

Viktoría Mullova

From Moscow to Rio

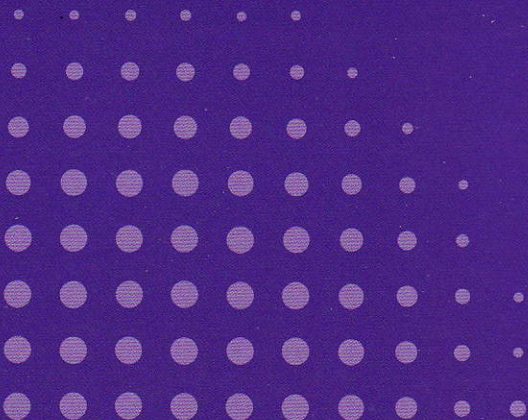
From Finland's brooding forests in the icy north, to the sultry tropics of South America – by way of the rugged, Romantic charms of Germany – violinist Viktoría Mullova is embarking on a globetrotting, not to say time-travelling, musical voyage in her four contrasting concerts across Sage Gateshead's 2018/19 Classical Season. 'I find it really exciting to play different types of music,' she explains, 'and to change the style of my playing.'

Her continent-hopping sonic adventures are partly inspired, perhaps, by the life-changing travels that Mullova herself made earlier in her career. Initially trained in Soviet Russia – with intensive studies at the revered Moscow Conservatoire – Mullova won the prestigious Sibelius Competition in Helsinki in 1980, and defected to the West just three years later. During a recital tour in Finland, she drove across the border to Luleå in Sweden,

catching a flight to Stockholm – only to discover that her intended destination, the US Embassy, was closed for the 4 July celebrations. She hid out in a hotel room for two days, not even daring to go outside. Shortly afterwards, however, she was welcomed into the US, and Mullova didn't return to Russia until the thaw in 1991.

Her rigorous, uncompromising Soviet musical training no doubt formed Mullova's fearsome technique – but since then she's thrown herself enthusiastically into the sheer richness and variety of music she felt she was missing out on. Mullova is now one of the most outward-looking musicians around – just as curious and inquisitive about Bach and Beethoven as she is about jazz, pop, rock and more.

And accordingly, the furthest-flung of her four Gateshead concerts takes us all the way to Brazil for an event on 25 September that Mullova calls *Stradivarius in Rio*, bringing together intimate chamber arrangements of laid-back Brazilian jazz and pop songs. 'I just love playing this kind of music, because it's so free,' she explains. 'There are lots of opportunities for improvisation between us – it's a lot of fun.' This is music that clearly matters to her just as much as her classical repertoire. 'It's such beautiful music,' she enthuses, 'and I don't think it's very different from the language of classical composers like Schubert or Mozart. This music is no less important to me, in terms of its melody and harmony – the pieces are absolutely stunning.'



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But alongside her wide-ranging musical explorations, there are still plenty of established classics across Mullova's four concerts. On 21 March, she gives a recital of three contrasting sonatas by Beethoven with pianist Alasdair Beatson – from the relaxed lyricism of the aptly titled 'Spring' Sonata (No.5) to the stormy extroversion of the magnificent 'Kreutzer' Sonata (No.9). Here, too, Mullova is deeply influenced by her musical explorations, in this case into Baroque performance. 'I'm going to be playing the Beethoven sonatas with gut strings and a classical bow, and we'll also be using a fortepiano,' she explains. She'll also be playing her 1750 Guarneri violin, which she finds lighter and more agile in this earlier music than her regular 'Jules Falk' Stradivarius from 1723.

Leaping forward to more recent times, Mullova's other big focus across two of her four concerts is Sibelius, a composer who's been with her throughout her career. It was with his passionate, virtuosic Violin Concerto that she won the Sibelius Competition back in 1980, and she returns to it on 29 September with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and conductor Thomas Dausgaard.

It's one of the most loved and respected Concertos in the repertoire, and a piece she must have played dozens of times throughout her career. How does she go about keeping it fresh, for herself and for her listeners? 'First of all, I have to be alive to it myself,' she explains, 'and also very close to the music. If I just play it automatically, the same way I've always played it, it becomes routine – and that's just not music.' There's more Sibelius, too, in Mullova's concert with Royal Northern Sinfonia on 3 May, but this time it's a collection of lesser-known but equally evocative works: his lyrical Second Serenade, and two of his inventive *Humoresques*. 'I haven't actually played those pieces before,' Mullova admits, 'but I've always wanted to learn them, and this is a fantastic opportunity!'

It's in that same May concert that Mullova also plays the astonishing *Fratres* by Estonian spiritual composer Arvo Pärt. And it's a piece she's keen to draw attention to. 'I've just started to play his music, and I love playing *Fratres*. It's absolutely beautiful, and I find that audiences love his music as well – it's very approachable.'

It's an extensive, expansive repertoire that Mullova brings to Gateshead. How does she balance all the different styles of music she plays, to remain authentic to their contrasting styles? 'To me, it's all just music, and I treat music in the same way whatever it is. If you want to play a piece of music, you need to ask yourself what you want to say with it, and what you want other people to enjoy about it. That's the same whatever the music is.'

David Kettle