

On tour with her baby boy, cellist Sol Gabetta has just realised that she's revisiting her own childhood with Basel Symphony Orchestra and Saint-Saëns, writes David Kettle

I'm not doing many interviews at the moment," Sol Gabetta warns me. She has a good excuse, though: a three-month-old son. "At the time when you need to be available to talk, you have to change him, or give him something to eat."

Her newborn is inevitably causing a serious rethink of the international cellist's activities. The understandable impact on interviews is one thing. But how is Gabetta's new arrival affecting her performances?

"I'm still trying to do everything I can," she says. "The calendar is already planned about three years in advance, and I don't want to start cancelling things."

That calendar includes a three-stop UK tour this month, which kicks off next Sunday with Saint-Saëns' lively, lyrical First Cello Concerto in Edinburgh's Usher Hall, part of a concert from the Basel Symphony Orchestra under Ivor Bolton. "Until now I've been travelling with my family," Gabetta continues, "and my husband has been there to help. But since September I've been travelling with a babysitter instead so that my husband can work. It's a big challenge for me – let's see how things work out."

Despite the limits she's putting on interviews, to speak to, Gabetta is energetic, enthusiastic and clearly passionate about what she does. And her new arrival isn't the only Gabetta family member who'll be with her in

Edinburgh. Her brother Andrés will be joining her on the Usher Hall stage, as one of the Basel band's violinists. "He's been playing in the orchestra for many years," she explains. "He finished his studies very young – he started with the orchestra when he was just 19, almost at the very beginning when we arrived in Basel."

Indeed, the Gabetta siblings have something of an intercontinental background. Born in Argentina, they moved first to Madrid (with their Russian-born pianist mother Irène Timacheff-Gabetta) to study at the renowned Reina Sofia Music School, then later to Switzerland to continue their training at Basel's Music Academy. Sol now lives between Basel and Paris. "I actually know the Basel Symphony Orchestra very well," she continues, "because it's the orchestra in the city where I studied for ten years. I've heard thousands of concerts by them – it's a fantastic ensemble."

As director of his own period-instrument ensemble Capella Gabetta, Andrés was also instrumental in his sister's most recent recording, released next month. It's the latest in a rich discography that ranges from cornerstones of the cello repertoire – concertos by Haydn, Elgar, Vivaldi and others – to lesser-known music by Latvian composer Pēteris Vasks and others. Her new disc, *Dolce Duello*, is another more unusual offering: duets for voice and cello by Baroque composers Vivaldi, Handel, Albinoni and more. And it's a collaboration with one of classical music's starriest names – Cecilia Bartoli.

Bartoli, it turns out, is virtually Gabetta's neighbour. "Cecilia lives in Zurich, and Switzerland is such a small country," she explains. "You see the same people all the time – but that's not the only reason we're working together, of course." So how did they get to know each other? "She came to my concerts many times in Switzerland, and I went to see her performing at Zurich Opera and at the Tonhalle. We slowly got to know each other, and we've always had a huge respect for each other's work."

There's hardly a glut of duets for mezzo and cello, however. How did Gabetta





Gabetta is increasingly interested in Baroque music.

Left: Ivor Bolton with the Basel Symphony Orchestra. Right: Cecilia Bartoli mezzo-soprano.

Cecilia Bartoli

Photograph: Uwe Arens



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and Bartoli go about choosing their repertoire? "My brother's ensemble concentrates specially on Baroque repertoire that isn't much played. So we had a specialist looking for pieces – and he found many, many of them, a lot of them really interesting."

Baroque music is an increasing interest for Gabetta – so much so that she now reserves her 1759 Guadagnini cello, which she's been playing for more than a decade, specially for earlier music. It was just last year that she took on an additional cello – a 1725 instrument by Venetian maker Gofriller – for bigger-boned, more recent music.

It's her more muscular Gofriller she'll be playing in her Usher Hall concert, and it's only when we discuss the Saint-Saëns Concerto that Gabetta unearths a surprising memory. "The Saint-Saëns Concerto was actually the very first piece I played with an orchestra – and, look at that, it was with the Basel Symphony Orchestra the first time I did it. That's an unbelievable coincidence – I didn't even realise until I thought about it just now."

That performance was way back when she was just 12, Gabetta remembers. "I remember practising for about a year for the concert," she says. "My teacher Ivan Monighetti made me practise it so

much – he took so much care that I knew everything about the piece, even all the orchestral parts. I think I could still sing just about every instrument's part while I play the cello solo."

But she's aware, too, of the perhaps unjust reputation that the Saint-Saëns Concerto has gained. "Some cellists think that the Saint-Saëns – or the Lalo Cello Concerto – are a bit like second-level pieces. But what does that even mean? As cellists we simply don't have as many big concertos as pianists or violinists do, so these pieces are extremely important to us. It's very dangerous to think of it as a minor piece. It's a very transparent piece, with not so much material in it – but when pieces are like that, it's even more important for the soloist to make something special of it. I don't mean something completely crazy and different from any other player, but something magical, so that every note makes sense."

As well as being in her repertoire since her

childhood, it's a piece that Gabetta recorded back in 2006. So how does she ensure she maintains a fresh perspective on it? "Well, I don't play it all the time, of course – sometimes you've

just had enough of a piece. But my approach to it has actually changed a lot. If I hear my recording of it and compared with the way I play now, first of all I think my technique has changed a lot in the last few years – passages that were very difficult technically are maybe slightly less difficult today. But that means I can really concentrate on the music and enjoy it much more. It's such a beautiful piece to play."



Sol Gabetta performs Saint-Saëns' Cello Concerto No 1 at the Usher Hall, Edinburgh, on 8 October, 3pm. Her new CD, *Dolce Duello*, is released on 10 November