IRINA KULIKOVA

Interviewed by GUY TRAVISS

IRINA KULIKOVA was born in Chelyabinsk, capital of South-Ural, Russia. Under the guidance of her mother, cellist Vinera Kulikova, composer/guitarist Victor Kozlov and musicologist Alexander Volgusnov, she started developing her musicianship from an early age. When she was 17, Irina moved to Moscow to study at the Gnessins Academy, graduating in 2005. Meanwhile, she had started at the Mozarteum University in Salzburg completing her studies there in 2008. Irina has studied with Marco Tamayo, Carlo Marchione, Simone Fontanelli, Howard Penny and Hans Bruderl, and participated in masterclasses with José María Gallardo del Rey, Kshyhtoph Peleh, John Mills, Sergio Assad, Eliot Fisk, Manuel Barrueco, Ricardo Gallén and David Russell among others. In recent years she has claimed first prizes in: *Michele Pittaluga*, Italy; *Guitarra Alhambra*, Spain; *Forum Gitarre Wien*, Austria; *International Guitarcompetition Iserlohn*, Germany; and the *Twents Gitaarfestival*, Netherlands.

Today Irina has given concerts in over twenty countries working as a soloist; ensemble player; and with orchestras in Belgium, Italy and Russia. She has been involved with several international guitar festivals as both a performer and tutor including Iserlohn (Germany); West Dean (England); Legnani (Italy); Naxos (Greece); Esztergom (Hungary); J.K. Mertz (Slovakia); Niksic (Montenegro); Kaunas (Lithuania); Nice (France); Saltillo (Mexico); and Miami (USA). Her activities as a musician have also led her to perform for members of the royal family in Germany and Denmark respectively.

Irina recorded her first solo CD in Moscow, 2005, featuring works by Aguado, Johann Kaspar Mertz, Moreno-Torroba, and Rodrigo. September 2009 marked the release of her latest disc as a Naxos recording artist with music by Ponce, Tansman, Brouwer and Antonio José.

Since 2007 Irina lives and teaches in the Netherlands developing her international profile in a variety of instrumental formats including the duo Irina & Felicia with Dutch flautist Felicia van den End.

What influence did your mother being a musician have on you as you were growing up?

My mother plays the cello. I always went with her when she played in her string quartet. I was in love with the violin, but my mother loved the guitar. At that time the guitar was becoming more popular in Russia. When I was five my mother gave me a guitar and said: 'This is a big violin. Give it a try. If you like it, you can continue. If not, you change to the four-stringed violin.' I was impressed by the guitar; to hold it and touch the strings with both hands. Anything you want to express with it offers such a direct response. I learnt a lot from my mother. She taught me many things about technique, phrasing, and the colours within music. She showed me how to make an instrument sing. Of course throughout my music education there have been unforgettable teachers, such as the late musicologist Alexander Volgusnov and guitarists Victor Kozlov, Marco Tamayo and Carlo Marchione. But what you learn at the youngest age becomes second nature. For this reason, I dedicated my Naxos disc 'to my wonderful mother, Vinera Kulikova'.

Irina Kulikova at 6 years old.

West Dean 1997.

Did having your mother as dedicatee influence your programming for that disc?

Definitely. I wanted to record something that she would appreciate for a lifetime, something similar to her personality: a lot of depth, complexity and beauty.

What did you gain by studying with a musicologist?

To love music in connection with everything in the world: nature, paintings, architecture, literature, culture and so on. Alexander Volgusnov was a very special man. With him I learnt to appreciate every detail of life: the shape of the clouds, the smell of spring, the taste of Spanish tapas. Give it the right tonality and find perfectly matching colours, and all this resolves in composing your own fugue. This is how

we worked with music. When we were analysing operas, for example, we connected them with different emotional and political elements in life. I studied several topics in his classes, but my dearest memories are of the private sessions at his home. We would spend the entire day listening to music and getting all the books down from his shelves, until my mother called asking if her daughter had time for dinner.

At twelve, you left Russia for the first time. What was it like travelling such a distance and coming to places where the physical geography is so different for the first time?
I had to take a two-day train journey from Chelyabinsk to Moscow, and then fight for a plane ticket with an agency: no electronic tickets and fewer options for flights; how did people live in those days? Everything was a big adventure, especially for a twelve-year-old girl. I remember how strange it was experiencing the change in weather: I came from -30 in Russia to +15 in Italy. This was also the first time I had seen the sea. That was a very special emotion! I've been in love with the sea from that moment. Now I am just a ten-minute walk from the coast, in The Hague. All these initial experiences showed me a world I wanted to come back to forever.

