

GOOD WEEKEND



July 19, 1997

The Sydney Morning Herald Magazine

Slava
Grigoryan

The world at
his fingertips

A man with dark, curly hair is shown in profile, looking upwards and to the right. He is wearing a dark, long-sleeved shirt and is playing a light-colored acoustic guitar. The background is a solid, vibrant green. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the man's face and the guitar. In the bottom right corner, there is a large, white, stylized letter 'b'.

Grigoryan's
chance: some
of the finest
and most
famous
musicians in
the world are
keen to perform
with Slava.

b



Slava Grigoryan is a 20-year-old who drinks, chases girls and plays pool with his mates. He is also a guitar virtuoso who is being hailed as Australia's next John Williams.

The boy was barely 14. The auditorium was full. Eight hundred other guitarists were in rapt attention. The piece was a finger-teaser – one of Bach's preludes from the lute suites in A minor. Slava Grigoryan was travelling beautifully when, suddenly, he hit a blank wall. His mind had shut down.

He had no idea where he was going. He was lost, so to speak, in a fugue.

Behind the stage his mother, Irina, froze. Was it 30 seconds or a lifetime that her son sat there, head bowed, his pale face hidden behind a shock of dark curls, trying to find his way home? "I'd said to him [before the performance] don't think about notes, think about phrasing, about music, about melody. Don't think about what comes next. Just enjoy yourself. Make music. But he was tense."

"I think you just go into shock," Slava Grigoryan says now, recalling the nightmare. "The thing with Bach is that it's like a circle and once you get on there's no breaks or anything. I had no music in front of me and I just didn't know where to start from so I had to start from the top. And I started again

and played the whole thing through."

His lapse almost certainly cost him first place in the competition. "If he'd been a mature musician it might have had a bad impact on his career," says Irina Grigoryan, "but he was so young that he recovered quite quickly."

Besides, fate was sitting in the audience in the form of Austin Prichard-Levy, a former student of John Williams and friend of pianist David Helfgott and his wife Gillian.

Six years earlier, in 1985, Prichard-Levy had recognised Helfgott, as much for his oddball character as his musicianship, and staged what was to be the first concert in Helfgott's remarkable reincarnation. "I borrowed a Steinway for it," Prichard-Levy told me by telephone from the US, where he was on the *Shine* tour as Helfgott's producer.

In 1991, Prichard-Levy had come to see Slava Grigoryan play in Sydney after hearing him on tape attempting Isaac Albéniz's famous movement, *Sevilla*. "I said at the time, 'This sounds like a young Julian Bream.' I had no set plan ... [but] I could hear ►

oy wonder

Story by **David Leser** Photography by **Greg Elms**

that his style was uncommonly original."

As Grigoryan played Paganini's tortuously difficult *The Carnival of Venice* and then Bach's prelude, Prichard-Levy and a group of guitarist friends listened in awe. It didn't matter that he stumbled in the prelude. "All of us, as we were walking out, said Slava was the only real musician in the contest," Prichard-Levy says. "We said, 'This kid has got it.'"

And, as if to prove them right, there was Grigoryan after his performance, playing

American jazz keyboardist Chick Corea for the way in which two of his pieces had been interpreted.

In 1994, Grigoryan became the first classical guitarist in 23 years to be signed worldwide by Sony Records, the last person being John Williams. He was signed to a five-album contract.

Michael Naphthali, the then newly appointed classical manager at Sony Records in Australia, was still trying to find the power points in his office when

In 1996, Grigoryan toured Australia as part of a *Great Guitars* tour alongside Paco Pena and Leo Kottke. After his performance at Adelaide's Festival Theatre, *The Australian* newspaper concluded that Grigoryan showed "such outstanding command" of his instrument that it was only a matter of time "before he, too, is world famous".

Early this year he toured the country with the Australian Chamber Orchestra and, at the time of writing, had almost

completed an international tour taking in Cyprus, the Netherlands and England. In England, he revisited Wigmore Hall, site of a thrilling recital last year which *Classical Music Magazine* described as "a truly dazzling and brilliant performance". In London his agents are Hazard Chase, Julian Bream's representatives. His producer, not surprisingly, is Austin Prichard-Levy, who seems to have an uncanny ability to locate and nurture unusual talents.

(Apart from Grigoryan and David Helfgott, he is also producer for violinist Asmira Woodward-Page, daughter of Roger Woodward.)

So the hype is on. Sting is considering playing with him. Sagat Guirey, Nigel Kennedy's guitarist, has become his friend. Russian violinist Yuri Bashmet wants him on his virtuoso tour of Europe. John Williams' agent also has proposed a tour of Europe, while Mayte Martín, the great Catalan singer, has suggested performing with him.

