



## IVAN EVSTAFYEVICH KHANDOSHKIN

We know from both surviving compositions and the reminiscences of contemporaries that Ivan Khandoshkin (1747–1804) was not only one of the most outstanding musicians at the court of Catherine the Great, but one of the greatest violinists in all the history of the instrument, on a par with Biber, Tartini, Paganini or Heifetz. He took an Italian (Tartiniesque) technique to a magical level of virtuosity, combining free improvisation with the heady intonations of Gypsy violists, the drama and mayhem of Russian folk songs, and an exquisite equilibrium of form inherent in the Classicism of Catherine's court.

He has never been entirely forgotten, but his reputation, at least for the past hundred years, has fallen far short of his due, for which reason many of his compositions have proven to be lost forever.

No portraits of Khandoshkin survive, although we do have a simple description in the words of his widow, transcribed by the writer Prince Vladimir Odoyevsky for Adolphe Pluchart's encyclopaedic dictionary: "He was not a drinking man; he was of medium height, solid of frame, of handsome appearance, with large eyes, and he wore a wig". Further: "Khandoshkin's fingers were small and thick". All his life he retained his brilliant technique, "and to the end of his days he played with a short, Tartiniesque bow".

His biography is full of anecdote, myth and blank spots. He was called a student of Tartini, but no documentation survives to allow us either to affirm or reject the connection. His creative life began at the court of Peter III, the violin-playing Tsar, husband of the future Catherine the Great, and it ended in the reign of another violinist Emperor, Alexander I. He would seem to have been born in Moscow in 1747, the son of Evstafy Khandoshkin, a musician in the service of Count Pyotr Sheremetev. They were not serfs, freedom having been granted to Khandoshkin's grandfather. At the age of 13 Ivan Khandoshkin was enrolled as student violinist in the orchestra of Pyotr Fedorovich (later Peter III), which also included another young Russian composer, Max Berezovsky. For seven years, Khandoshkin studied there under Tito Porto, an Italian violinist at the Russian court. Before this he may have been a singer in the court choir.

After Catherine's accession to the throne, Khandoshkin was the sole student violinist from her husband's orchestra to be employed in her court theatre. At the age of seventeen he was invited by Ivan Betskoy, one of Catherine's closest advisers, to take charge of music classes in the recently founded Academy of Arts. Later, in the early 1780s, he was to teach in the Free Theatre of Karl Knipper, where the actors, dancers, singers and instrumentalists were taken from among the orphans of Moscow's Foundlings' Hospital. By this time he was already chamber musician and conductor of the court chamber orchestra and it was around this same time that his compositions began to be published.

Khandoshkin became extraordinarily popular as both violinist and composer. In 1784, he worked as director and rehearsals musician with the court ballet troupe, together with the ballet master Angiolini and the popular ballet composer Conobbio. In 1785 Khandoshkin left court service with the rank of Mundschenk or Cup-bearer, just one level short of nobility, to take charge of the Academy in Ekaterinslavl (now Dnepropetrovsk), at the desire of his patron Prince Grigory Potemkin (Catherine II's secret husband). Potemkin had plans to turn the city into the capital of the southern lands, recently annexed by him to Russia. But Khandoshkin was detained in Moscow by a cholera epidemic, and possibly by other circumstances, and he never went to Ekaterinslavl. We know nothing of his fate during the reigns of Paul I and Alexander I, but we do know that he died in St Petersburg on 18 March 1804, "upon arriving in the office for his pension".

Six sonatas by Khandoshkin for two violins, dedicated to Nikita Akinfievich Demidov, their existence known from an announcement in the newspaper "Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedemosti" in 1781, were until recently considered lost. In 2003 the anthology "Six Sonatas" was discovered in a collection of scores from the Solovtsov estate, housed in the Ulyanovsk Regional Research Library, albeit without the 4th and 5th sonatas.

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