
Interview: Audronė Vainiunaite and Donatas Katkus

Two members of the Vilnius Quartet: 'Beethoven's Ninth has united us all'

In mid-May, just as the economic sanctions inflicted by Moscow on Lithuania began to take effect, and the West (led by Washington) all but flaunted its indifference to the fate of the Baltic states, the Vilnius Quartet played in the Federal Republic of Germany. The four—first violinist Audronė Vainiunaite and her colleague Petras Kunca, both trained by David Oistrakh, violist Donatas Katkus, and 'cellist Augustinas Vasiliauskas—spontaneously decided to give a benefit concert in Cologne for the "Medicine for Lithuania Initiative," which had been launched by the Lithuanian Culture Institute in the F.R.G. at the beginning of May. The Schiller Institute joined forces with the Culture Institute to organize these concerts.

The Vilnius Quartet, since its sensational debut in the West in 1972, when it won the first prize in the Quartet Competition in Lüttich, is one of the most renowned Eastern European chamber music groups. All four players are professors at the Conservatory in Vilnius and thus, former colleagues of Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis. Since 1972 they have given more than 1,500 concerts worldwide, and they have mastered a repertoire of more than 250 works. With appearances at large international festivals in Eastern and Western Europe, Ibero-America and Asia, they have earned an excellent reputation.

In Cologne the Vilnius Quartet played the Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 125 No. 1 by Franz Schubert, the Quartet No. 1 of the contemporary Lithuanian composer Vytautas Laurušas, and Ludwig van Beethoven's Op. 130 in B Major, in the original form in which Beethoven first composed it, closing with the Grosse Fuge (rather than the Allegro finale he later composed).

In a startling expression of gratitude, the audience showed the artists with bouquets in the Lithuanian national colors. "Some years ago, it would have created a political scandal to do that," remarked the violinist Petras Kunca later.

What follows is an interview granted to Ibykus magazine's Ortrun Cramer and Hartmut Cramer by violinist Audronė Vainiunaite and violist Donatas Katkus. It has been reprinted by permission of the editors of Ibykus magazine, and was translated from German by Marianna Wertz.

Ibykus: First, hearty congratulations for the concert this evening. You come from Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, and your President Landsbergis, truly quite unusually for a politician, has called on the whole world to support the Lithuanian freedom fight with classical music, and most of all with performances of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Why has he done that, and what was the response?

Katkus: Music unites all mankind, because music is universal and a language which everyone understands. Political language, and most of all party politics, is often misunderstood. If one, however, speaks about and, most importantly, through music, then one employs a language everyone can understand. And in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which one can characterize truly as the "Freedom Symphony," it is most particularly appropriate. This music is understandable for everyone: It is an expression of the highest art, but at the same time for every person, also directly significant.

This aspect of being outside parties and politics is very important. Landsbergis is a musical scientist and as such, not a narrow thinker; he is no mere academic specialist, but rather a man who has thought and written about *all* aspects of culture. What he has written always had a very definite culturally political reference. Landsbergis was the chairman of our composers' union, but also the chairman of the Union of Musical Scholars and Critics, besides being a musicologist. At his lectures he never dealt with subjects narrowly, but always in their political context. You must know, art was for us in Lithuania in the last 50 years the only field in which we have maintained our independence.

Vainiunaite: Indeed, this is really of greatest importance. For without our culture, without classical music, we would never have been able to endure the complete repression by Moscow, beginning with Stalin, through Brezhnev, until now with Gorbachov. It was truly the field in which we have maintained our human freedom in all these years.

Katkus: The arts, i.e., music and poetry—not prose, for it is too direct, too political—were truly free. Under the restrictions of Stalinism our poets—and we in Lithuania had and have very good poets—only symbolically depicted truth, hence—

Vainiunaite: —write "between the lines."



The Vilnius Quartet in concert: (left to right) violinists Audronė Vainiunaite and Petras Kunca, 'cellist Augustinas Vasiliauskas, violist Donatas Katkus.

Katkus: Exactly, through poetry. And because we could only depict the truth in poetry and music, for this reason art is essential for us.

However, I would like to come back to President Landsbergis. He is not, as I have read here in German newspapers, a music professor, who has no practical knowledge at his disposal and no idea of politics. Landsbergis has an idea of politics and he understands the political situation very well. What we are living through is a new era. Humanists are going into politics; and humanists think a little differently from pragmatists. Because they have a special quality which I would like to signify as “space thinking.”

Vainiunaite: Indeed, this means these people make politics not only for themselves, not for the sake of their careers, but in fact for the good of the people. They are inspired by ideas and not possessed by striving for power. They are prepared to sacrifice and stand unselfishly for the development of the whole people. One seeks in vain in these humanist leaders the egoism, which one so frequently finds in ordinary politicians.

Ibykus: This independence which you have maintained in Lithuania in the field of art, how has it expressed itself in daily life?

Katkus: In this way, that our composers and our poets have expressed their own individuality in their works. We were allowed to perform these works, and that was very important

for us; for many people came to these performances. For example at the large festivals, where our poets appeared and recited their poetry. That made such an impression that many, many people cried. So they had a very strong common experience and had the feeling that we Lithuanians have a unique language and are a unique people, and are not, as Brezhnev for instance had always stressed, part of a Russian-speaking empire.

