

# Who played the Barjansky Stradivarius?

*Julia Severus has recorded the complete piano works of Adolf Barjansky for Grand Piano. In this article, she seeks to unveil the mystery behind the Barjansky Stradivarius: which prestigious cellist, born in 1883, was the guardian of the master's legendary instrument? The name of Barjansky the virtuoso cellist was well-known in worldwide musical circles during the first half of the 20th century but, paradoxically, that's where the daunting problem of identification began...*

In musical circles the name Barjansky is associated with the famous Barjansky Stradivarius, honouring its former owner, the Russian virtuoso cellist of the same name. Since 1983 the instrument has been owned and played by celebrated cellist Julian Lloyd-Webber<sup>1</sup>.

The cellist Barjansky is associated with the world premiere of the Cello Concerto by Frederick Delius and the creation of Ernest Bloch's Hebrew Rhapsody for Cello and Orchestra *Schelomo*, which the latter dedicated to the Barjansky couple ("Pour Alexandre et Catherine Barjansky"); Catherine Barjansky, the sculptor and wife of Alexander Barjansky (1883–1961), gives a detailed account of their artistic collaboration in her memoirs *Portraits with Backgrounds*<sup>2</sup>.

It is striking that the first name of the cellist Barjansky is given in the various sources partly as Serge, partly as Alexander (or Alexandre), and partly as Serge Alexander. It is assumed that he used two different first names<sup>3</sup>. Why this is so, I could not find an explanation for at first. In Russian there is only one first name and one patronymic for a person, not several first names as in many other countries.

In her memoirs<sup>4</sup> Catherine Barjansky writes about her husband as Alexander. Eric Fenby, who got to know the Barjansky couple well on the occasion of the premiere of Delius' Cello Concerto, also writes of Alexander Barjansky in his book *Delius as I Knew Him*<sup>5</sup>. The few photos always show the same man, the cellist Alexander and husband of Catherine Barjansky.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Strad*, April 2015

<sup>2</sup> New York, Macmillan Company, 1947

<sup>3</sup> See *The Delius Society Journal*, autumn 2011, Number 150, p.121: "I was particularly intrigued to read of the concert given in November 1912 by [...] the conductor [Edward Elgar] with the 'cellist Serge Barjansky. Delians know him better as Alexandre Barjansky whom Eric Fenby vividly recalled in talks to The Delius Society and in *Delius As I Knew Him*. I have not been able to find out why Barjansky used this alternative forename at this time. For many years I have wanted to read Catherine Barjansky's book *Portraits With Backgrounds* and thought I might find the answer to this mystery in this book. Recently I managed to track the book down on the internet, but was unable to discover why Mr. Barjansky used two separate first names."

<sup>4</sup> *Portraits with Backgrounds*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1947

<sup>5</sup> G. Bell & Sons, Ltd., London, 1936



*Alexander Barjansky*

I began to search for concert programmes and reviews of the cellist Barjansky. In the process I came across numerous documents which gave the cellist's name as Serge Barjansky, but more often as Dr. Serge Barjansky (1883–1940), others which gave his name as Alexander/Alexandre/Alexandro Barjansky.

It should be noted that the cellist Barjansky belonged to the elite of the music world at the time and performed as a soloist in the greatest music halls and with the leading orchestras of Europe.

I found Serge Barjansky's first review in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*<sup>6</sup> of February 21, 1906: "A young pupil of Klengel's, the Russian Serge Barjansky, made his debut on 17 February very happily in front of the Leipzig audience. [...] natural-fresh grasp, genuine musical temperament, warmth of feeling and an already highly developed technique, the good geniuses have laid at his feet. [...] One had to be grateful to him for his acquaintance with the cello concertos of Davidoff and Lalo. [...] The young artist was warmly welcomed." In the *Musikalisches Wochenblatt*<sup>7</sup> of February 22, 1906, Paul Merkel commented: "The artist, who possesses an excellent bowing technique, praiseworthy dexterity and an easily movable temperament, played the A minor Concerto for Violoncello by Ch. Davidoff and the D minor Concerto by E. Lalo, as well as the *Notturmo* in D major and Variations in A minor by Julius Klengel. [...] His tone formation and tone treatment are very promising."

