

Itziar Mendizabal

FIRST SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 2 November 2011.

David Bain welcomed Itziar and began by asking her about her background. She said she was born in a little village near the coast in the north of Spain in the Basque-speaking part of the country, hence her unusual sounding name. At home they spoke Basque but as her mother's side of the family is Spanish, Itziar also speaks Spanish as well as English, French, German and a little Italian.

At the age of four she told her mother she wanted to do ballet. No-one in the family was involved in dance or theatre but her mother has told her that every time there was dancing or skating on TV, Itziar would stop and watch whereas otherwise she would be moving and jumping the whole time. There aren't a lot of ballet companies in Spain, though they have very good teachers who tend to follow their careers out of the country as there's no real opportunity to progress in Spain. At four her mother signed her up for a little ballet school where most of her class went after academic school had finished. From the age of 12 to 14 she went to a variety of classes below and above her current level just to have the chance to dance some more. She'd never stopped saying she wanted to be a dancer but when at the age of 14 she was taken seriously she went to Madrid as her teacher said she couldn't teach her more and Itziar needed a higher level of dance school which would also give her the opportunity to perform on stage. She'd done summer schools in San Sebastian where international teachers were invited and was always keen to improve and learn. Her parents took her to Madrid where she took classes at the Conservatory to get a feel for what it was like and to look at possibilities. She was very taken with Victor Ullate's school and he immediately wanted her to finish academic school and join his school full time. He runs a private school where you do classes all day. By the time she was 16 she was also dancing with the company which was tough as after the day classes she rehearsed with the company from 6 to 9 as well as performing on stage. Much as she wanted to carry on with her academic studies, Itziar felt she couldn't continue this sort

of schedule but her parents, who are both teachers in a normal school, said she must continue studies even if by correspondence. She really tried hard but it proved impossible so her parents agreed she could do the ballet full time and see how she got on. If she wanted to she could always return to academic studies. It was a big risk but it paid off.

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Victor has a great reputation as a teacher but things have changed a bit since Itziar's time at the school. About nine years ago he had a heart attack and other health issues so had to slow down though he does still teach but less than formerly. He has many successful former pupils dancing in Germany and the USA as well as here. He is very strict, very demanding and tough but in a good way as he wants what's best from the dancer as well as himself. Because of his way of teaching his dancers can all turn well! Some people have a difficult time with him but his criticism is designed to get the best out of you and it makes you strong. He put all his energy into improving dancers he thought had potential. Once when Itziar was in the corps in *Giselle* her pirouettes hadn't gone well in performance which finished at 11.30 and he had her practising them till 2am before he was satisfied! So it was an extreme way of working which he wouldn't now be allowed to indulge. There were about 100 in her class plus another three classes so at any one time there could be 160 people working in different studios and the end of season school performance would have students ranging from the age of four to 15 or 16. As it's a private school you can stay on into your 20s if you wish as you don't actually graduate – a lot of people just love dance but don't want to do it as a career.

So, aged 16 she was dancing with the company in *Don Quijote* although she wasn't yet a company mem-

ber. She was fortunate to have had two years' financial support from the Basque government because even though she was dancing with the company she was still a student so had to pay school fees. At the age of 18 when the funding finished she did join the company while still being at the school but then Victor did not ask for payment – these decisions were entirely his own. (At the time the company numbered about 60 but this reduced to 40 when they stopped doing the classics.) During that two year period she did numerous roles beginning in the corps in *Giselle*, *Don Q*, a lot of Victor's ballets which were very difficult, and works by Van Manen and Balanchine so she enjoyed a mixture of classical and neo-classical works. When she was 19 she did Forsyth's *Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude* which was tough for a young dancer. Sometimes Victor gave you things which seemed beyond your capabilities but you had to push yourself and it made you grow so you never feared doing very difficult works.

She stayed three years with the company, dancing in various theatres in Madrid (Victor now has studios in a centrally located theatre) and they toured around Spain as well as Mexico, Italy, the USA, France and Germany. One of her greatest memories was working with William Forsyth. She also did lots of Victor's and his partner Eduardo's choreography but when the work became more contemporary she began to think she needed to learn works other than Victor's, and she missed doing the classics. A dancer likes to do different things and she was too young to give up classical works.