Besides culture, there was also another very important area in which to strengthen our feeling of independence: sports. For instance, the best basketball team in the Soviet Union came from Lithuania, and no matter how often the Moscow leadership stressed that there is no Lithuania, but only *one* Russia, only *one* language, only *one* culture, for us it was clear: All these different activities, in which we have gone on a somewhat special track, have naturally also strengthened our Lithuanian national feeling.

Ibykus: Recently Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was performed in Vilnius in front of the cathedral before many, many listeners—well over 100,000. How did the people react, what effect did this performance have? Were you there?

Katkus: No, unfortunately not, because we were at the time on a concert tour in Germany. But our families, our relatives, and friends were naturally there. And they have told us about it. It was something very special, something that is very difficult to describe. In such a situation music unites with—

Vainiunaite: —a political demonstration—

Katkus: Yes, yes, and a higher emotion. The consciousness of people who experienced it at first hand is raised. People hear the music with a special feeling, an emotion which is already “prepared.” Music like Beethoven’s Ninth symbolizes something, and something very important: freedom. And for that reason, music in such a situation produces a strong effect, with greater power than in other occasions. This you can no doubt recognize by the fact that not all of the audience had heard everything, because the plaza was very large and the acoustics naturally correspondingly bad. But everyone there was emotionally involved with the music. It was a great event, as already said, a great political demonstration.

Vainiunaite: We are living in a very interesting time. The revolution proves it; it developed peacefully and without weapons, though Moscow still is always seeking to intimidate us with tanks. But in opposition we put our spirited power. All the people in Lithuania, especially the intellectuals, are united by the newly won freedom, and most of all Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony has brought us together. With this music we have united Lithuanians in spirit. That is a wonderful power, much stronger than weapons could produce.

Katkus: We Lithuanians have an interesting history. For we have a unique language, which traces back from Sanskrit; it is in fact quite similar to it. If I, who know no Sanskrit, read a text in Sanskrit, then I have a fantastic feeling, as though I were reading something in Lithuanian, but not understanding it. This tradition—one could call it the Indian tradition—points also elsewhere. We are, for example, very peaceful; we are not nationalistic, though naturally patriotic; i.e., we have nothing against other lands, nations or people—altogether different from the Russians, who now make great difficulties for us and greatly grieve us. We, however, speak and keep very calm in the face of the Russians, we discuss with them, etc.

Ibykus: How do you perceive the Western governments, and most of all the posture of the Bush administration, who have not supported Lithuania in this difficult situation?

Katkus: We understand the international situation and also the worldwide problem, which proceeds with our fight for independence. We understand if the newspapers here [in Germany] write that Lithuania is “too impatient, it wants independence much too quickly.” We understand all of this. However, one could express in opposition, that the German reunification process proceeds too quickly, and indeed much quicker than the political process with us. But: “Germany is a great country,” it is said, “it must be so. But Lithuania is small; Lithuanians can wait a little. Not now.”

We understand politicians, who calculate and weigh everything. But we want nothing but justice, truth, and freedom. We know that our aspirations don’t fit in the great political calculus. Take the example of the Russian Empire.

The people of the West knew almost *nothing* of the Russian Empire. But now, because of Moscow’s posture against Lithuania and the other Baltic states, they begin to understand it.

The development in the Baltics is thus somewhat of a test case: If perestroika is a genuine thing and not only a tactical retreat, to gather forces and prepare a great aggression against the whole world, then there exists no reason to withhold from the Baltic states their independence, freedom, and neutrality. If Russia has no aggressive intentions, then our fight for independence is no danger, for we are peaceful neighbors.

Ibykus: To come back once more to President Landsbergis. He is a musical scientist and pianist—

Vainiunaite: Yes, and a leading thinker in Lithuania. One of the intellectuals, who has always put himself on the side of the people. And the fact that he was selected as President, is an expression of the people’s trust in him. We artists have known him very long and very well.

Ibykus: The news has it that he has a piano in his office in the Parliament, which he always plays if he must solve a difficult political problem.

Vainiunaite: Indeed, and this has also already become the subject of anecdotes about him. The most recent, my daughter brought back from school recently: “Landsbergis now has a nine-hour day.” “Why does he work *nine* hours?” “Eight hours in the Supreme Soviet and one hour on the piano.”

Katkus: There is another anecdote, which aims in the same direction. “Landsbergis can play good chess. Yes, very good. So good, that he once beat a Russian grand master.” That is in reality a joke; but it is true, that Landsbergis is an excellent chess player.

Ibykus: Do you believe that you will win your fight in Lithuania?

Katkus: Yes, because Gorbachov can indeed do everything to us; he can even shoot at us. But two things he cannot do: He cannot change our thoughts, and he cannot change the economic order. At least not at once. And it is in any case not to be done with united appeals and letters.

Ibykus: What is happening with Gorbachov’s decreed economic sanctions against your land?

Vainiunaite: They naturally have a terrible effect. Many people in Lithuania are unemployed, food is becoming scarce, one can only obtain it with ration cards. Yet no one must go hungry, but the quality of food which we have is very poor; for the most part there is only rice. As you know, there is a shortage of all medicines. But despite these difficulties, we do not give up. Freedom and independence are the most important things.

Katkus: You know, in the end the truth will also seep through here; in the Soviet Union nothing works, absolutely nothing; also not the economic sanctions.