

French violinist Philippe Graffin isn't tied down by his nationality. He tells Jessica Duchen about his diverse influences

Wandering minstrel

Why do we expect French musicians to play French music? Not that Philippe Graffin doesn't. His recordings of turn-of-the-century French repertoire attract ecstatic reviews and his discovery of a spellbinding chamber version of Chausson's *Poème* made headlines a few years ago. Yet you are as likely to find him in Vilnius, Cincinnati, Cape Town or London (where he lives) as in Paris; and as certain to hear his unmistakable tone – "exquisitely sweet and focused" as the *Sunday Times* wrote – unfurling a new piece that he's commissioned, as expounding a Saint-Saëns concerto. Graffin's sound is all his own – a rarity among today's younger soloists, yet so deeply ingrained that, while other musicians obsess about such things, it isn't an issue that bothers him. 'It's like having your own voice when you speak,' he says. 'I don't really think about it.'

Graffin's family history haunted his childhood, especially the story of his Hungarian-Jewish grandmother, who played the violin but died when Graffin's father, Daniel, was only eight. 'She's a mythical person in the family,' Graffin recounts. After her death Daniel had had to attend strict Catholic schools and was never permitted to study music. 'He literally escaped from school at 16 and lived a Bohemian life for a while. He taught himself the guitar and played jazz with Stephane Grappelli!' Eventually, however, he found his true path in sculpture and became a celebrated artist – his work can be seen in cities from Atlanta to Singapore. He built a house on a farm in southern France and raised his family there. In this setting one of the young Philippe's earliest musical memories was 'wanting to play Grappelli's music' – besides which, 'they gave me a recording of Menuhin speaking about music, which sparked my first love of the violin.'

It wasn't until he was eight, however, that Philippe began to play, 'which is rather late by today's standards. As soon as I began to play, I wanted to play for people and I wanted that to be my life. This worried my parents and I had to fight for it until my mid-teens – when I too escaped from home, like my father!'

He entered the Paris Conservatoire where he studied for several years with Michèle Auclair, graduating with the Premier Prix at the age of 16. While there, however, he chanced on a recording of the Russian violinist who had won the 1967 Queen Elisabeth Competition: Philippe Hirshhorn (he died of a brain tumour in 1996 aged only 50). 'He was one of the greatest violinists I ever heard,' Graffin says. 'I adored him! He is remembered as one of the great talents to come out of Riga, along with Gidon Kremer. He was living in

Brussels and although I was officially at the Paris Conservatoire, I was taking the train to Brussels every two weeks to have private lessons with him. Hirshhorn's favourite violinist was Toscha Seidel, and he had the same burning, fascinating quality in his sound; that left a lasting impression on me.'

After the Conservatoire, Graffin headed for Canada hoping to study with the veteran Hungarian violinist Lorand Fenyves. Fenyves, however, decided that the very young French student needed a more structured environment and sent him to Josef Gingold at Indiana University.



Graffin with his teacher Philippe Hirshhorn, 'one of the greatest violinists I ever heard.'

'Gingold and Hirshhorn were stylistically my biggest influences. Studying with Gingold was like studying with the whole history of the violin. He also influenced my love of the repertoire; whenever you came into the room, he would always be playing a piece that you didn't know, incredibly well and by heart, often an obscure work by Vieuxtemps, Wieniawski or Hubay. Physically he looked very much like his own teacher, Ysaÿe; like Ysaÿe he'd often accompany you by playing the orchestra part of a concerto pizzicato, and you could learn as much from that as from what he said to you. Once I was playing some Vieuxtemps and he remembered: "I played it like you – singing. Then Ysaÿe played it – crying." And when I heard him play Kreisler, it was very close to Kreisler's own style. It was a unique and cherished experience for me that someone showed me everything I'd dreamed of knowing about the violin. When I played one of my first recitals in the school, he came backstage and said: "You've heard a lot of violinists in concert – but remember, tonight you are the violin." That was incredibly generous.'

Graffin lists other influences as Miriam Fried, Eli Goren and Viktor Liebermann. 'I was brought up in a rather idealistic way – I didn't have any ambition to make a career, I just followed my heart and studied with people by whose playing I was blown away. All these people I consider great artists and the time I spent with them is growing more and more precious. Some of the things they told me I am only realising in life now.'

In 1987 Graffin entered the Fritz Kreisler Competition in Austria. He reached the final, but the event appears not to have been entirely straightforward. 'I was told that the orchestra was too small to play my concerto, the Prokofiev Second, even though it was on the list, but somehow it was big enough for the others, like the Sibelius. But there was a Eurovision concert that they wanted me to play in and I did the Wieniawski "Faust" Fantasy.' Yehudi Menuhin was there, heard the concert – and the backstage story – and promptly invited Graffin to record with him. This was a particularly happy coincidence since Menuhin had been one of his principal inspirations. 'Both Hirshhorn and Fenyves had adored Menuhin and while I was growing up he influenced my love of repertoire like the Elgar and Schumann concertos. And I knew that there was something special, something spiritual, about him.'

