

Get To Know Lachezar Kostov, Assistant Principal Cello

By: Carole Hamlin

I had the distinct pleasure (because he is so much fun to be with) of sitting down with Lachezar Kostov, assistant principal cellist with the Baltimore Symphony, to discuss his life and his new role as one of the string principals in the orchestra. I asked him several questions, and he was quite willing to go into detail about his life and accomplishments:

Childhood and The Cello

Lachezar was born in Plovdiv, the 7th oldest city in the world according to UNESCO, with evidence of habitation since the 6th millennium B. C. and continuously inhabited since 4,000 B.C.

All schooling was free or had a nominal fee. Certain specialty programs were hard to get into unless the student exhibited exceptional ability. Lachezar's parents wanted to get him into a good school to increase his opportunities in life. They had heard him singing well around the house when he was as young as two and three, with good intonation and with feeling. They thought maybe he could study music. There was just one music school in Plovdiv, and so Lachezar's parents had him audition before the committee of judges. He was five years old. They asked him to sing a communist party song, which was difficult but he sang it well. As to learning an instrument at the school, the policy was that to get into the piano program, the student had to start at age 3 and for violin age 4 - so Lachezar was too old! Cello students would enroll at age 5, which is why he started on the instrument by which he makes his living (and he is very happy with his choice). Even at age 5, he knew it was a big honor to be accepted at the school, as only a lucky few were. He played a small cello, a bit larger than a viola.

Lachezar became part of a community of great teachers and students, and he learned a lot. Then in 4th to 12th grade, he transferred to the National School of Music. His first concert was at age 13 at a venue outside the school. It was with his hometown orchestra, and he played a solo. This event was important because the player realizes what an opportunity and responsibility it is. Plus, Lachezar added with a wink, if you are good at something, girls are going to like you. He said that after experiencing success playing with an orchestra, he didn't want to do anything else. He felt exhilaration, an adrenaline rush, and a sense of accomplishment. That's why he became a professional musician.

From Bulgaria to The BSO

After his early experience came acceptance to a conservatory in Sofia, Bulgaria's capital and largest city (about 1.5 million people). He started getting fees for his

playing. Bulgaria still had economic woes, and Lachezar was getting paid more for a concert than his father made for a couple months' work.

In 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell, things started to change in Bulgaria. Eventually, citizens were able to travel abroad. He had won an audition as principal cellist with the Symphony Orchestra of Rome and moved in with his new love. They were married the following year (and stayed together for 12 years). Lachezar received a full scholarship for a master's degree in cello at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem in 2004, and so he moved to the U. S. He told me that the cultural shock he experienced moving from Rome to Winston-Salem he "wouldn't wish on anyone - a shocking thing!" His wife joined him a year later.

In 2006 Lachezar moved to New Haven, Connecticut, because he had the opportunity to work on an artist's diploma in cello at Yale University School of Music, with legendary cellist Aldo Parisot (who is currently 95 years old and still teaches 17 cello students at the School of Music). He stayed for three years and played many solo events and chamber concerts. Then in 2008 he moved to Houston and Rice University to obtain a doctorate in musical arts (DMA), which he is now finishing. In 2014 he relocated to San Antonio to become a member of the San Antonio Symphony, where he remained for two seasons before coming to Baltimore.

The BSO Audition Process

Following industry standards, the BSO had advertised open positions, and Lachezar believes close to 100 candidates sent in applications for three openings. The audition itself was over two days, with "a lot of waiting between playing. I mostly felt sorry for the committee, because they listened to people from 10 am to 6:30 pm, and then had a concert!" His favorite was the final round, when the committee removed the screen, and player and committee members were able to see one another. In this round he played with frequent BSO pianist Lura Johnson (who he thinks is an incredible talent). "After playing we exchanged a couple of jokes, and I, together with all the other candidates, was left waiting for the results." The committee granted a trial week playing with the orchestra to five players for three open positions. Lachezar said his trial week was amazing, as "the BSO performed Richard Strauss' 'Alpine Symphony' - one of the most massive and overwhelming orchestral works. I thought the orchestra was brilliant, and Marin Alsop was inspiring. The Joseph Meyerhoff Hall sounded like 100 million bucks!" That trial week was in September, and he received a call with the good news in January of last year. He started full-time in April. So in his calculations, it took 350 days from audition to trial to start date. "Those were some long days!"

