



# Man on a mission

In conversation with **Michael Church**, the pianist Evgeny Kissin speaks out about the invasion of Ukraine and how this relates to his experiences of anti-Semitism while growing up in the USSR

**I**t's an ill wind... Temporarily prevented from performing in Verbier by tendonitis in his left shoulder, Evgeny Kissin suddenly has time on his hands and is in a mood, I'm told, to give an interview. So I jump straight in, because this is a man who normally does his best to avoid giving any interviews at all. What has triggered this volte-face?

I get the answer before I've had the chance to ask my first question, as he launches into a diatribe, eyes blazing with fury: 'We're here in Switzerland,

**'I have always hated giving interviews, but I want to share what I've observed in Russia'**

and this morning I read that this beautiful country has refused to treat wounded Ukrainian soldiers, citing its traditional neutrality.'

A few hours later it emerges that Switzerland will row back on that prohibition, but Kissin's rage encompasses all democratic countries which don't put their shoulder to the wheel in the Ukraine war. He very much approves of Britain's support for Zelensky, but thinks Britain should press on militarily even harder, until Ukraine wins the war and Putin is defeated.

He then offers a detailed catalogue of Putin's crimes, from turning Russia back into a totalitarian state to his nonsensical assertion that

Ukraine's government is undemocratic, and to his claim that that country is a hotbed of Nazism. 'Yet since the end of the Gorbachev period,' says Kissin, 'Russia has literally been teeming with fascist organisations and publications. And although the Russian criminal code states that igniting ethnic, racial or religious hatred is punishable by law, no one has been punished.' Putin's propaganda, he adds, 'involves lying in a special way, best expressed in the Russian saying that the thief shouts "stop thief" more loudly than anybody else.'

Kissin's fans tend to think of him as a dweller in the serene uplands of musical thought, and they may find this outburst of pugilism surprising, but in the course of our three-hour conversation I come to realise that that pugilism has always been there under the surface, fuelled by everything Kissin experienced in his 20 years' residence in the Soviet Union, and by everything he's observed of Russia since leaving it. And if you look at the library on his website, you'll see that he's long been a vigorous participant in European and Middle Eastern political debate.

'I have always hated giving interviews,' he tells me, 'but now I am going to give them, in order to inform as many people in the free world as possible of what I have observed in Russia. And I have to say that although by no means all Russians are anti-Semites, Russia is one of the most anti-Semitic countries in the world.' Kissin, with many Russian friends, is emphatically no Russophobe, and this comment should be taken in the same sense it would if applied to

Speaking out:  
Evgeny Kissin believes  
the time is right to share  
his experiences of Russia

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Serene on the surface: (right) Kissin at the Salzburg Festival in 2021; (below) Vladimir Putin, whom Kissin describes as wielding a 'special' style of propaganda

Victorian England, where Dickens's Fagin was a popular racial stereotype.

As a voracious reader of classic Russian and European literature, Kissin quotes chapter and verse to prove his point. From among 20th-century authors, he singles out Vladimir Nabokov's assertion in his novel *The Gift* that most Russians were prejudiced against Jews. He quotes the Russian writer Yuri Nagibin's pronouncement: 'If there is one characteristic which unifies Russia's population – I don't use the word "nation", because a nation without democracy is a mere rabble – it is anti-Semitism.' He adduces the massacre of many thousands of Jews near the Russian village of Zmievka, identified and sent to their deaths by their Russian neighbours. And he stresses the oft-forgotten fact that the Jew-hating Protocols of the elders of Zion – which strongly influenced Hitler – were concocted not in Germany, but in Russia.

So when was Kissin first aware of his own stigmatisation? 'I knew it from my earliest childhood. I felt it constantly on my own skin, when I was a child. I mentioned this briefly in my autobiography, but now I should tell some details. I remember kids of my own age – and even younger – harassing me. I remember some of them finding a big stick and saying that they would use it to make me into a Jew kebab. I remember a man in the house where I was living, an old grandfather, telling me, "You bloody Jew, just take yourself off from here." My elder sister had the same experience. All the Russian Jews I know have had that experience. And this was not state anti-Semitism. It came from the ordinary people.' Subsequent to this interview, Kissin sent me one of his poems – not before published in English, and reproduced on page 52 – which reflects his despair when he was ten.