Menuhin chose most of the repertoire for the recording. 'But I asked if I could do the Chausson *Poème*, which I felt very close to, and he said he'd like to give me a lesson on it. I spent an afternoon working with him and even though I'd thought I knew the piece very well, it changed my whole approach. It was amazing how strongly Enescu was present – it was almost as though he was in the room. The fingerings were Enescu's, as was the particular approach to the phrasing. Enescu had been a close friend of Madame Chausson and the composer was very impressed by him. Whenever I met Menuhin, there was always a sense that it was really Enescu that he loved.' Graffin last visited him only two weeks before his death. 'Even then, he talked to me for half an hour about Enescu.'

In France again after ten years abroad, studying with musicians he admired but who were not necessarily the most influential in the practical world of the music business, Graffin found that starting a career was not so easy. Never one to sit around waiting for things to



With pianist Stephen Kovacevich at the St-Nazaire Festival, September 2002

happen, he set about creating his own opportunities. One of these was his festival, Consonances de St-Nazaire in the Loire Atlantique region of France, near Nantes. Thirteen years later, it is still flourishing. Every September he brings a hand-picked bunch of quality musicians to this coastal town to play a wide range of music, from violin and piano recitals to quintets and larger ensembles, from the Baroque to the present day. In 1995 St-Nazaire came to London for a series at the Wigmore Hall, including an Ysaÿe series as a tribute to Gingold. 'That was a real high point,' Graffin remembers. 'The festival is a good way to meet friends again and its very important to open it up to as many people as possible. It's a reminder that instead of living in a cocoon, classical music has a place in the wider world. This town didn't have much music before.'



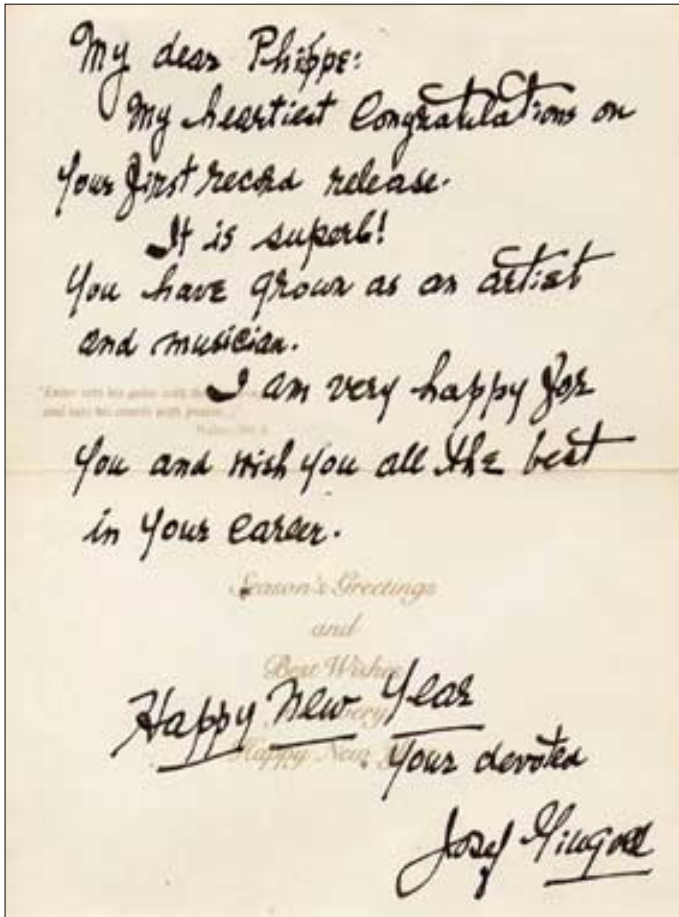
Performing the Rhodian Schedrin Concerto Cantabile with Rostropovich on the podium, November 2001 © Mikhail Rashkovsky

Each year Graffin and the festival commission a new work from a different composer. So far that has meant ten pieces over the past ten years, from composers including David Matthews and, most recently, Vytautas Barkauskas from Lithuania. 'He'd written a masterpiece called Partita that Gidon Kremer plays a lot. I met him in Vilnius and asked if he would write me a concerto.' The result is *Jeux*, Barkauskas's first concerto, which Graffin finds immensely exciting; he gave the premiere with the Lithuanian National Orchestra in Vilnius in February this year. The concert was recorded live and at the time of writing Graffin's negotiations for a commercial release were progressing well. In June Graffin gave the work's US premiere as part of Music 03 in Cincinnati – he also played Nicholas Maw's Solo Sonata there. Barkauskas is now writing him a double concerto, for violin and viola.