How did your initial trips around Europe alter the direction of your career?
My first trips to Europe were like a fairytale. I met so many fantastic people. From that point, you would expect life is already guiding you on the right path. But bureaucracy (problems with visas etc.) and lack of financial support can create quite an obstacle. I imagine that many young musicians experience this. Things can become very difficult, but these situations often have a positive outcome: they strengthen your passion to move forward.

I understand that things became worse before they got better...
Yes. At 19 I broke my left arm, leaving me unable to play for 18 months. This gave me time to think. A bit more than I would have liked, but in that period my determination to continue with music grew even stronger. At that time I was studying at the Gnessins Academy in Moscow. I obviously missed guitar lessons, but I also missed lessons in piano and conducting. Fortunately there were a lot of different modules you could take; theory and historical studies. During this period I disappeared into a lot of literature; medical books in particular. I developed an interest in the relationship between music and health: how to stay healthy as a musician, and how music can serve as medicine. Five years later, I wrote my Masters thesis on this topic at the Mozarteum: *The Mystery of Sound and Wholeness of the Artist: A Multidisciplinary Introduction to a Better Stage Performance.*

Alessandria 2008 – 1st prize.

What sort of issues does this paper focus on? Does it look at the physiology of playing an instrument as well as the psychological aspects of performance?
The paper is about dealing with physical and mental blocks, to be free and open in our stage performances. My interest in the subject was inspired by Ilsa Safarova, a Russian pianist who works with musicians who are struggling with physical or mental problems. She helped me when my arm was broken. After the long pause from concert life, I was afraid of going back on stage. But thanks to her treatment, I found my way again. Through personal experience and meeting so many other musicians who at some time suffered from blocks on stage, I became very much involved with this theme.

"On the night of the concert, the body remembers everything that has happened in the months before. Only twenty times stronger."

How did Ilsa Safarova treat you?
She gave a special kind of massage and taught me to concentrate on energy flows through the body. She helped me to be more conscious about the way I practice and the way I live life in general. The intensity with which we work on a piece; the books we read; music we listen to; movies we see; people we meet; and all kinds of other daily rituals have a special meaning to us: this everything settles somewhere in our subconscious. On the night of the concert, the body remembers everything that has happened in the months before. Only twenty times stronger.

To be able to transmit music with all its meaning and full intensity, musicians need to be whole themselves. This is what Safarova made me aware of. If your hands are trembling on stage, or if your memory is failing you, you have built up blocks somewhere. You can't take these blocks

away by focussing on the night of the concert alone. You need to make changes in life generally. For example: be open to experiment with tai chi, or qigong. Get some good massages, or go to an acupuncturist. Learn to concentrate on your breathing and movement. Try different kinds of mental and physical training. Create a special atmosphere while you're practising at home. All these things help to create a sense of inner harmony that you bring to the stage.

Do you feel that all this has had an overall effect on your playing?
Very much. The essence of Safarova's treatment is the essence of her approach to music: 'Music is a means for a complete, whole unity of the body and soul's movement over the tone and the sound.' To find the depth in a piece, and to be able to get completely into the music while playing it on stage, we need a broader approach in every aspect of life. I know that music education is for a large part about discovering technical aspects of our instrument and developing a broad knowledge of music. But it is also about the whole of our physical, emotional, intellectual, intuitive and spiritual development. That's why I work with my students on more than technique and musical interpretation alone. I encourage them to open their imagination to any piece they play, to find out what inspired the composer. But also to find their own way in a spiritual direction. I'm sure this helps to become more whole as a person; to open up more of our gifts and unite them in beautiful music.

You encourage a very programmatic approach to interpretation then?
It is the musician's humble task to make an audience feel and understand the personality of the music they play. Egos that scream for attention block energy flows; true masters of sound are servants to music. This idea I compare to acting: an actor's objective is to make the audience feel and understand a certain character in a story. If we don't feel this character, because the personality of the actor is too dominant, then the actor himself becomes a disrupting factor. The Russian actor and director Stanislavski – who influenced actors and actresses such as Al Pacino, Anthony Hopkins, Kate Winslet and Johnny Depp – was the first to demonstrate that emotions shown on stage move audiences when they are authentic; when the actor has experienced the life of the character he's playing. When actors simply follow basic techniques for displaying emotion, their characters often become stereotypes. Stanislavski wanted something more alive. For him it was important that actors should find something new every time; to be human and not mechanical. For him, head and heart needed to be united in acting; to use intuition, but also understand what it is you are doing. This method is quite involved. The preparation is about understanding the personality you're going to play in a deep and complete way. Knowledge of the character is not enough, imagining the character is not enough: the actor needs to become the character he is playing to truly make them his own. The parallel with a musician's work is clear. We need to become one with the piece in the same way the actor becomes one with the play.