So what nationality does he feel? Witty and well-read, he mocks the banality of the question. 'Since early childhood we Jews were always being told that we were not Russian. Consider the Russian literature with which we all grew up – you'll find the word "yid" on almost every page.' Was Turgenev's writing tainted? 'He wrote a short story entitled *The Yid*, whose plot concerned an old Jewish spy who was selling his beautiful daughter to Russian officers.' And Dostoevsky? Kissin fires straight back. In one of the closing scenes of *Crime and Punishment*, he says, where Svidrigailov commits suicide, he does it in the presence of a Jewish soldier. 'And not only does Dostoevsky mock the soldier's manner of speech, his description of the man's facial expression reflects the most contemptuous



“Kids of my own age harassed me. I always felt Jewish. Russian was my first language, and only in that respect am I Russian.”

kind of stereotyping: "His face wore that everlastingly peevish and woebegone look which has been sourly imprinted on all the faces of the Jewish race without exception." OK, QED.

When Kissin does give an answer to the nationality question, it's oblique but emphatic: 'I always felt Jewish. Russian was my first language, and only in that respect am I Russian.'

However, in these matters Kissin is as keen to absolve as to point an accusatory finger. Tikhon Khrennikov, who was Secretary of the Union of Soviet Composers from 1948 to 1991, and who acted first as Stalin's musical tsar, then as the government's spokesman on musical taste, is widely regarded as having had a repressively philistine influence on Russian musical life. In 1948 he spearheaded the attacks on Prokofiev and Shostakovich among others, in the Zhdanov purge of unacceptable musical styles. Western musicologists have demonised him.

Kissin was one of this man's protégés, and he subsequently got to know and love him as a friend. Though admitting that he was 'no angel', he regards him as unjustly maligned. 'One must distinguish between words and deeds, especially if one has a high position in a totalitarian regime. Inevitably, some people had bad relations with him, but on the whole he was loved for his generosity in using his position to help people. I had nothing but kindness from him, and he particularly helped Jewish composers during Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign. For some of them he was literally their saviour.

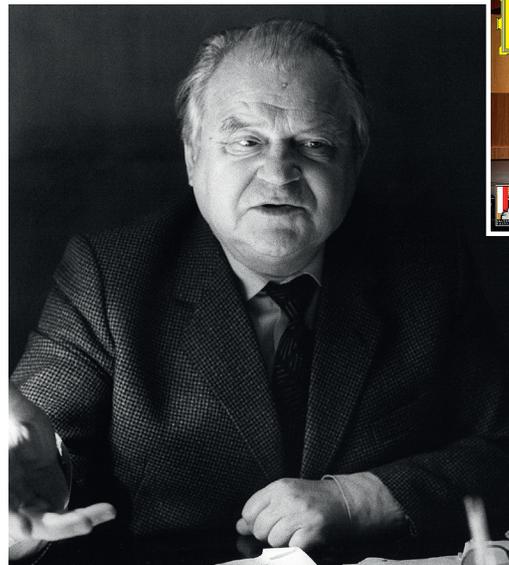


**A child's perspective**  
*A poem by Kissin, aged ten*

I am a poor Jew. How much grief  
 I have experienced!  
 I have seen the Baltic Sea,  
 Forests and fields,  
 The Volga, the Caucasus,  
 the Ukraine —  
 All that is like a paradise!  
 At home however I am like  
 in a desert —  
 Everybody in our courtyard,  
 All the cruel anti-Semites  
 Shout at me:  
 'A Jew! A Jew! A Yid!' I am  
 lonely  
 In the human river.

**Russian original**

Я бедный еврей.  
 Сколько горя  
 Испытывал я!  
 Я видел  
 Балтийское  
 море,  
 Леса и поля,  
 Поволжье,  
 Кавказ, Украину  
 —  
 Всё это как рай!  
 На родине ж я  
 как в пустыне —  
 Ведь все со  
 двора,  
 Все антисемиты  
 жестокие  
 Галдят надо  
 мной:  
 «Еврей! Еврей!  
 Жид!». Одинокий я  
 В речушке  
 людской.



