

# KARINE GEORGIAN

The Russian–Armenian cellist looks at old, familiar repertoire with fresh eyes

## ONE THING I ABSORBED VERY EARLY ON

in my years of study with Rostropovich was that the 'autopilot' must never be allowed to take over, either in practising or performing. Routine is the killer, so I urge my students to choose a variety of locations for their practising. In my own practice I vary my approach, sometimes beginning with scales, sometimes with slow practice on a piece, sometimes with studies – my favourites are the Piatti Caprices, because there is a kind of lightness about them. They strengthen technique and control and, like the piano studies of Chopin and Debussy, they are satisfying musically.

My father, who was my first teacher and the architect of my cello technique until I was 18, somehow injected scales into me intravenously. I don't think they will ever leave my bloodstream while I remain sentient, and I often wish I could introduce a similar mind-altering substance into my students.

Scales will always feature somewhere in my practice session, and today is no different. I vary the progression with different speeds, in legato, spiccato, détaché, martelé, sautillé, and so on. If I'm feeling at all off form, I find scales in double-stops the quickest way of recovering. I'm also a great believer in playing scales in slow motion, one note to a bow (with or without vibrato) in different gradations of dynamics, to produce the endless 'hula-hoop' effect of seamless bow changes that Rostropovich famously wanted from his pupils. I would love to match the Russian violinist Lev Tseitlin, the founder of Moscow's Persimfans orchestra in 1920s Moscow – legend has it he could extend a single note for 22 seconds. I doubt that I'll ever get there, but even the attempt works miracles on bow control.

## IN TERMS OF REPERTOIRE, this week

I've been working on Brahms and Mozart piano quartets and Ireland's Clarinet Trio



**Imagination is our birthright, and often we don't exploit it enough**

for a concert with the London Soloists Ensemble. I'm also starting to prepare three of the Bach Suites for a summer festival in Lugano, and the gigantic Kodály Sonata for Solo Cello op.8 for the Dumfries and Galloway Arts Festival in Scotland. These are both works I have played repeatedly, and recorded, but an awful lot of work lies before me.

Today I work on the ensemble repertoire. The Ireland presents special problems: although we have played it several times, integrating the cello sound with a woodwind instrument always needs thought and work. Sometimes the colours should blend, at other times they should contrast, and that means my sound palette has to be as extensive, varied and imaginative as I can make it. The second movement of this trio is a tricky scherzo, and this brings

another conundrum: the use, rather than overuse, of the metronome. Here the watchword is for the metronome to be a servant, not a master. The moment there is any hint of it taking command of my interpretation, I turn it off.

After so many years of playing and teaching, I often find myself working on repertoire I already know inside out. To work on these pieces any further requires discipline: I have to disassemble the music, which exists in my mind as a more or less finished creation, and look at each interpretative and technical element as if through a magnifying glass. Once I have done that I gradually put it all back together again – hopefully with refreshed and enhanced ideas and insights. I then play through each work several times at near performance speed. This has the added benefit of increasing stamina, because in performance one always has to have so much in reserve. I put myself mentally in contexts and acoustic environments other than my familiar music room at home – in a hall before an audience, for instance. It is surprising how much this can change how I play. Imagination is our birthright, after all, and often we don't exploit it enough.

## FOR ME, A GOOD PRACTICE SESSION

leaves me with a sense of having uncovered something new: an approach to a technical problem, fingering or bowing; a way of producing a sound I hadn't thought of before; or a whole new conception of a piece. It never ceases to amaze me that, even after years away from a work, the memory of having played a piece rises unbidden to the mind and the fingers – a foundation for renewal and change. Performers are no different from listeners in taking pleasure from renewing acquaintance with what they know, because every time we can find fresh beauty or new understanding. ■