There was a dancer in the company who had talked about Zurich Ballet who were then performing in Bilbao so Itziar sent them her CV. She auditioned and was offered a contract as demi-soloist, a grade a bit above our First Artist. It meant you didn't do corps work but more soloist roles. It was hard to gauge her standard and it was her first attempt at auditioning but she thought they were a good company so when they offered her a contract she moved to Switzerland. She was 21. In Zurich they worked mainly in English as it was an international company and English is easier than French or German.

Heinz Spoerli has a reputation for being not the easiest person to work with, though Itziar didn't have a problem with him. She quite agrees you should be told off if doing something wrong but not when there's no reason and this she disagreed with particularly if he was unfair with very young children. The atmosphere in which you work is very important and a mutual respect is also very important for her so after three years she decided to leave. It's a very successful company – Heinz is a great businessman and makes it all work. He tried to make the best working environment for the dancers but the human contact sometimes failed and this was important for Itziar. He is a very clever man, the company has a great rep, the dancers have good salaries and

some people are very happy with just that. The company was slightly more classical than Madrid and they also did great tours. The rep included ballets like *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Rite of Spring* though not by the choreographers we know here. Itziar did the Chinese pas de deux from *Nutcracker*, *Octet* which she loved, *Smoke, Theme and Variations*, was in the corps of Rubies, and also did Kylian's *Petite Mort*. He was a very humble man who came to teach his work and it proved an amazing experience. He has a special aura about him and you feel good when he comes into the room. He is respectful to everyone and very considerate and giving. His movements are very organic and musical.

By that time she was thinking of leaving so did a private audition in Munich but was then told she had to go to the open audition in February because that's how

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it works there. Meanwhile she auditioned for Leipzig Ballet and they offered her a soloist contract which she put on hold until her second audition for Munich. There they only had one, corps, contract for that year although they were prepared to offer Itziar more money than the contract was worth and said she would get demi-soloist work as well. She felt she needed time to think about it as although Munich was a better company she wanted to be happy with what she was dancing. Finally she decided to join Leipzig. She had a good feeling about the Director, Paul Chalmer, who'd previously danced with ENB and who said he had lots of things in mind for her. He was true to his word and she adored working with him. In her second month with the company she was Katherina in *Taming of the Shrew* and two months later was Odette-Odile in *Swan Lake*. It may have been early days but Paul knew she was capable and it gave her a push for which she'll always be grateful as it helped her grow so much as an artist and dancer. She stayed four years performing amongst other things *Firebird*, *Giselle* (*Giselle* and *Myrthe*), *Nutcracker* (*Sugar Plum Fairy*), Tetley's *Rite of Spring*, *Les Noces* and Balanchine. *Taming of the Shrew* is one of Itziar's favourite ballets as she loves to be funny so it suits her well. Her mum said seeing her on stage reminded her of Itziar fighting with her sister when they were kids! Her partner was usually Jean Sebastien Colau from Paris Opera Ballet who'd also danced with the National Ballet of Canada. He was very experienced and one of the best partners you could wish for, particularly giving her confidence in her debuts.

As for *Swan Lake* it's heaven and hell when you

hear the music begin before the entrance jetée. She was coached by Paul Chalmer and Silvian Bayer and danced different productions over the four years and every time she felt differently about it and learned something new.

Asked about Leipzig as a place and as a company, Itziar said it changed so much over the time she was there and was in a constant state of renewal. It's a university town so is full of young people, with art, music, culture, dance and lots of interesting things going on. It's quite calm and peaceful and you can cycle everywhere as it's a small place and she misses that. She had a bicycle and went shopping and to work and all over the city on it. The company numbered about 45 with extras coming in for big works like *Swan Lake* and *Giselle*. She also did *Nutcracker* and *Firebird* (Fokine but with some changes by Paul) which she'd love to do again. Some of the ballets are by different choreographers from The Royal's productions. *Les Noces* for example is by an Italian, a contemporary work which gives you the freedom to add your own touch and quality of movement. It's a very impressive ballet.

