*Everything in motion and in flux*

The trajectory of German Tcakulov – A portrait by Florian Olters

A soulful sound, earthy and warm, yet mysterious and dark, wide and deep, extremely colorful: this is what distinguishes German Tcakulov's viola sound in a very special, unique way. He seems to literally sing and speak with and through the viola. His playing is dominated by colors that are prevalent in his homeland, the Caucasus: fir green and brown. He comes from Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia-Alania. As its name suggests, this large city dominates the Caucasus.

**Origin: the Caucasus**

The Caucasus is a high mountain range between Europe and Asia with towering peaks, endless expanses, and dense forests, and is also rich in languages and cultures. This is where German grows up and, after a few detours, finds his instrument: the viola. As is so often the case, he comes to the viola by way of the violin, but: "Actually, I wanted to play the viola from a very early age," German reveals. "However, in Russia there are no viola lessons for children like there are in Western Europe, at least not at public music schools."

And at that time, there is no instrument available for German in Vladikavkaz. However, he starts out on the piano. "We had a piano at home, and my mother always enjoyed playing music. When I was seven, I took piano lessons from her former teacher. But I soon found the instrument rather boring, too mechanical. I didn't enjoy it." German also attends concerts with his mother at the Vladikavkaz Philharmonic. German still raves about the philharmonic today.

"It was an old German Lutheran church that was converted into a concert hall during the Soviet era. Its acoustics are among the best in Russia." It is here that German listened to the Vladikavkaz Philharmonic Orchestra as a child. One day, Ludwig van Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* was performed. "When the fugato began in the first movement, I could feel the chairs vibrating. I was particularly fascinated by the deeper sounds, the vibrations and oscillations."

German also finds the string instruments beautiful to look at. "I didn't care whether it was a violin, viola, cello or double bass, as long as it was a string instrument. The bows on the strings: that impressed me immediately. I was eight years old, and from then on I dreamed of playing a string instrument myself." German soon learns that his grandfather had played several instruments. "My mother told me that we also had a violin at home. I found it somewhere and took it for myself."

The violin had no strings, no bridge, nothing, just the body and a bow. "But I thought it was beautiful, an old German instrument from Saxony. I stood in front of the mirror and pretended to play. No sound came out – I simply moved the bow silently through the air. I was so fanatical that I desperately wanted to play the violin. I annoyed my parents terribly, telling them repeatedly that I wanted to play the violin. But I had already started playing the piano and given up after two or three months."

**Piano – violin – viola**

His mother waits and expects her son to forget about the violin, just as he has forgotten the piano. But a little later, his father intervenes because his son is so intensely and constantly preoccupied with the violin – he is totally fanatical. "In my free time, I made violins out of paper, cellos too, various instruments – a small orchestra made of paper." Private lessons? Out of the question, far too expensive for the family. Without further ado, his mother takes her son to the state-run and therefore free music school No. 1 in Vladikavkaz. She herself once attended this school.

"The headmistress 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 headmistress is stunned. "You know, in forty years of professional experience, I have never met a child who wants to play the violin voluntarily," she says to German's mother. "You need to talk to the department head. She is the best violin teacher in the Caucasus." No sooner said than done, two days later they go to see Mrs. Madorwskaja, an elderly lady. She doesn't take any more students, but she says to German: "Give me your little hands."

She examines his hands, plays notes and taps out rhythms for little German to copy. "My mother said I sang incredibly badly. Really awful." She even apologizes for German's singing, but the teacher replies curtly: "Oh, boys are always slower to develop." So, he starts with the violin, but from the very beginning, the teacher is convinced that German will switch to the viola: eventually. She brings it up again and again, talks to him about it nonstop.

"She was very pragmatic," German says today. "A good violist will always find a good job, she said. There are lots of good violinists. She told me that I should choose the viola at every opportunity. Maybe that's why I became a violist, because she said it so often." And then comes the key moment: during the intermission at a concert, German sees a viola up close for the first time. "I secretly plucked the empty strings, and from then on, I only wanted to play the viola."

To help him get to know the sound of the viola better, his teacher gives him records featuring the violist Yuri Bashmet. German is immediately captivated by one recording in particular: Alfred Schnittke's Viola Concerto. "That impression blew me away and has stayed with me to this day." The depth, the volume, the warmth, the sonority: "When I heard that sound, I was completely fascinated. Like the human voice. It spoke to me directly. I had never felt that way with the violin."

The young German promptly tunes his violin strings down to match the viola. "Since then, I've spent half my time practicing with a lower tuning. It was a dream come true for me." At the age of twelve, German finally wants to switch to the viola completely, but his viola teacher at the college in Vladikavkaz, an institution halfway between a music school and a conservatory, wouldn't hear of it. "There was this cliché back then that bad violinists switched to the viola. But he thought I played the violin very well. He couldn't understand why I liked the sound better. "

The young German has to wait for a while before finally making the switch to the viola, until he is accepted into the music school of the conservatory in St. Petersburg. "As a child, I was totally fascinated by the word 'conservatory'. After my very first music lesson, I knew immediately that I wanted to be a musician. Students from the conservatories in St. Petersburg and Moscow often came to Vladikavkaz to teach us. I wanted to study at a conservatory like that."