A time for exonerat... (from left to right) Kissin in the 1990s; Tikhon Khrennikov, who Kissin says was 'loved' for his kindness; Kissin's new album

Then comes a revelation: 'Many musicians hear words as they play, and I

do too, but my texts are anti-Putin ones. When playing Mozart's G minor piano quartet recently, I heard the Russian words for "Down with Putin" again and again. My Russian partners loved that.'

On the evening prior to this interview we'd seen Kissin in very unfamiliar guise, performing with the baritone Thomas Hampson in a semi-staged production of Kathrine Kressmann Taylor's Hollywood two-hander *Address Unknown*. This is an epistolary drama between two German art dealers, Max (here played by Kissin) being in San Francisco, with Martin sending him the news from Germany as it unfolds in the mid-Thirties.

At first Martin is all for new-broom Hitler, lambasting Max for his political pessimism, until finally even Martin can't deny reality. The plot has striking parallels with the present, reflecting as it does the splitting of families and friendships: between those outside the country knowing the truth, while those inside it are brainwashed. As Kissin observes, this is the mirror-image of Ukraine and Russia today, and there's the possibility of a professional production of this play in London soon.

Kissin has written short stories in the past, but now he is engaged in writing a novel in Yiddish – a love story set in the Soviet Union of the 1970s, with the male character being a young Jewish pianist who is studying with Emil Gilels (a hero of Kissin's, and also one of Kissin's admirers).

But the project occupying most of Kissin's thought at present is a piano trio he is composing. 'It's about the war in Ukraine,' he says defiantly. 'A few years ago, some bars of music came to me, and I wrote them down on a piece of paper, which I kept in my wallet. Then I realised that it should be the beginning of a piece about the war.' For violin, cello and piano, its second movement was to be premiered by Mischa Maisky and his son and daughter at Verbier, but they didn't have time to learn it; the finale is unfinished. Kissin talks me through his musical scenario: from an ominous introduction, via bombings (multiple glissandi) to the people's sufferings (which he illustrates by singing two Slavic Ukrainian folk songs) and finally to victory. 'I feel I have to do everything I can,' he says, 'whether it's participating in concerts for Ukraine, or writing music for it.'

To put it mildly, this interview has been a surprise. I had anticipated a decorous discussion of musical arcana, but instead we got Evgeny Kissin the Jewish warrior. ☺

'It was in his house, not mine,' he continues, 'that I, as a teenager who had grown up in an assimilated Jewish household, first heard the words "Kol Nidrei", the name of the Jewish prayer. Khrennikov's wife used them to describe the way a violinist was playing the second movement of Tchaikovsky's Concerto. Khrennikov also knew those words, and what they meant. His wife was Jewish, and in his family they celebrated all the Jewish holidays.' Then Kissin adds a clincher: 'Unlike in all the other creative unions of the Soviet Union, not one single member of the composers' union was killed in the purges. Khrennikov protected all his members.'

Politics have occluded the fact that Khrennikov was also a composer. Kissin regards him as a gifted melodist, and has translated some of his song texts into Yiddish; he quotes composer Nino Rota as saying that if Khrennikov had set up in Hollywood, he would have become a millionaire.

Last month Kissin released a CD which represents the opening salvo in a campaign to rehabilitate Khrennikov's musical reputation. *The Salzburg Recital* (DG) includes a series of short pieces, chosen by Kissin, which Khrennikov composed while in his twenties. Playfully dissonant and possessing a fey charm, they could easily pass for Prokofiev, and they sit nicely with Kissin's sly *Dodecaphonic Tango* and the Gershwin Preludes which follow.

But Chopin – Kissin's great love – occupies much of the new release, and here too, the current war obtrudes. Kissin points out that Chopin wrote his B minor Scherzo as a reaction to the Russian invasion of Warsaw in 1831, and his A flat minor Polonaise to celebrate the victory of the Polish army over the Russians near Grochów. 'Those pieces are now very relevant,' he says, 'and since the war started, I have always played the A flat Polonaise as an encore.'

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