Itziar has a great respect for inheritance works. She loves Cranko and Tetley's *Rite* which Bronwen Curry put on for them. She was happy in Leipzig doing principal roles but they wanted to bring in a German choreographer as director to do more contemporary work and Paul's contract wasn't renewed. She didn't know the incoming director but looked him up and found his work was more dance theatre. She respected that but it wasn't what she wanted, as there were to be no pointe shoes and no classical works. When she came to put on *Rite*, Bronwen asked if she'd thought of auditioning for the Royal Ballet and as she was due to go to London suggested Itziar give her a DVD which she could show to Monica Mason. The DVD contained most of the roles which Itziar had done so Monica could see the sort of things she was capable of and Bronwen was able to say what she was like as a person. A week later Monica invited her over and a week after that she was doing class. Monica came to the first class and afterwards invited Itziar to go and talk to her next morning when she offered her a contract as First Soloist. Although this was an apparent demotion it wasn't really a problem for Itziar as she was aware of what the company was about and she is realistic about life and herself. The Royal has some of the best dancers in the world and Monica said she hoped Itziar wouldn't feel unhappy about the First Soloist contract but it would be good to see how they worked together. Itziar was more than happy to come, work hard and do her best. Anyway, you don't say 'no' to an offer like that! She's glad to have done all the roles she has done in the past and is very satisfied with her career today.

At the beginning of the last season she joined the Royal, a much bigger company than she'd been used to. The first few weeks it was *Theme and Variations* for

which she knew many of the steps. Hikaru was injured so she did all the shows. Then she did Olga in *Onegin*. She loves MacMillan's work which is clever and beautiful and human. It suits her as she likes 'human' acting, more natural rather than overplayed. She absolutely loves Lescaut's mistress. The solos are hard but the story is great and you really get involved with it. Her Lescauts have been Thiago Soares and Ricardo Cervera and the next day it was to be José Martin – two Spanish and a Brazilian! Thiago and Ric are very different from each other, each has their own way of playing the role. You shouldn't really be in control and you have to go with the moment although you decide the technicalities beforehand. It's a playful pas de deux with the man always being a bit off. Thiago is great for that and she finds she can work very well with him.

Last season she was also the Ram in *Penguin Cafe*. She loves that role as she loves salsa though it was a bit hard to see through the mask so she held on to Bennet Gartside which helped. She loves the different rep at the Royal. Now they are doing *Requiem* and *Sleeping Beauty* so a mixture of classical and more contemporary. She'd just made her debut as the Lilac Fairy and was quite

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tired as she'd been to a gala in Bilbao on the Sunday, had rehearsed *Enigma Variations* during Monday and then Lilac Fairy before the performance that night. She often gets strong roles which she finds easier, but Lilac Fairy is more sugary which isn't the easiest thing and she loves working on that to try to find her softer side and be sweet! Monica has helped her so much with most of her roles and she's spent a lot of hours with her in the studio. Other coaches have been Chris Saunders, Ursula Hageli, Lesley Collier, Sacha Agadzanov (for Bluebird) and Christopher Carr for *Enigma*. In *Beauty* she's danced two fairies, Bluebird and Florestan, but her favourite is Bluebird.

Her first Ashton was the Winter Fairy in *Cinderella*, which is also hard. It's so cold waiting in the trap as you're usually there for the third fairy solo, and then there's the smoke to contend with. Her first time the trap didn't fully open and she had to climb out! Now she is Lady Mary in *Enigma*, a beautiful solo which she really enjoys. Ashton's choreography is very different from her previous experiences. The positions and épaulement are different, movements controlled and very correct.

She would love to dance Tatiana in *Onegin* and also Manon which is an amazing role, but she's already done lovely things and it won't be a big problem if it doesn't happen. She prefers to be happy and enjoy what she's

doing rather than having goals. If you aren't happy you can't wait for ever and have to make the change yourself. She'd love to play the Queen of Hearts in *Alice* and hopes to work with Wayne McGregor which she thinks she'd really enjoy. She's in Chris Wheeldon's *Polyphonia* and has already done DGV.

Asked about the difference in classes between the different companies, Itziar said that rather than the company it depends more on the teacher. In every company there are guest teachers and each one is a bit different. Unless you are a principal when you can choose whose class to go to, you go where you are told. Dancing at Covent Garden is luxury and the conditions are amaz-

ing, the stage crew so efficient, and everyone is very professional so it is easy to work in the House where there's usually a positive response whereas in some companies they say 'no' to everything.

In thanking very much Itziar for coming to talk to us so early in her time with the Royal, David said he hoped she wouldn't get tired of being here and looked forward to seeing her in a variety of roles in future, particularly Tatiana and Manon.

Reported by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Itziar Mendizabal and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2011.