'It's also marvellous that Barkauskas made me discover Vilnius!' Graffin adds. It was here that Graffin replaced Maxim Vengerov at short notice to perform the Rodion Shchedrin *Concerto Cantabile* with Rostropovich on the podium; the result was such a success that he was invited to play the work in Moscow at a special concert for the composer's 70th birthday last December, broadcast live to the US.

The much respected name Graffin has now built up is not so much thanks to overnight accolades, but

rather 'created by friendships with musicians, re-engagement with orchestras and my love for interesting repertoire. I'm now playing more and more concerts, rather than less and less; I'm very grateful for that. Life doesn't only have to be interesting if you were taken on by an international agency as a teenager, although we live in a world where people expect someone to have found himself artistically at 15." Graffin gives annual masterclasses at Apeldoorn in Holland, the Courchevel 'music alp' (Pascal Devoyon's summer academy) and the Gothenburg Conservatory in Sweden, as well as on occasional visits to South Africa. 'I often see kids in their 20s who are very good but feel depressed because it's difficult to make their way through competitions and to know how they can develop their lives.'



A card from Gingold congratulating Graffin on his first record release. 'Studying with Gingold was like studying the whole history of the violin,' says Graffin

Graffin's recordings for Hyperion include both rare and less rare repertoire, the latter notably including Saint-Saëns's complete violin concertos. Graffin found that 'I had to develop my affections even more than I'd expected for turn-of-the-century French composers; I'd tended to play music by composers who were influenced by Franck, but not so much Saint-Saëns. I didn't know the Saint-Saëns concertos so well, but in the past few years I've done the Third Concerto about 50 times and I love it more and more! Each time, with each conductor, I learn something new.' For the future he's adding to his Hyperion roster more rare works from the French repertoire, including pieces by the Franck students Pierre de Breville and Silvio Lazzari, as well as Canteloube's Chants de la Montagne and Reynaldo Hahn's Concerto. 'This is an important part of my life and it's something that I love — I don't care about having a "niche". One advantage of the overcrowded recording market is that it has created an interest in music that has waited a long time to be discovered. But I also have an interest in other rare music that isn't French.' Lurking among his Hyperion recordings is a CD of sonatas by Goldmark and Bruno Walter; other music that intrigues him ranges from Maw to Korngold.



Graffin started to play the violin at the age of eight, 'rather late by today's standards', he says

'When a French musician goes abroad, the market is very difficult because it is accepted that an American, British or even Russian violinist could play everything according to his or her taste at that moment, whereas the French are usually asked to take the "French programme" spot. In France, a French violinist playing French music seems rather banal.'

Graffin bought his violin 14 years ago from Behrendt Möller in Amsterdam. It is a Venetian instrument dating from 1730 that was thought to be a Domenico Busano. 'But since then I've seen other Busanos,' says Graffin, 'and it's nothing like them. I think it could be by a Montagnana student or Montagnana himself. I play all my concerts and recordings on it. It has a very tender voice, but the sound can also be brilliant. I think it has the quality of a mother singing to her child, rather than a big operatic soprano, but it cuts through the orchestra and it's ideal for chamber music.'

For an artist with such an enquiring mind the future holds countless possibilities. Graffin is considering various projects, ranging from music by forgotten Jewish composers to learning to conduct and playing string quartets. 'I'm also working on a TV documentary about the Chausson Poème, which is fascinating. It's based on a story by Ivan Turgenev called The Song of Triumphant Love which in turn is based on the true story of Turgenev and the mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot. I've found all kinds of things that have been sitting there like clues in an incredible puzzle.' Other highlights for the season ahead include the 13th Consonances festival (12-20 September), a return to South Africa in October following Graffin's first highly successful tour there last year, a series of concerts with the Swedish Chamber Orchestra playing Saint-Saëns and Vieuxtemps concertos and chamber music with members of the orchestra; and in London, a concert at the Wigmore Hall with pianist Pascal Devoyon, celebrating ten years of their duo. They will also be recording Ravel and Enescu together.

'In many ways my background is not really so French,' Graffin reflects. 'We should always be learning from different traditions. Sharing the stage with Rostropovich, it felt as though the music was almost a political statement — something made real at that moment, without any nostalgia for the past. Whereas Gingold was full of nostalgia and Hirshhorn had a poetic notion of searching for an idealised state of being while performing. For Liebermann and Rostropovich, music is a way of life, a matter of life or death. We can learn something from all these approaches. Traditionally, the violinist is a wanderer. And I'm glad that this is still true.'