Little wonder that Michael Naphthali keeps gushing. "Even though he's a classical guitarist he will also be one of the best jazz guitarists the world has ever seen. It's kind of scary. He's just a young kid with this incredible talent ... You will see him jamming and he will switch between doing *Sevilla* to doing the riff from *The Wind Cries Mary*, the classic Jimi Hendrix song, and you think, this is just too good to keep bottled up in little old Australia."

Kazakhstan, the former Soviet republic, is known more for its nomadic cattle breeders than its musicians. In summer, the Asiatic winds turn feather-grass to desert and in winter the rivers ebb and freeze.

In 1980, Eduard and Irina Grigoryan decided to pack their bags for Australia with four-year-old son Slava and various members of their extended family. Eduard was a jazz drummer and violinist and Irina a violinist. Both were highly successful musicians with the philharmonic orchestra in the Kazakhstan capital Alma-Ata when a cousin wrote urging them to come to Melbourne.

They knew virtually nothing about their

"When I heard this performance by Slava I was struck. Any idiot who knew anything about good music could hear it was amazing."



an impromptu recital in the foyer, with a crowd gathered around him. "He was playing everything he could," his mother recalls, "and everyone was clapping and I thought this was a good thing because he could tell that everyone liked him."

At the age of 20, it's probably too soon – and too unfair – to start talking about Slava Grigoryan as though his place alongside the guitar gods is assured. Look at the burdens John Williams was forced to shoulder after Segovia virtually anointed him his heir apparent 30-odd years ago.

Williams spent years trying to wrestle with such presumptions. It's one of the reasons he is reluctant to comment publicly on Grigoryan today, even though he is full of admiration.

And yet there is no escaping the buzz which now surrounds the young man with the hooded, burning eyes and the fingers that look like eagles' talons. Grigoryan, or "*el chico ruso*" (young Russian boy) as he is known in the Spanish guitar fraternity, came to Melbourne as a child from the former southern Soviet republic of Kazakhstan in 1981.

Eleven years later, he'd become the youngest ever finalist in the Tokyo International Classical Guitar Competition and in the same year had recorded his first solo guitar CD, *Spirit of Spain*, which was to hold the number-one spot on the classical charts in Australia for six weeks.

Described in *The New York Times* as a remarkable recital ... [and] guitar playing of uncommon originality and authority", it was also lavishly praised by legendary

Austin Prichard-Levy arrived one morning with a tape for him to listen to.

"He came to see me with this cassette and the first cut was [Albéniz's] *Sevilla*," says Naphthali. "I knew that track quite well because John Williams plays it. So when I heard this performance by Slava on a crappy old cassette I was struck. You didn't have to be the big record industry mogul to work it out. Any idiot who knew anything about good music could hear that it was amazing."

A week later Naphthali remembers Prichard-Levy returning with a cassette of both Grigoryan and Williams. (According to Prichard-Levy, it was Grigoryan and Williams, but also a selection of Segovia and Julian Bream.) "He asked me to pick the difference, which I did, but the quality of the technical performance was so immensely close that it was impossible to tell," says Naphthali.

"To get to a point where I'm splitting hairs between Slava and John Williams should give you some indication of how well it came across. It was just amazing that a child, a child literally of 16, could be up there on a cassette being compared to someone of such a virtuosic nature as John Williams."

"I thought, 'God, here's a star.' What else could you think? You can't just dismiss it as being some flash in the pan."

Prichard-Levy agrees. "There is nothing in the repertoire Slava can't play. I have seen him sight-read the most difficult piece, *Usher Waltz* by [Nikita] Koshkin, on the spot and he played it much better than most people who have recorded it."

new city, but Eduard dreamed of visiting shops filled only with records, particularly those by his jazz heroes Miles Davis, Chick Corea and Weather Report.

By pretending to emigrate to Israel, the Grigoryan family were given permission to leave Kazakhstan. It was on the Romanian-Ukraine border, in temperatures of 20 degrees below zero, that Slava was given his first instrument – a toy guitar.

After arriving in Australia in June,

as a solo guitarist in Sydney. At school he was a star. "He played *La Bamba* behind his back in class," says one of his old school friends, Andrew Eaton, still reveling in the memory.

At his last school assembly he did a solo version of the school anthem, the same way Hendrix did *Star-Spangled Banner*. "I saw a lot of red-faced teachers in the audience," Grigoryan chortles.

Today, when you talk to Slava Grigoryan, you get dual impressions. One,

guitar and within four hours of us meeting the three of us were playing on stage and from then on we played it every night

From a record company's point of view Slava Grigoryan is a gift to be treasured. Classical music is throwing off its old straitjacket. New music is being forged. New audiences are being tapped. Nigel Kennedy, well-spoken English public schoolboy that he was, proved that when he reinvented himself as the bad

boy punk violinist. So too, did Freddie Mercury (the late singer from rock band Queen) when he recorded with the Spanish soprano Montserrat Caballe.

"People are looking for the sensibilities of classical music but packaged in a more contemporary way," says Michael Nappali. And Slava Grigoryan fits the bill perfectly – he can play whatever has been imagined for the guitar, even if it might offend at times.

