the sonority: "When I heard this sound, I was totally fascinated. Like the human voice. It spoke to me directly. I had never felt that way with the violin."

Young German promptly tunes down his violin strings to achieve the viola's tuning. "From then on, I practiced half the time with the lower tuning. That was pure joy for me." At twelve years old, German finally wants to switch completely to viola, but the viola teacher at the Vladikavkaz College—an institution between music school and conservatory—resists this decision. "There was this cliché then that poor violinists switch to viola. But he thought I played violin very well. He couldn't understand that I simply found the viola's sound more beautiful."

For the final step to viola, young German must wait a while longer, until he reaches the Music Special School of the Conservatory in St. Petersburg. "As a child, I was totally fascinated by the word 'conservatory.' Right after my first music lesson, it became immediately clear to me that I would become a musician. Students from the conservatories in Petersburg and Moscow would regularly come to us in Vladikavkaz to teach masterclasses. I also wanted to study at such a conservatory."

**From Vladikavkaz to St. Petersburg**

At thirteen, German first seriously considers going to Petersburg. He knows the city well, especially since family relatives live there. "Of course, the Music Special School of the Petersburg Conservatory came to mind, but I thought I wasn't good enough for it." After all, it's a school for the highly gifted—Mariss Jansons, Grigori Sokolov, and Mischa Maisky all studied there. "We hadn't even considered it initially. I traveled to Petersburg with my mother to audition at a college when I was fourteen. We submitted an application for the entrance exam and spoke with the director."

But German is still too young for the college—he still needs supervision, like what's available at the Special Music School next door, which has boarding facilities. German's aunt in Petersburg knows a teacher at the Special Music School and intervenes on his behalf. The entrance exams for the Special Music School are technically over, but German auditions anyway, borrowing a teacher's violin. Her violin class is already full, she explains. "Actually, I want to play viola," bursts out of German.

The teacher is both astonished and delighted. "We have the best professor for viola here, from the Petersburg Conservatory," she says, and arranges for German to meet Vladimir Stopichev. German auditions for him while his mother watches. Stopichev says nothing, doesn't react—a reserve typical of his nature. That evening, German's mother calls the professor, speaks with him, pleads with him. He accepts German, apparently wanting to test how important this opportunity is to both German and his family. Life in Petersburg can begin.

For German and his family, it becomes clear very early that Vladikavkaz would no longer suffice—that he must go to another city to continue his musical education. "Teachers had said this too, but it was a gradual process. I didn't have to convince anyone, not even my mother. However, it was important to her that I be properly supervised—that's why St. Petersburg made sense, where we had relatives."

During his first years at the Special Music School, German regularly stays with his aunt and uncle and their children. "Of course, I was very homesick at first, but once I had settled into the boarding school routine, I didn't want to leave anymore." German flourishes, completely in his element—music becomes his world. He plays and practices constantly, and when all the practice rooms in the Special Music School are occupied, he simply plays in the laundry room—for hours, in the middle of the boarding school's hustle and bustle, which he completely blocks out.

German attends the Special Music School from ages fourteen to nineteen, then transitions directly to the conservatory—into the class of his teacher Vladimir Stopichev, who wants to continue training German as a student, having already taken him to competitions.

**From Petersburg to Germany and Austria**

His studies at the Petersburg Conservatory begin in 2009, and already in 2011 German takes the bold leap to Berlin, where Tabea Zimmermann teaches at the "Hanns Eisler" University of Music. Through internet recordings and CDs, he discovers Tabea Zimmermann's artistry. "Her perfection and sound shaping totally fascinated me. I was determined to study in Berlin." His mother cannot understand this decision at first. "She told me she couldn't help me financially. My parents aren't wealthy. She couldn't support me more than she already was."

But German remains undeterred: "I was convinced that I would somehow make it work. I didn't realize that in Germany you can apply to several music universities simultaneously for safety. I only auditioned in Berlin at 'Hanns Eisler.'" It works on the first try—only later does German realize how fortunate he was. In Berlin, he earns additional money busking on the streets. With Tabea Zimmermann, he completes both his bachelor's and master's degrees and eventually becomes her assistant.

As a lecturer, he teaches not only at the "Hanns Eisler" University of Music but also at the Music University in Munich. In Munich, German also serves for several years as a permanent viola member of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra before being appointed as viola professor at the Music University in Karlsruhe. Since October 2024, German has been teaching as viola professor at the University Mozarteum in Salzburg.

German began teaching early as well—it was, in a sense, part of his heritage, since his maternal grandparents and aunts were themselves educators. "Already at ten years old, I knew I wanted to be active in music education—from the very beginning," German reveals. At ten, he was already teaching children in Vladikavkaz, initially on violin. At the Petersburg Special Music School, he expanded to teaching all kinds of instruments—flute, trombone, piano, cello.

**Work in Progress**

"The beautiful thing about teaching is that you learn so much for yourself in the process. The combination of teaching and performing is fascinating, especially as it reflects the versatility inherent in music itself. Orchestra, chamber music, solo work, Baroque, Classical, contemporary music, connections to other arts—all of this in relation to the viola is magnificent. I see my role as a professor in expanding my students' horizons. It cannot be the sole goal to obtain a permanent position in an orchestra."

Of course, that represents "wonderful security," but as German emphasizes: "There's so much more! I experience the teaching activity and pedagogical responsibility for the next generation as the greatest enrichment in my professional, artistic life. It fills me with the greatest joy to pass on the knowledge and understanding as well as the passion for music that was always conveyed to me by great, fantastic personalities—now to share this with young generations myself. It's a process of searching, of continuous learning. One never stands still—everything is in constant change, everything in motion, in flow."