On Marin Alsop

Lachezar said that he admires Marin Alsop very much for who she is and trusts her musical instincts completely. He said that he follows her with an open heart.

Life in Maryland

Lachezar tries to practice as much as possible and "definitely sees improvement in my preparation skills - I prepare much faster and more efficiently for rehearsals and concerts." And on a personal note – "I have picked up an amazing sport - pickleball, and have even gone to several tournaments!" Pickleball is a fast-growing sport, played on a tennis court, with a smaller/shorter net, and paddles and a wiffle ball. It's normally played by two couples, who are playing against each other. Even though he started in May, he is now considered a level 3.5 player: high-intermediate/low-advanced player, and have won two gold medals and one bronze medal from different tournaments. Lachezar has invited several BSO players to play with him, and concertmaster Jon Carney came to play several times. Percussionist Chris Williams is becoming a great player also, and he believes more musicians will join.

Other Musical Pursuits

Lachezar is an aspiring pianist and likes to play when he can, although he claims he is not good at it. "I love the piano! It, together with the guitar and the harp, are instruments capable of 'standing alone!'" He feels that the piano is the king of instruments and that the repertoire that was written for it is matched only by the orchestral repertoire, although "some of the virtuoso works by Franz Liszt or Frederick Chopin do not have an equivalent in the orchestral world."

Lachezar studied conducting while a student at Yale. "I truly believe that being a conductor is a calling that many hear but not many are able to meet; in other words, conducting is much harder than most of us realize." Conducting is "always at the back of my mind" and he may get into it again after some years. "Being a member of the BSO, I get to see some of the world's leading conductors and am constantly reminded of the incredible challenges conductors face."

The Lufthansa Affair

Lachezar's chamber music partner, pianist Viktor Valkov, and he often travel to Germany, where they play concerts once or twice a year. They were in Germany last November after a performance in Bulgaria. He decided to check his cello on the plane as "special handling luggage" in a sturdy flight case so that he could save the \$1400 it would have cost if he had bought the cello a seat. When he arrived in Sofia, Bulgaria, the cello was not there. He began to panic because he had a concert the next day, his first in Bulgaria for more than ten years. It was a "big deal" because he and Viktor are somewhat famous in Bulgaria. He found a cello that unfortunately was very inferior to

his own but played a successful first concert that was broadcast live on national TV and radio. He gave several interviews and was able "not to freak out." Getting no help from Lufthansa, he and his partner flew to Hamburg, Germany. He scrounged around for another substitute cello and played two more concerts on a borrowed German instrument. One evening he received a very enthusiastic call from Lufthansa telling him that his instrument was still in Houston in the baggage storage area, which no one at Lufthansa had thought to check. "In any case, this was an extraordinary trip, and it taught me that no matter what, the audience deserves the best one can give, no matter what instrument one plays on."

Travel and Scotch

Lachezar goes to Europe often, for concerts and vacations. He said that he has "become much more Americanized (having lived here for 15 years), but there's one thing I always notice when I am in Europe - I never feel guilty for having a glass of white wine, or a beer for lunch." Dinners are normally eaten at 7:30-8, and he can't understand how Americans eat their dinner at 5:30.

About ten years ago, while traveling, Lachezar started trying single malt scotches from the duty free shops at airports. "I am not really a collector but always have between 15 and 25 bottles of good single malt scotch. I have several whiskey encyclopedias and sometimes take tasting notes about different whiskies. It's interesting because I drink much less now - maybe once or twice a week a few sips of any two or three scotches." Occasionally on the bus rides back from Strathmore, he brings a bottle for some of my colleagues to share. It has become a great 'out-of-music' bonding experience and has led to many meaningful conversations.

If any readers need whiskey recommendations, they know whom to ask!

Not only are we lucky to have such an accomplished musician as the BSO's third chair cellist, but the players and others in the BSO family are glad to have Lachezar as part of our community because of his charming personality. He is a delightful addition to our orchestra.