

The Brightest of Lives

An address by Natalya Ushmanova, May 2007

The whole country was shocked when Mstislav Rostropovich died earlier this year.

Rostropovich was a world-famous cellist, a musician, an accomplished pianist, a brilliant conductor, a true friend, a man who was so kind, generous, very witty and charming. He was renowned as one of the greatest instrumentalists of the 20th Century.

As a cellist, Rostropovich played a vast repertory that included works written for him by some of the greatest composers, such as Shostokovich, Prokofiev and Benjamin Britten. He was able to make his cello sing. People stopped breathing when listening to his cello.

Rostropovich was also an accomplished pianist. He was often the accompanist at recitals by his wife, the Russian soprano Galina Vishnevskaya.

And still, a few years ago he said, 'If I am asked which of my deeds I can be proud of, I would answer that they were not connected with music.'

Then what was it? What was so important for that man? It was freedom. Freedom and independence. You, people of Scotland, can understand better than anybody else.

So Rostropovich became famous well beyond musical circles, as a symbol of artistic conscience and his defiance of the Soviet regime. He was the only one among great Soviet artists who didn't remain silent about the suppression of creativity by the party authorities. His own troubles began in the 70s when out of the frustration with the suppression of writers, artists and musicians he sent an open letter of protest to *Pravda*, the main Soviet paper. *Pravda* didn't publish it, but western newspapers did.

'Explain to me please, why in our literature and art so often people absolutely incompetent in this field have the final word,' Rostropovich asked in his letter. 'Every man must have the right fearlessly to think independently and express his opinion about what he knows and what he has personally thought about and experienced, and not merely to express with slightly different variations the opinion which has been inculcated in him.'

'I will not utter one single lie in order to return,' Rostropovich said in 1977. 'And once there, if I see new injustice, I will speak out four times more loudly than before.'

Once, Ekaterina Furtseva, who was the minister of culture at that time, called on him and told him to replace one of the musicians in his orchestra. He answered her, 'Madam, here's my baton. Take it please. When you are a conductor instead of me, you can replace any musician you like.'

When he was on tours of Russian cities and towns, the halls were often empty because his performances had not been announced at all. He lost every opportunity to give his talent to people which was a real disaster for him. He started having a drink problem and his wife, wishing to save him, suggested that they should emigrate. She thought that was the only way to save him.

So he had to leave the country together with his family; his wife Galina Vishnevskaya - one of the most talented opera singers in Russia, the prima donna of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, and their two daughters. They left everything there; their native land, their property, friends and audience. They had no luggage at all. They had to begin their life abroad from zero. They both, Rostropovich and Vishnevskaya, made a brilliant career again, now abroad. In this way, Rostropovich insisted on his right to be free in his private life and independent in his creative activity. Rostropovich was lucky - he managed to escape.

Pushkin, who also protected his right to be free and independent in his creative activity wrote about it in his verses and said so to the Tsar's face. However he didn't have an opportunity to leave the country. Tsar Nicholas 1 never allowed the poet to go abroad, Pushkin couldn't even go to his family estate to work there quietly. Instead the Tsar made him attend all the main balls, where his beautiful wife was the main decoration, though the poet was full of creative plans and was eager to work. Instead he had exiles, prosecutions, lack of money interdictions and censorship. Post office officials were allowed to read his personal letters and their content was reported to the tsar.

You can see the depth of responsibility of the government, the society and even his friends for the tragic outcome of the conflict. The Russian authorities disrespected talent, and the life of a genius was neglected in Russia.

I believe that both Rostropovich and Pushkin were winners and happy men. They both had a joyful youth, they married the women they loved. They lived the brightest of lives. They left themselves to us in music and verses, records and books. It's a great pity that Pushkin is so difficult to translate, otherwise you would be able to understand why those Russians are so crazy about their Pushkin. However vexed the question of translating Pushkin, we do at least now have the whole of his works translated into either good prose or competent verse in English.

So don't say with sadness, 'They left us.' Say with gratitude, 'They've been in our lives.'