

# Piatigorsky comes to Los Angeles

**W**ith the return of the Piatigorsky International Cello Festival, Gregor Piatigorsky's name is once again on the lips of musical Los Angeles. The city was not the cosmopolitan center it is today when he first played here in 1929, and its distance from such centers on the East Coast and in Europe was keenly felt. At the same time, Los Angeles had an eager audience for classical music and was increasingly well funded, ensuring an all-star lineup for its burgeoning solo, chamber, and symphonic series. Piatigorsky played a big part in that scene. But unlike elsewhere, his success here as a performer was only the beginning of his relationship with the city, a relationship that grew deeper and more multifaceted as time went on. This article tells the story of that relationship as seen through the eyes of the *Los Angeles Times*.

To be sure, Piatigorsky's success here was huge. His Los Angeles Philharmonic debut in December 1929 caught the city unawares. The performance was preceded by just one solitary notice and passed without review, but less than a month later the *Times* named him as one of "three young Russian geniuses" whose performances had contributed to a "renaissance" of musical interest in Los Angeles (the other two were Nathan Milstein and Vladimir Horowitz). When Piatigorsky returned the following season, the *Times* ran no less than six notices and reviewed all three of his concerts. For critic Edwin Schallert, Piatigorsky's performance of the Haydn Cello Concerto in D major on that occasion was epoch-making. "As far as cellists are concerned," he wrote, "this may be termed the Piatigorsky era." The rationale for this superlative declaration can be found in Schallert's statement that "Piatigorsky has both rare nuance and singular depth, and he is technically

remarkable" – he was, in other words, a complete package.

These impressions stayed. In the words of *Times* critic Isabel Morse Jones, Piatigorsky "absolutely had this town 'by the ears,'" and she positively gushed in her review of his 1935 recital at Philharmonic Auditorium:

*Not a living cellist, nor a remembered one, has played here as Piatigorsky did for a wildly enthusiastic audience yesterday. His splendid, glowing tone, combined with a sensitive delicacy that would do credit to a violin virtuoso, creates with his musicianship the ultimate expression only dreamed of by composers and seldom heard in reality.*

By the end of the 1930s, interest in the musician was fueling interest in the man – and that man was interesting. The statement in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* that Piatigorsky "left the USSR surreptitiously in 1921, going first to Warsaw, then to Leipzig" does not do justice to a dramatic sequence of events that entailed trudging across the Polish border with cello in hand, escaping police custody and deportation, and playing for food before rocketing to success. "Only a man who had mastered his instrument and mastered himself," wrote Jones in a 1939 editorial recounting his story, "could play as Piatigorsky did."

By the early 1940s Piatigorsky's ties with America had strengthened considerably. In addition to having toured the country unceasingly for more than a decade, he had taken out naturalization papers and settled in Connecticut with his family. "I do not like to be called the young Russian cellist any more," he told the *Times* in 1941. "Please, if you speak of me, call me the 'veteran" ▶

Three young Russian colleagues, 1930  
 Left to right: Nathan Milstein, Vladimir  
 Horowitz, Gregor Piatigorsky  
 Piatigorsky Archives/Colburn School



Piatigorsky appears in the movie *Carnegie Hall*, 1947  
 Piatigorsky Archives / Colburn School



Gregor Piatigorsky USC Master Class  
 Left to right: Nathaniel Rosen, Valerie Marshall, Gregor Piatigorsky, Denis Brott  
 Piatigorsky Archives / Colburn School

Gregor Piatigorsky in his home studio in Brentwood, California  
 Bill Bridges/Piatigorsky Archives/Colburn School



- ▷ American cellist.' I like that much better. It makes me feel so proud!"

The *Times* never did adopt Piatigorsky's preferred epithet, but his reviews from the 1940s give the distinct impression that his career had entered a new phase. No longer amazed, critics paid him the rather higher honor of heightened expectations that didn't always result in unchecked praise. Reviewing Piatigorsky's 1941 recital, for example, Jones wrote that "Piatigorsky is probably the most facile instrumentalist in the world today" – no small statement with the likes of Heifetz, Horowitz, and even Rachmaninoff gracing Los Angeles stages. "The efficiency displayed by the soloist and the cooperation of Pavlovsky [the pianist] were something to marvel at," she continued, "but where was the music?"