In the same year, the *Zeitschrift für Musik*<sup>8</sup> commented: "Equally justified to high expectations is the debut of the young cellist Serge Barjansky, who offered a completely mature performance of Davidoff's A minor Concerto." A short time later in the same year, on 16 November 1906, Serge Barjansky played Davidoff's Concerto with the Wiener Concertverein at the Musikverein in Vienna.

About his debut in London *The Musical Times* wrote on August 1, 1909: "Dr. Serge Barjansky, a violoncellist who made his first appearance at St. James Hall on June 28 proved to be a player of unusual ability. His tone was full and sweet, and he was able to execute with fluency and neatness passages of the greatest technical difficulty. He played Lalo's Concerto in D but it was chiefly in Klengel's *Caprice* that his virtuosity was revealed."

This was followed by appearances as a soloist - in each case as Dr. Serge Barjansky - in St. James Hall (28 June 1909) and Bechstein Hall in London (now Wigmore Hall, 23 November

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<sup>6</sup> No.8, p.185, volume 73

<sup>7</sup> No.8, p.162

<sup>8</sup> P. 436

1910), in the Beethoven Hall in Berlin with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (18 November 1909, 26 November 1910) and in the Queen's Hall (on 8 May 1911 with the London Symphony Orchestra), and on 26 November 1912 under the baton of the composer Edward Elgar: "The soloist was Dr. Serge Barjansky, a very accomplished artist with a highly temperamental style."<sup>9</sup>

As to his tone, "*The Morning Post* speaks of its "purity and breadth"; the *Standard* of "command of tone colour"; the *Pall Mall Gazette* of "a rich and resonant tone capable of various colour gradations"; and the *Sunday Times* of a "tone of exceptional range and quite individual quality".<sup>10</sup>



*Concert programme of December 12, 1908 at the Singakademie Berlin, with Dr. Serge Barjansky as soloist*

The concerts played under the name of Alexander Barjansky are no less prestigious: on 4 March 1910 he performs Lalo's Concerto with the Wiener Concertverein, in 1911 he gives a recital with the pianist Arthur Schnabel in Prague<sup>11</sup>, in 1915 he meets the composer Ernest Bloch, who creates for and dedicates to him his Hebrew Fantasy *Schelomo*.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Philip Hale, Dramatic and musical criticisms (Scrapbooks of mounted clippings, letters, programs, etc), Boston Public Library

<sup>10</sup> *The Strad*, Supplement to No. 246, October 1910

<sup>11</sup> *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 1911, p.414

<sup>12</sup> Bloch remembers: „Towards the end of 1915, I was in Geneva. For years I had been sketching a musical setting of the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, but neither French, German, nor English suited my purpose and I did not know enough Hebrew. Consequently, the sketches accumulated and slept. One day I met the cellist Alexander Barjansky and his wife. I heard Barjansky play and immediately became his friend. I played him my manuscript works—the *Jewish Poems*, the *Israel Symphony*, and the *Psalms*—all of which were then unpublished and had failed to arouse anyone's interest. The Barjanskys were profoundly moved. While I played, Mrs. Barjansky, who had borrowed a pencil and a piece of paper, sketched a little statue—her 'sculptural thanks,' as she put it. At last, in my terrible loneliness, I had found true, warm friends. My hopes revived and I began to think about writing a work for that marvellous cellist. Why not use my *Ecclesiastes* material, but instead of a human voice, limited by a text, employ an infinitely grander and more profound voice that could speak all languages—that of his violoncello? I took up my sketches, and without plan or program, almost without knowing where I was headed; I worked for days on my rhapsody. As each section was completed, I copied the solo part and Barjansky studied it... Mrs. Barjansky worked on the statuette intended as a gift for me. She had first thought of sculpting a Christ, but later decided on King Solomon. We both finished at about the same time. In a few weeks my *Ecclesiastes* was completed, and since the legend attributes this book to King Solomon, I gave it the title *Schelomo*." David Z. Kushner, *The Ernest Bloch Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), p.35.