Earlier this year, Grigoryan toured with the

Australian Chamber Orchestra and, together with the ACO's artistic director Richard Tognetti, performed a piece called *Hallow ... A Welcome Message for Electric Violin and Guitar*.

Writing in *The Australian*, Jeremy Vincent summed up the feelings of many when he said: "*Hallow*, for all its complexities and exploitation of the chromatic scale, becomes caught up in its own improvisation, its disparate elements flaying about almost as if Tognetti and Grigoryan are a couple of lads experimenting with new-found instruments and electric leads out in the garage."

"It's very frustrating," says Grigoryan of this and other negative reactions to the piece. "In all classical concerts, the audience [and critics] know what you're going to be playing. They've heard the best versions of it, and so when you do something like what we did with *Hallow*, they don't know how to deal with it ...

"We were so excited about doing this new stuff in front of people, but the public just don't want it. They're so tied up in their own little worlds. People would walk out and not come back for the rest of the gig, knowing what was coming on after this [Evangelista, Sibelius, Prokofiev and Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*]. It was only a four-minute piece."

"Both Richard and I love rock and we wanted to play a serious classical composition using rock sounds, and people were just petrified as soon as they saw the amplifiers on stage."

Soon after making these comments Grigoryan, Tognetti and drummer Chad

It was on the Romanian-Ukraine border, in temperatures of 20 degrees below, that Slava was given his first instrument – a toy guitar.



1981, he was given an old cast-off with a high action and steel strings that left his fingers in shreds. For a while he stopped playing. He might have pursued the violin except his parents wouldn't hear of it.

"When he was born ... there is a tradition that you have to drink to the newborn," explains Eduard Grigoryan from the family's neat weatherboard home in Melbourne's inner-east. "And the first toast was from a very good violin player who said, 'Let's drink that Slava is not going to play violin.' That was the toast, because it's a very difficult instrument. It takes years to learn."

At six years of age, Slava was given his second instrument, this time a full-sized treble guitar which he could pick and hammer without drawing blood. His father, who'd never played guitar but understood the instrument completely, became his teacher. "In two years he passed six grades," Eduard says. "Which is fast. It's not incredible, but it's fast."

By the time he was eight, Slava was performing in eisteddfods. At 11, he'd appeared on radio for an ABC children's program. At 12, he was busking on Acland Street, St Kilda, earning up to \$80 an hour (which paid for the household groceries), as well as playing with the Melbourne Musician's Chamber Orchestra. He'd also played in the Australian Guitar Competition, which was his first contact with the classical guitar scene.

By the time he was 13, he was guitar soloist with the Melbourne Mandolin Orchestra and at 14, Austin Prichard-Levy had arranged his first formal debut

that there's nothing musically that's beyond him and that whatever he wants is now within his reach. Two, that he's still pinching himself in disbelief at the giddy heights he has already reached. He is at once urbane and assured, but at the same time disarmingly boyish. He still lives at home, likes to wake up late, play pool with his friends, smoke, drink and chase girls. But then he will go and play to full concert halls with two of the greatest guitar players in the world, Paco Pena and Leo Kottke.

"Paco and Leo were really great," he says, recounting his experience of playing with them in Australia last year. "Originally, Pepe Romero was meant to be doing the tour. He was the classical guitarist. I was meant to be the support act, playing for about 10 minutes every night. I was in Sydney the week leading up to the tour and I got a call saying, 'Look, Pepe hasn't rocked up, you're the classical guitarist now. The first show is tomorrow in Adelaide.'

"So I had to get on the plane, fly over and meet them, and that was it. We did the show. We got a really good response from the crowd and after the two guys played some duets ... they called me out and all three of us walked on and had a bow and the audience was great and they were still clapping."

"Then Paco said to me: 'Do you know *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* [by Francisco Tarrega]?' And I said, 'Yes,' and he said, 'Well, you just play the straight bars and we'll play around you.'

"So I ran to my room and grabbed my

Wackerman played at the 25th Bells Beach Rip Curl surfing classic in Victoria.

This time, instead of in a concert hall, they played under a tarpaulin on a bluff above the Southern Ocean. Called *Deviance*, the piece was meant to be a parody of Paganini's *24 Caprices*. To many of the surfies, in their beanies and lumberjackets, it was white noise.

"Will you tell them to shut up," one girl screamed at the security guard. "I can't," he yelled back. "It's music."



LEADER NEWSPAPERS

THE WHITSUNDAYS

OUT OF THE BLUE™

DW5Y050/GW

Laguna Quays Resort



\$300 BONUS SPENDING MONEY*

A luxurious resort on the Whitsunday coast, created for pleasure and relaxation, offering tennis, championship golf, 15 hectare watersports lagoon, 3 pools, a free Kids Only Club (2-12yrs) and more.

5 nights from

\$793*