Heroes of our culture

Without Victor and Lilian Hochhauser, the West would never have seen Soviet Russia's greatest performers, or heard Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony. As the astonishing impresarios bring the Kirov back to Britain, they tell Ismene Brown about their stormy and controversial career

By Ismene Brown
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NEXT month the great Kirov Ballet returns once again to Covent Garden, rather sooner than we expected after their triumph last summer, but no less welcome for all that. To the wonders of their historically authentic 1893 Sleeping Beauty and of their moving conquest of Balanchine's Jewels will be added their new claim on one of the Royal Ballet's signature works, Kenneth MacMillan's lush, romantic story of 18th-century sexual vice, Manon, with the divine Altynai Asylmuratova among the promised interpreters.

Love and vice: Svetlana Zacharova and Evgeny Ivanchenko in the Kirov's production of MacMillan's Manon, opening at Covent Garden on June 18

It should have been the Bolshoi rather than the Kirov this summer, had negotiations with the tour's promoters, Victor and Lilian Hochhauser, not been aborted by ill-timed dismissals in Moscow. But as it is, there is an accidental appropriateness in the Kirov's return, since next month is the 40th anniversary of the event that made headlines all over the world - when their young star dancer, Rudolf Nureyev, defected just as the Kirov left Paris airport for London, to make their first appearance in this country.

The Hochhausers also ran that tour - it was a first for them too, their debut in ballet. Not even Nureyev's defection could rock their excitement, for they were also about to present another of the cultural events of the century, the London debut recital of the pianist Sviatoslav Richter, the following month.

Nowadays this couple may be more renowned for their safe taste, high ticket prices and

merciless haggling, as well as their uncomfortable commercial presence at the Royal Opera House for long periods of the summer, but in fact they are unsung heroes of Western cultural life. Their exploits behind the Iron Curtain through the Cold War have the flamboyant improbability of a John Le Carre thriller.

Had it not been for their role as linkmen with the Soviet Union, the appearances in Britain of Richter, David Oistrakh, Mstislav Rostropovich, Emil Gilels - the Russian musical giants of the 20th century - might not have occurred. Modern European music might not have been heard in Soviet Russia at the time; and it is also possible that many of Dmitri Shostakovich's major works would have been buried, had the Hochhausers not engineered the first British performances.

Finally it is also the Hochhausers who have made appearances by the Kirov and Bolshoi ballet companies so regular a feature in Britain over the past 40 years.

The commercial promoter is a shadowy, unfeted figure. There are few to be found, since there are no subsidies to pay the gigantic costs of flying in vast companies and orchestras, and betting on the box-office for a profit is a gamble that can go horribly wrong. Last month's failure of the cut-price Bolshoi Stars tour promoted by Raymond Gubbay, the Hochhausers' main domestic rival, proved that.

This summer, for the second year running, the Hochhausers have hired the Royal Opera House for a major season of ballet and opera - this time on a massive scale. Not the usual six weeks or so, but 10. First the Kirov Ballet and Opera, then the Royal Ballet, La Scala Ballet with Sylvie Guillem and San Francisco Ballet.

Victor and Lilian are investing millions of pounds: both to rent the Royal Opera House, for well over £1 million for the season; and to pay the companies' fees. For their stints, the Kirov and Royal Ballet are costing £6 million between them; and a full house at Covent Garden brings in £100,000-odd a show (less for ballet, more for opera) so the margins of error are not large.

The label "Victor Hochhauser presents" has in recent years become a byword for conservative, middle-of-the-road taste in ballet. But as Victor points out, "We take the risk, so we dictate the terms." And the fact is that, even if they like populist ballet, these people are two of the most audacious buccaneers ever to have sailed the stormy seas of commercially produced culture.

For 20 golden years, from 1954 to 1974, the Hochhausers had a virtual monopoly on the most precious commodity of all: the Soviet artists. It is astonishing, considering Victor's origins as a fugitive Hungarian-Slovakian. Arriving in London in 1939 with his family, he found a country where, he says with gratitude, "you get a chance to do things properly and well, which you don't in other countries."

He began at 22, by presenting the pianist Solomon, then Yehudi Menuhin, Sir Thomas Beecham, and then a Vienna Philharmonic tour to Britain with Bruno Walter which rapidly sealed the newly married Hochhausers' stature as major classical impresarios. Then they took their greatest gamble: the Soviet Union, where Hochhauser's father said there was a wondrous violinist called David Oistrakh.