Barjansky's concert appearances in the 1920s and 1930s figure without exception under the name of Alexander Barjansky.<sup>13</sup> In 1938, the *Allgemeine Musikzeitung* comments: "The excellent violoncellist Alexander Barjansky as soloist delighted the audience with his warm, soulful tone"<sup>14</sup>.

However, I could no longer find the name of Dr. Serge Barjansky in the concert programmes of the twenties and thirties.

A short reference by a critic in the *Neue Musikzeitung* of 1910 provided the first indication that Dr. Serge and Alexander Barjansky were not one and the same person, but two different cello virtuosos: "[...] the participating cellist Alexander Barjansky (*not to be confused with Dr. S. Barjansky*) [...]"<sup>15</sup>.

I found the next clue in an essay by the Italian Slavist Bianca Sulpasso<sup>16</sup>, quoting the letter of a certain Dottore Federico Spiro, who wrote to the President of the Accademia di Santa Cecilia, Enrico di Martino, on 14 January 1910:

*"Dear Count,*

*Today I come to solicit not for me, nor for any project with which I were in the most distant relationship, but rather for a person who seriously can and must be called a great artist.*

*The young cellist will soon introduce himself to you, recommended from abroad. Sergio di Barjanski is not to be confused with another cellist of the same name who played last year in the Augusteum and to whom this newcomer is from far superior. [...] I confess that never any artist made a similar impression on me with that instrument. This young man so modest has not only a prodigious technique and a phenomenal memory, but sings divinely on his cello, so that I myself, usually so resistant to any virtuosity, was moved, convinced, enthusiastic. [...]"*

Finally, in the *Courrier Musical* of 1909, I found the visible proof that they were two different cellists: a photo by Dr. Serge Barjansky illustrating the advertisement of the Konzertdirektion Wolff, which represents the young virtuoso.

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<sup>13</sup> Some examples:

1907: Florence, with conductor Vasily Sapelnikov

August 1922: Chamber music performances, Great Hall of the Mozarteum, Salzburg

12 November 1923: Vienna Konzerthaus, Vienna Symphony Orchestra, Dvorak: Concerto for Cello and Orchestra

1926: Berlin, recital

1926: Wiesbaden, Bloch's *Schelomo* and Delius' Cello Concerto

17 January 1929: Royal Philharmonic Society, with conductor Barbirolli

1929: Berlin, with conductor Barbirolli

1929: Aeolian Hall, London, with pianist and conductor Howard-Jones; Delius' Sonata, Bloch

24 October 1935: Aeolian Hall, London, Beethoven recital with Renata Borgatti.

1938: Conservatory, Luxembourg

<sup>14</sup> *Allgemeine Musikzeitung*, 1938, p.696

<sup>15</sup> *Berliner Konzertrundschau*, p. 338

<sup>16</sup> B. Sulpasso, *L'armonia di colori di Alexandr Barjanskiy ed Ekaterina Barjanskaja*, Europa Orientalis, Russian-Italian Archive V, 2009, pp. 237-264



But which of the two cellists played the famous Stradivarius?

The memoirs of Catherine Barjansky give no indication: although she reports in detail about her husband and his encounters and collaboration with the composers Ernest Bloch and Frederick Delius, she does not mention that her husband played a Stradivarius. There is no mention of a Stradivarius either in Bloch's notes or in Eric Fenby's memoirs.

