

# The last time Nikolaj Znaider was in Edinburgh he conducted the RSNO, but this week he'll be the soloist in Bruch's First Violin Concerto. It's a piece he's loved for 30 years, he tells David Kettle

**S**téphane is my big French cuddly big brother!" Violinist Nikolaj Znaider is enthusing about Stéphane Denève, one of his most intimate musical associates, he explains – and well known to Scottish audiences, too, of course, as Music Director of the RSNO up until 2012. It's Denève and his new band, the Brussels Philharmonic, who join Znaider for his Usher Hall concert on 12 November, the culmination of a four-date UK tour.

Friendship, Znaider continues, is increasingly important to him when it comes to performing. "As I'm getting older – I don't quite have grey hairs yet, but I'm getting close – I feel if you know someone and like them, especially outside music, then it's that much more pleasurable to make music together."

But typically of Znaider, behind the disarming humour, there's an endearing frankness to his insights into performing music with friends. "For me, music is very intimate, very private," he admits. "Something where I feel very vulnerable, very exposed. You want to come off stage and feel like there's nothing more you could have given. And if you experience that with someone you know and like, that's wonderful."

It shouldn't be surprising to hear Znaider talk in such intense, heartfelt terms. He's been hailed for decades as one of our most gifted and perceptive violinists – or, strictly speaking, all-round musicians. Born in Denmark to Polish parents, he found himself travelling from an early age, first for

study and later as a performer. With such an international background, where does he call home? "Doing music the way I'm doing it, as a kind of itinerant musician, you almost become a permanent, self-imposed exile," he explains. "Except for three times when I don't feel in exile: one is when I'm with family; the second is when I'm in nature – outside the city, somewhere you can't hear cars; and the third is in music."

Exile – that's a strong word. Isn't it a sad state to feel you're in? "It's okay," he says. "It's not that I feel not at home, just not connected to a specific piece of dirt." Which is understandable, given his multinational background. "But maybe you're right – maybe I should feel sad about it..." he muses. "Thanks very much for the psychotherapy – I appreciate what you've done and you can send me the bill afterwards."

Speaking of analysis, Znaider admits he approaches music in quite an analytical way – the result of a surprisingly early childhood immersion.

"When I was about 12, Isaac Stern came to Denmark and I played for him," he explains. "He was very kind, but he said: 'This boy doesn't know what he's doing.' Which was true. Well, I was only 12. But he said I should have music theory lessons, music history, analysis, so my parents arranged them. I had a very good teacher – Axel Matthiesen – who was very strict with me. When I was about 14 or 15, he told me to come and do some formal analysis with his composition students. They must have been thinking: 'What's this little boy doing here?'"

He accepts that this analytical way of approaching music – rare in soloists – feeds into his performances. "You can get so caught up in the physicality of playing. Itzhak Perlman said that playing the violin is so difficult that by the time you can play a note that doesn't sound terrible, you're already 25. So it's good to look at things from a theoretical point of view. I use a lot of that analysis in my conducting now."

Indeed, the last time Znaider appeared in Edinburgh's Usher Hall, it was as a



Znaider's playing was never same after the personal intervention of Isaac Stern. Below right: conductor Stéphane Denève. Below left: the Brussels Philharmonic



**'Suddenly these three little people arrive and – no, it was never about me at all'**

conductor rather than a violinist, in front of the RSNO last May. Directing orchestras from the podium has played an increasingly central role in his music making for more than a decade. "I wanted to conduct from very early in my life," he explains. "I fell in love with the symphonic and the operatic repertoire, and I knew I had to do that as well as playing the violin."

And as a respected soloist, he was lucky to gain access to some influential conducting figures. "I think Daniel Barenboim was my first teacher," he remembers. "He was the first person who explained to me what a conductor actually does, and how they rehearse. It wasn't until I started to conduct properly myself that I realised you have to teach your brain to look at music in a different way." How would Znaider describe that difference? "As an instrumentalist you're almost learning music from the details outwards, but as a conductor you're learning it from the structure, then adding in the details later on."

For his Usher Hall concert with Denève, however, he'll be on his violin – a 1741 Guarneri "del Gesù" previously played by Fritz Kreisler, no less – and he'll

be performing one of the cornerstones of his instrument's repertoire. "The Bruch First Concerto is a wonderful piece," he enthuses. "I've been playing it for – well, it must be almost 30 years now. You could probably wake me up in the middle of the night and I'd happily play it to you. In a good way, of course – there are some pieces where you just know you're going to have a lifelong dance with the music. You return to them again and again, and you learn something more about them each time."

Znaider is only in his early 40s, but questions of ageing and maturing keep returning to our conversation, both in his current perspective on music he knew as a teenager, and also in his life away from music. "I have three kids of my own now," he reminds me, emphasising how this new generation has changed his perspective

on his own activities. "The first 30 or so years of my life were all about music and myself and my navel-gazing. Then suddenly these three little people arrive and – no, it was never about me at all." How does he feel about them pursuing

musical careers themselves? "A child should never pick music as a profession," he states flatly.

That's quite some assertion from one of the world's most respected players. But he hasn't finished. "It's not a profession you pick – it should be something you can't imagine not doing."



**Nikolaj Znaider performs**

**Bruch's Violin Concerto No 1 with the Brussels Philharmonic and conductor Stéphane Denève at the Usher Hall, Edinburgh, on 12 November, 3pm**