Until Stalin's death in 1953, the USSR was closed. Stalin had instituted state control even on music, anything modern being condemned as anti-Soviet. Shostakovich and Prokofiev were his particular targets, but there was no question of letting musicians out of the country. Khrushchev, Stalin's successor, took a different view: the top musicians could be put to use abroad for Soviet glory. Suddenly the door was unlocked. Oistrakh's Western debut was a Hochhauser promotion in 1954; London debuts by Gilels and Rostropovich followed, and the Leningrad Philharmonic and the Borodin Quartet. The revelation was not only of the Russians' interpretative brilliance but also of the music of Shostakovich and Prokofiev, some of which was in danger of oblivion.

When Hochhauser went to Moscow to arrange the Leningrad Philharmonic's London debut, he tells me that he had no idea that the choice of repertoire would have far-reaching consequences. "Evgeny Mravinsky - the orchestra's conductor - came to me and said, 'Please do me a favour. When you go to see the Minister of Culture, could you say that you want us to bring the Shostakovich Eighth Symphony? Because we are not allowed to play it. It's been refused all the time - it's too pessimistic. But if you say you want it, they may listen to you. It's very important.' " The ruse worked and the symphony was established in the West as a masterpiece.

There had been a similar ban on Shostakovich's first violin concerto. until Oistrakh's

Western premiere of it in London on a Hochhauser tour in 1955. A vast British Shostakovich Festival organised by Lord Harewood, with the Hochhausers' help, established the composer as a major 20th-century figure. According to his son, Maxim, the Hochhausers' intervention "helped Shostakovich to survive the difficult years that followed."

The composer stayed with the Hochhausers on his rare outings to London. "He was always very nervous. A very unhappy and nervous man," recalls Lilian.

It is easy now to be ignorant of how cruelly the Communists treated their artists. Though the Hochhausers were negotiating fees at top Western rates, to be split 90 per cent to the government, 10 per cent to the artist, they knew from the artists that little was reaching them.

Their house in Holland Park became a magnet for Russians. Rostropovich gave their daughter cello lessons. Richter would arrive to practise on their piano or just to disappear into London, to the fury of his KGB stooges.

"Richter was the freest spirit you could imagine. He did just what he wanted to do, and they couldn't touch him," says Lilian, who was his particular friend. "But we lost money with him," adds Victor, "because he was always cancelling and we couldn't insure him any more."

Victor liked Gilels, that other master pianist, but found him jealous of Richter's fame. "Richter admired him very much, and Gilels had no reason to be jealous, but it was in his nature," says Lilian sadly. "Richter was an occasion; Gilels was just a great concert," adds Victor. "Yes, because Gilels didn't cancel so much," says Lilian.

Their closest friends were Oistrakh and Rostropovich. Oistrakh was Jewish too, and "loved gossiping". He told them his misery about his country, feelings that he never made public, unlike Rostropovich, who made no secret of his dissidence.

"We felt very sorry for them," says Lilian. "From today, it's hard to remember just how frightening those days really were. We had to be so careful not to get people into trouble. In Moscow we'd be dealing for weeks at a time with people from Gosconcert - the Soviet concert agency - and the Ministry of Culture who were beastly mediocrities, and yet were able to order these great artists around."

"I hated those Soviets," says her husband. " There was one real nasty apparatchik we dealt with. He was very cold-blooded, and knew he couldn't trust me, but we knew that we needed each other. He needed me because of my money, and also the artists trusted me."

According to one of Nureyev's biographers, Peter Watson, KGB files show that the Hochhausers were suspected of having a hand in Nureyev's defection on the 1961 Kirov tour. Lilian and Victor say this is news to them - they would not then have risked jeopardising their Soviet contacts for a dancer whom they had not even met.

Events accelerated, however. The ballerina Natalia Makarova, another friend, defected

on the Hochhausers' tour of the Kirov in 1970. In 1974, the bargain snapped. As Soviet anti-Semitism rose sharply, "they wanted us to hire a private army of protesters against the Jewish demonstrations. I told them, 'Go to hell,' " says Victor.

And then Rostropovich defected. It was tricky, what with them promoting the Bolshoi at the Coliseum that year, but the Hochhausers gave him refuge. Shattered equally by Baryshnikov's defection in Canada that year, the Soviets pulled down the shutters until 1989, when Gorbachev ended Communism.

The Hochhausers, though, did not go hungry. They did Rudolf Nureyev tours for 10 years. "We presented Fonteyn, Makarova, Seymour and Rudolf in Les Sylphides at the Festival Hall. They were known as the 'Star Wars,' " says Lilian. And there were the Chinese acrobats. . .

"We made money before the Russians, and we made money without them," says Victor. "But whatever went on, the most important thing was to get these artists out."

- Kirov Ballet and Opera are at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden from June 12. Tickets: 020 7304 4000

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