The documentation of the "Jacques Français Rare Violins Inc. Photographic Archive and Business Records Archives Center"<sup>17</sup>, however, provides clear information about it: Dr. Serge Barjansky acquired the Stradivarius cello from the London violin maker Hart for 37,500 francs who had acquired it in August 1909 for 32,500 francs, and sold it to M. Guersin in 1922 for 61,000 francs<sup>18</sup>. The Tarisio Register<sup>19</sup> confirms the dates of purchase and sale of the Stradivarius (ID 41607) by Dr. Serge Barjansky.

The namesake of the famous Barjansky cello is therefore not Alexander Barjansky, who premiered Delius' Cello Concerto and to whom Bloch's *Schelomo* is dedicated, but Dr. Serge Barjansky, the son of the composer Adolf Barjansky.

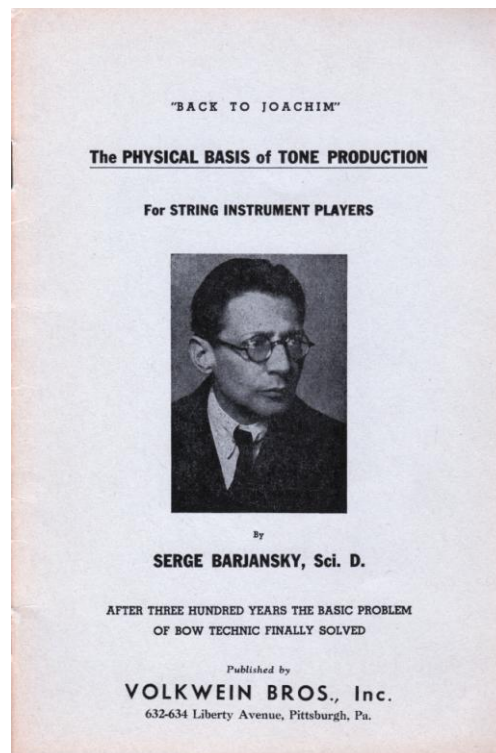
What can we say about Serge Barjansky's doctorate? During my search, I came across a paper entitled *The Physical Basis of Tone Production for String Instrument Players*, published in 1941 by Volkwein Bros., Inc. of Pittsburgh, USA; the author is a certain Serge Barjansky, Sci.D.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA: Transcription, translation, and commentary by Nicholas Sackman, 2017-2018

<sup>18</sup> The prices of the instrument, which are ciphered in the original, were deciphered by the editor Nicholas Sackman; the original text is "vendu à Hart août 1909 pour rioxz. Hart l'a vendue à M r Serge Barjansky pour rioxz. Revendu à acheté en 1922 par M r Guersin à Bruxelles pour nhxzx et confié à Gaillard pour le jouer sa vie durant"

<sup>19</sup> www.tarisio.com

<sup>20</sup> The first edition of the book was published in 1939 by Serge Barjansky, „privately printed“



In the introduction, written by the internationally renowned violinist and pedagogue Gaylord Yost, the treatise is praised as follows: "In short, I consider this the most important contribution in this specific field of pedagogics that has ever been made. He has cleared up the final mystery of string instrument playing [...]".

Serge Barjansky writes in his treatise<sup>21</sup>: "Simultaneously with my work and study of the 'cello with professor Julius Klengel, I studied higher mathematics and physics at the Imperial University in Odessa", explaining thus his doctorate. And later: "If it is not immodest of me to point out, at that time, it had already been my privilege to appear as a soloist with the London Symphony conducted by the late Edward Elgar; Königlische Kapelle, Dresden, under Schuch, Frankfurter Museum Concerte under Mengelberg; Concert Gebouw, Hague, under Mengelberg; and many others. My master, Professor Julius Klengel, wrote as follows: "My pupil, Serge Barjansky, one of the most gifted – one of the foremost 'cellists of the present time..." But the absence of complete bow mastery created in me a feeling of discouragement and hopelessness. [...] I decided to abandon my career as a concert performer and dedicate myself to the investigation and research in this particular field. [...] My persistent labor and efforts were finally crowned with complete success. [...] Unfortunately, at this time, personal adversities intervened and delayed my further work [...]. The war, the Russian Revolution, twenty years of life lost in Turkey [...] where one had to obtain the means of bare existence, all combined to retard my work."<sup>22</sup>

This clears up the disappearance of the name of Serge Barjansky from the concert stage in the twenties and thirties.