"Egos that scream for attention block energy flows; true masters of sound are servants to music."

In front of Concertgebouw Amsterdam.

Has your Russian background influenced this aspect of your musical aesthetic?
For sure, yes. The depth of the literature, endless landscapes, beautiful bells of the orthodox church, and the dramatic history of the country: it is part of my soul, so it is part of my life and music. Besides, Russia has a great tradition of music education. It is a tough school for young children, but what you learn as a child settles deep in you.

Still you decided to move, to study in Salzburg...
One of the reasons I moved to Europe is that in Russia the guitar is considered mostly a folk instrument. At music schools, academies and conservatoires it is in the department with the balalajka, domra, bayan and accordion. In Europe, the guitar is grouped with string instruments such as the cello.

What was it that attracted you to Salzburg as a place to study?
I wanted to study with Marco Tamayo as I had heard a lot about him. Through some contacts in Austria, I was invited to give concerts quite frequently in the Salzburger Schloss Mirabel. This brought me right next door to the Mozarteum University and it provided the means to pay for my study. After one of these concerts, before starting at the Mozarteum, I met a fantastic couple: Tony and Irmgard Leswell. They live in Hof bei Salzburg, in the mountains, half-an-hour out of the city. I lived with them for

quite some time. They grew to become my family, which was important for me living so far away from my parents.

After you had been living in Salzburg for a couple of years, you started participating in competitions again. It seemed that until then you had moved away from the competition scene after a very promising start at around 12 years of age...
Several of the people who heard me play when I was a child have asked me the same question. My focus simply was not on competitions. After I turned twelve I only entered a couple of competitions in Russia. Then I got dragged into a concert life with a lot of travelling in Russia, Italy, Poland, England, Austria, Germany, Spain and the U.S. Some of these places I visited for performances at guitar festivals. But I also played a lot of concerts at chamber music festivals and for special events involving embassies and royal families. These concerts are of course less prominent on the guitar scene. I started entering competitions again in 2005. By that time I had already been living in Salzburg for two years.

Your biography highlights several of the competitions you have participated in, and you have had many successes competing in them. What does the competition scene mean to you?
On the one hand, I find it difficult to understand the idea of competition. How can we compare musicians like we compare athletes? Everyone has his own personality in music, his own unique characteristics. On the other hand, I understand the value of the competition scene. It offers great motivation to develop technical skills. And of course competitions are a means to meet people and develop a network of contacts; to find great friends who share your passion for music.

At this stage in your career, what direction do you imagine you will take? Would you like to become more involved in music academia for instance?
I have my dreams, and bit by bit they come true. But I cannot discuss them now: it would break the magic. Generally speaking, I am fascinated by the influence music has on people, what it can bring to their lives. I've been giving concerts since I was eight years old, so when I'm not performing I start to miss the stage. It's wonderful to perform as a soloist and guide the audience through the evening. It's also fantastic to play with my friends – violist Emlyn Stam and flautist Felicia van den End - in our trio Frasulando. I also love to teach, to help students realise their dreams. I strongly believe that we should follow our deepest wishes: they will show us the right direction at any point in life.

Presently you reside in the Netherlands, what is the scene like for guitarists there?
There are quite a lot of people in The Netherlands who love the guitar. They put great effort in organising festivals and inviting guitarists from all over the world for concerts and masterclasses. But I have heard that in the past the guitar was really big in the Netherlands. Last November I had a tour of ten concerts which included some of the renowned Dutch podiums for classical music, such as the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Anton Philipszaal in Eindhoven and Concertgebouw De Vereeniging in Nijmegen. During this tour I met a lot of people that love classical music, but who simply didn't know much about the classical guitar. They became very enthusiastic about composers such as Aguado, Tansman, Brouwer and Ponce. The same goes for the people who heard me play Bach and Barrios on the radio: wonderful responses via e-mail. So there are certainly potential audiences out there for the classical guitar; the only question is how to reach them. I think this question is raised all over the world; people love music, love the guitar, but much too few know of its full potential. How can listeners discover our beautiful instrument? Maybe with growing numbers of guitarists who really play beautifully, the coming decades may see audiences for guitar grow.

Discography
Guitar Recital, Naxos Laureate Series, Toronto 2009 - Ponce, Tansman, Brouwer and José.
Guitar Recital, Moscow 2005 - Legnani, Sor, Mertz, Aguado, Moreno-Torroba, Barrios and Rodrigo.