

In Memory of Rodion Azarkhin

“Like Paganini on the violin, Azarkhin accomplished seemingly impossible technical feats on the doublebass. And, like Paganini, Azarkhin turned his physical malady into something so astounding that no bassist will ever be able to forget him for his great accomplishments on our instrument.”

--- *Gary Karr*--USA

“Rodion Azarkhin was a giant of the double bass. His musicality has always touched my heart, even more than his unbelievable virtuosity. With him we have lost one of the greatest personalities of our instrument.

--- *Silvio Dalla Torre* – Germany

“Rodion Azarkhin was a true musician, pushing the limits of the double bass in his time, using musical instinct and logical thinking in technical matters.

--- *Hans Roelofsen* -- The Netherlands

Rodion Mikhailevich Azarkhin was born on March 22, 1931 in Kharkov, Ukraine, at that time part of the Soviet Union, to Russian parents Mikhail and Alexandra Azarkhin. A product of a musical family, Rodion’s mother was a singer who attended the Leningrad conservatory. Mikhail died in 1935 and in 1941 Alexandra, Rodion and Victoria Azarkhin (Rodion’s sister) were evacuated to Tashkent during German invasion of the Soviet Union in WWII where the Leningrad conservatory, serendipitously for the world of bass, had also been moved.

Upon being evacuated to Tashkent, the Azarkhin family lived in extreme poverty, for a time even using an outdoor cinema for improvised shelter. After a short time, however, Azarkhin learned that students in the conservatory were provided with housing and decided to attempt to gain entrance into the conservatory program. He states: “I knew that if I became a student at the special preparatory school in the Conservatory, I would be able to live there. It would be better for the entire family if I lived there.” Rodion soon obtained a cello and began practicing. He was accepted into the school in

1945 at the age of 14. However, after only a year or so, at the behest of school officials, Azarkhin switched to the double bass.

His teachers included his initial cello teacher Nikolayevich Burlakov, the bass professor Sergei Nikolayevich Buyanovsky, and Petre Abramovich Weinblatt, principal bassist of the Leningrad Philharmonic. He also studied with Mikhail Mikhailovich Kurbatov who had been principal bassist in the Leningrad Symphony under Mravinsky for an extended time, and did post-graduate work with the celebrated cellist Svyatoslav Knushevitsky at the Moscow Conservatory.

After graduation, Rodion spent a few years playing in a variety of musical situations, from cinema orchestras to jazz quartets, throughout St. Petersburg (Leningrad). In 1959, however, he attained a position with the State Orchestra of the U.S.S.R. and settled in Moscow. For years he held the assistant principal chair but by 1975 he was ranked as principal of this orchestra, a position that he held until 1989 when he retired from the Orchestra to become sole caretaker for his ailing mother. Azarkhin held this charge for a decade until her death in 1999.

Azarkhin gave his first professional solo recital in 1959 at the age of 27. The successful recital quickly turned into an annual event, broadcast on Radio Moscow, and propelled him on to a solo career. Notable tours with orchestra included daring works such as Dvorák's cello concerto.

As a recitalist, Azarkhin continued to give his annual recitals to the end of his career, never repeating the same works, until 1988 when he retired from the concert stage, at which time he claims to have had a repertory of over 500 works. He made numerous recordings for Melodya (at the time the government-owned recording label)

which were subsequently released, in part or whole, worldwide. Jeff Bradetich, included Azarkhin's U.S.-release, *Incredible Virtuoso Performance on the Double Bass*, as his second choice among recordings to "pay tribute to some of the founding fathers of solo double bass playing," calling the 1975 album "the single most talked about bass recording of all time." (Jeff Bradetich, "Discs under Discussion," *Double Bassist*, no. 24, 2003) Bradetich further emphasized Azarkhin's importance in the development of solo playing on the double bass stating that "during this initial era of bass recordings it [*the above mentioned recording*] opened many minds to the virtuosic possibilities of the bass."

Throughout his career, Azarkhin was constantly innovating his approach to the instrument. He used all five fingers of his left hand in all areas of the fingerboard, experimented with the bent endpin as early as the 1970's and played with a bow of his own design which included the addition of approximately 210 grams of weight and the addition of a key mechanism at the frog which allows for finger control of accents.

Azarkhin contributed to the solo literature of the double bass by working closely with Russian composers and arranging music as diverse as traditional Russian folksongs, Paganini Caprices, and Bach Violin Partitas for solo double bass. Azarkhin was also the first double bassist, to transcribe, perform and subsequently record Sarasate's "Zigeunerweisen," a work that has today become part of the standard repertory for classical double bass virtuosos. He also composed virtuosic works of his own for solo double bass and wrote several articles on the pedagogy of the double bass. With the publication of his book *Kontrabass* in 1978 Azarkhin also became one of the first historians to document important Russian and Soviet double bassists.

In the history of our instrument there have been many pioneers, and Azarkhin certainly ranks as one of the most colorful and influential on the instrument. As Azarkhin himself tells us in his 1978 book *Kontrabass*: “To open the possibilities of bass playing is not easy, but it is a very noble thing to do.” Rodion spent his life in pursuit of this noble goal and succeeded spectacularly. The worldwide bass community will miss him and will be in debt to him for his accomplishments on our instrument.

Azarkhin suffered throughout his life from an undiagnosed medical condition resembling Marfan’s Syndrom. In the final two years of his life his health weakened severely, and he ultimately died of a stroke on the evening of March 26 in Moscow, Russia at the age of 76. He is survived by his daughter Natasha Alexandrova, currently residing in the U.S, and will be missed by bass players worldwide.