**From Vladikavkaz to St. Petersburg**

At the age of 13, German first thinks about going to St. Petersburg. He knows the city well, especially since relatives of his family live there. "Of course, the music school at the St. Petersburg Conservatory came to mind, but I didn't think I was good enough." After all, it is a school for highly gifted students. Mariss Jansons, Grigori Sokolov, and Mischa Maisky have also studied there. "We didn't even consider it. I went to St. Petersburg with my mother to visit a college when I was 14. We applied for the entrance exam and also spoke with the director."

But German is still too young for college. He needs more support, like at the special music school next door, which has a boarding school. German's aunt in St. Petersburg knows a teacher at the special music school and gets involved. The entrance exams for the special music school are already over, but German plays the violin for one of the teachers. She says her violin class is already full. "Actually, I'd like to play the viola," German blurts out.

The teacher is amazed and enthusiastic. "We have the best viola professor here, from the St. Petersburg Conservatory," she says, speaking to Vladimir Stopitschew. German plays for him, his mother is there. He says nothing, shows no reaction. That's his reserved nature. His mother calls the professor in the evening, talks to him, begs him. He accepts German, probably wanting to see how important it is to him and how much his family supports him. German buys a simple viola for less than 100 euros. Life in St. Petersburg can begin.

**Special music school and conservatory**

It becomes clear to German and his family very early on that Vladikavkaz would no longer suffice—that he would have to move to another city to continue his education. "The teachers said so too, but it was a process. I didn't have to convince anyone, not even my mother. However, it was important to her that I was under control—that's why we chose St. Petersburg, where we had relatives." During his first years at the special music school, German regularly visits his aunt and uncle, cousin, and cousin.

"Of course, I was very homesick at first, but once I had settled into the boarding school, I didn't want to leave." German thrives and is completely in his element – music. He plays and practices, and when the rehearsal rooms at the special music school are occupied, he plays in the laundry room – for hours on end, amid the hustle and bustle of the boarding school, which he completely blocks out. German attends the special music school from the age of 14 to 19, before moving straight on to the conservatory – into the class of his teacher Vladimir Stopitschew. He wants to continue German's training as a student and has already taken him to competitions.

**From St. Petersburg to Germany and Austria**

He began his studies at the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 2009, and in 2011 German took the plunge and moves to Berlin, where Tabea Zimmermann is teaching at the Hanns Eisler Academy of Music. He discovers Tabea Zimmermann through recordings on the internet and CDs. "Her perfection and tone production totally fascinated me. I wanted to go to Berlin." At first, his mother couldn't understand. "She told me she couldn't help me. My parents aren't rich. They couldn't support me financially any more than they already were."

But: "I was convinced that I would make it somehow. I didn't know that you could apply to several music academies in Germany at the same time – just to be on the safe side. I only auditioned in Berlin at the Hanns Eisler." It works right away, with a top grade of 1.0. It is only later that German realizes how lucky he had been. In Berlin, he earns extra money as a street musician. At the Hanns Eisler School, he does not initially study with Tabea Zimmermann, but he attends her classes often and regularly.

In 2012, German becomes her student, completing his studies with Tabea Zimmermann, and becomes her assistant. As a lecturer, he teaches not only at the Hanns Eisler University of Music, but also at the University of Music in Munich. He also works for several years as a permanent member of the viola section at the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (BR) before being appointed professor of viola at the University of Music in Karlsruhe. Since October 2024, German is professor of viola at the Mozarteum University in Salzburg.

German also began teaching at an early age. It is, in a sense, in his blood, as his maternal grandparents were professors themselves and his aunts are teachers. "I knew from the age of 10 that I wanted to be a music teacher – right from the start," German reveals. At the age of 10, he was already teaching children in Vladikavkaz, at that time still on the violin. At the Special Music School in St. Petersburg, German teaches all kinds of instruments, including the flute, trombone, piano, and cello.

**Work in progress**

"The beauty of teaching is that you learn a lot for yourself in the process. The combination of teaching and playing is very interesting, especially as it reflects the versatility of music. Orchestra, chamber music or solo, baroque, classical, contemporary music, other arts: all of this in combination with the viola is wonderful. I see my role as a professor as broadening the horizons of my students. Getting a permanent position in an orchestra cannot be the only goal."

Of course, that is a "nice security," but: "There is so much more! I consider teaching and the educational responsibility for the next generation to be the greatest enrichment in my professional and artistic life. It fills me with great joy to now pass on to the younger generations the knowledge and passion for music that I have always been taught by great, fantastic personalities. It's a process of searching and continuous learning. You never stand still, it's constant change – everything is in motion, in flux."