I received another confirmation of the new findings a short time later:

During my earlier research I had already found out that Melit(t)a Barjansky (1884-1959, in Russian written with one "t"), violinist, daughter of Adolf and sister of Serge Barjansky, had emigrated to Pittsburgh. From the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh I received a copy of a

<sup>21</sup> Serge Barjansky, *The Physical Basis of Tone Production*, 1939, p.5

<sup>22</sup> Serge Barjansky, *The Physical Basis of Tone Production*, 1939, p.6



newspaper article<sup>23</sup> that appeared in 1949, during Melita Barjansky's lifetime, and was dedicated to her. The author is the music critic Ralph Lewando, who wrote for the Pittsburgh Press from 1930 to 1957, and in particular a weekly column entitled *Who's Who in Pittsburgh Music Circles*, of which this article is a part:

"Melitta Barjansky. This skilled violinist and accomplished teacher was born in Odessa, Russia, to a family of outstanding musicians. Her father, Adolphe Barjansky, a Paris Conservatory Graduate, was highly regarded as a pianist and composer by the German critic Edward Hanslick. Her brother, Serge Barjansky [...] was a gifted cellist [...]. His book *The Physical Basis of Tone Production for String Instrument Players* is one of the important books on the subject. [...] During the Barjanskys' flight from Russia they managed to take with them two magnificent violins: the Testore once owned by Wieniawski, and the Stradivarius cello of Serge. [...]"



Newspaper article from The Pittsburgh Press, June 19, 1949

It remains to be noted that the Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh also has an entry stating that Dr. Serge Barjansky held master classes at the Pittsburgh Musical Institute in 1938, at the time one of the most prestigious in the country.

<sup>23</sup> 19 Juin 1949, The Pittsburgh Press

Last but not least: the granddaughter of Serge Barjansky who lives in the US, gave me some of the most valuable testimonies of her grandfather, which she took from the scrapbooks of his sister Melita: one is from the supplement of the magazine *The Strad* from October 1910, which contains a detailed article about the owner of the Stadivarius cello, which, as we now learn, had apparently been given to him by a generous patroness: "Mention has been made [...] of the exceptionally fine 'cello owned by Dr. Barjansky, which was presented to him by a lady well known in London for her kindness to musicians. Before coming into possession of this instrument, he played on a 'cello of Andreas Guarnerius, a good example, though of course not to be mentioned with the Stradivarius. [...] I think the words used then might be repeated: "An artist of such sterling worth well deserves the beautiful instrument of which he is so proud."<sup>24</sup>



Serge Barjansky, *Odesski Listok*, 1906

<sup>24</sup> B. Henderson, *The Strad*, Supplement to No. 246, October 1910





The photo by Histed is taken from B. Henderson, *The Strad*, Supplement to No. 246, October 1910

In the future, Dr. Serge Barjansky will have to be credited as namesake of the Barjansky Stradivarius, having been one of the outstanding cello virtuosos of his time and the author of one of the fundamental scientific treatises on tone production for string instrument players. Alexander Barjansky remains the cellist to whom Bloch's *Schelomo* is dedicated and who premiered Delius' Cello Concerto.

For the sake of completeness, the biographical data of Serge (May 1, 1883 Odessa – May 29, 1940 Pittsburgh) and Alexander (December 1883 Odessa – 1961 Brussels) should be added here.

Alexander was the son of a cousin of Adolf Barjansky.

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