Jones did not ask this question in her review of Piatigorsky's Hollywood Bowl debut later that year. "To whisper sweetness on the cello in an amphitheater of 20,000 seats and have it heard is no mean feat," she wrote. "The tone of Piatigorsky vibrates with life to the last. It is hard to determine where his pianissimo stops and your imagination begins." These sentiments were not to change. By 1945 Piatigorsky, now an American citizen, had become a fixture in the country's musical life, having offered, as the *Times* reported, "over 600 recitals and[...] more than 150 appearances with major orchestras" since his American debut in 1929.

In 1949 Piatigorsky bought a home in the Los Angeles Westside suburb of Brentwood, where he would live out his remaining 27 years – longer than any other single residence of his life. There he became an "exile in paradise," one of the numerous eminent European creative artists who settled in Los Angeles in the years surrounding World War II. Although he was originally a political refugee of the Soviet Union, the circumstances of his international success – to say nothing of his marriage to a Rothschild – placed him in a cosmopolitan

social milieu rather different from that of the broader émigré community in Los Angeles.

Like his Westside neighbors Heifetz and Arthur Rubinstein, Piatigorsky made occasional appearances on film during this time, solidifying his general reputation as one of the most distinguished living musicians. His credits include appearances in the 1947 musical drama *Carnegie Hall* and in a series produced by World Artists that was broadcast over NBC in the early 1950s and later released by 20th Century Fox.

In 1951 Piatigorsky put his fame to local use when financial distress disrupted the Hollywood Bowl season in its opening week, threatening its very existence. In an effort to get the series back on its feet, the administration underwent an expeditious shuffle, Piatigorsky and conductor Alfred Wallenstein donated their services for their upcoming appearance, and the *Times* did what it could to stoke public support. And support they did. When the series reopened on July 26, concertgoers turned out in such great numbers that the beginning of the concert had to be delayed by a quarter of an hour.

That evening Piatigorsky "gave a magnificent account" of the Dvořák concerto, according to *Times* critic Albert Goldberg, who also felt that the new Bowl administration's decision to jettison concert amplification had "contributed an infinitely greater degree of intimacy and contact with the audience than was ever possible under the former system. Both the soloist and the orchestra seemed to sense this," he continued, "and the result was an interpretation of uncommon eloquence." Following Piatigorsky and Wallenstein's lead, Bruno Walter, Heifetz, and other distinguished artists donated their services that summer, and the season ended jubilantly.

By the mid-1950s, Piatigorsky's artistry had begun to assume civic importance. To his regular performances were added those at public events, such as the memorial service for Albert Einstein held at UCLA in May 1955. The *Los Angeles Times* described his performance

there of Fauré's *Élégie* as "a high point" of the program, which consisted otherwise of verbal eulogies by distinguished civic and educational figures from Los Angeles.

As Piatigorsky began gradually scaling back his concert schedule in the late 1950s, his roots in the community grew deeper. He had become a fairly regular participant in Los Angeles social life, and displayed increasing interest in cultivating local musical talent by judging competitions, supporting the Los Angeles Junior Philharmonic, serving as president of the Young Musicians Foundation, and offering musical advice to the Music Academy of the West, where he also taught for a time. Now he was ready to devote a significant portion of his time and energy to regular teaching. This he did at the University of Southern California, beginning in 1962. The endowed Piatigorsky chair – held today by Piatigorsky Festival founder and artistic director Ralph Kirshbaum – was established in 1974.

Piatigorsky had always devoted some time to teaching and considered it an integral part of his personal and artistic development. What mattered most to him as a teacher was "how [his students] will use their art as human beings in a productive life," and he considered it his duty as a teacher to be "a good man. Without

goodness," he said, "one cannot be right in any walk of life." Jones was right: for Piatigorsky, man and music were inseparable.

Just six months before he passed away, Piatigorsky was asked how one ought to approach death. "It's terribly simple," he replied. "Don't waste too much time thinking about it." And that's precisely what he did. Piatigorsky's commitment to his students remained utterly undiminished as his health gradually declined. "To his students he gave all of himself," recalled his wife, Jacqueline. "When they came early in the morning I asked, 'Will they be here for lunch?' 'No,' he said. But they were still there for dinner."

After giving some masterclasses in Zurich in July 1976, Piatigorsky could simply go no further, and he died of cancer at home less than a month later, on August 6. His legacy lives on in the performing and teaching of leading cellists throughout the United States and Europe. As one of the great musicians of the 20th century, Piatigorsky belonged to the world. But no single place in the world has greater claim on him than Los Angeles, on whose musical history he left his indelible mark in the threefold capacity of virtuoso performer, distinguished citizen, and master teacher. Welcome home, Piatigorsky.

KEENAN REESOR



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