

Publicity photos can lie: the plainest person can be transformed into a Hollywood star through canny lighting, clever make-up and a skilled photographer. This means that the contrast between the artful photo and the real person can sometimes be glaring. However, in the case of Yevgeny Sudbin, he's every bit as striking as his publicity photos suggest and with his deep-set eyes and high cheek bones, he bears a passing resemblance to film star Adrian Brody. In conversation, the Russian-born pianist is serious and intense (a word he uses a lot), but he has a slightly self-deprecating manner that's refreshing in an artist who is on the cusp of a major career.

In the last several years Sudbin has performed in concert and recital throughout the UK and the continent. In 2006 he toured the US and Canada, making his New York debut at the Frick Collection. Adrian Jack in the *Independent* offered high praise for Sudbin's Wigmore Hall debut: 'A great recital. He is a pianist of uncommon sensitivity and refinement and has total confidence in his imaginative concept of each piece.'

Then there's the clutch of discs he's made for the Swedish BIS record label, including a solo Rachmaninov disc with some of the Russian master's trickiest repertoire, the Sonata No 2 and the Chopin Variations. 'This confirms him as one of the most important pianistic talents of our time – and he's still only 25,' wrote Harriet Smith in *International Record Review*. Sudbin's latest disc, of Tchaikovsky and Medtner concertos, is released this month, while a solo Scriabin disc is due soon.

'I don't know if my writing programme notes makes for a better performance, but I enjoy getting to know a composer so I can focus and have a picture in my head of the music I'm playing'

But it was his first disc for BIS, of Scarlatti sonatas, that brought him to the attention of critics and discerning listeners. The music of the Italian Baroque composer is hardly the expected fare for a typical Russian pianist, but then the 27-year-old Sudbin is not really a typical Russian pianist.

Born in St Petersburg in 1980, Sudbin began playing piano 'at age four or five. The usual,' he says offhandedly. His parents, both pianists, were supportive, although 'I don't think they wanted their children to be musicians. Apparently they had no choice with me, because they felt I was too talented. But then maybe every parent says that,' he laughs. (His younger sister has also studied the piano but apparently plans to become a sound engineer.)

At age nine, by then studying at a specialist music school in St Petersburg, Sudbin won a competition in Czechoslovakia. His career trajectory was clear: focused Russian training, hours and hours of practice, public performances from a young age, worldwide fame – but then his world turned upside down. In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, the Communist system collapsed and, soon after, the nine-year-old Sudbin and his family immigrated to Germany. Fortunately for him, his teacher Lyubov Pevsner immigrated to Germany six months later. Recounting this, Sudbin says something surprising: 'In Russia the training was extremely intense. I sometimes regret leaving Russia a bit

early.' Why? 'Because I think I could have done with a bit more of that sort of thing. You go through so much repertoire in a short space of time. You literally have to learn a recital programme in a few months. You don't get distracted by other things.'

Only the lonely

Sudbin, it would seem, has always been looking for that room of his own, a place to concentrate where he could escape from unnecessary distractions. 'Pianists are very lonely people, really,' he says. His quest would eventually bring him to London. 'We went to Germany because my parents wanted to leave Russia but London was my choice. I found the school system in Germany quite strict, hindering me a bit in my focus on piano and I wanted to go to a specialist music school in London. In Germany there really wasn't such a thing.'

He'd also found an inspirational teacher in Christopher Elton, with whom he studied first at the Purcell School and later at the Royal Academy of Music. He also took lessons and masterclasses from Murray Perahia, Claude Frank, Leon Fleisher, Stephen Kovacevich, Dmitri Bashkirov, Fou Ts'ong, Stephen Hough, Alexander Satz, and Maria Curcio. He has good memories of all these artists but was particularly admiring of Satz, who died recently. 'He was incredible in Scriabin and I thought he was one of the greatest teachers in the world.'

Sudbin's technical mastery no doubt stems from the concentrated focus of those years. 'I never viewed technical hurdles as separate from musical hurdles. I always thought that for every technical hurdle there's a musical solution so I figured it out as I learned the piece. I never liked playing studies or scales. If I wanted to improve my technique, the only way to improve it was by learning pieces.'

He claims he was only defeated by one piece: Ligeti's Etude No 1 'Disorder'. 'I tried to prepare it for a competition, but it was the one piece I couldn't get into my fingers and into my head as well. It has octaves, alternating in different rhythms, it's just impossible. The whole piece is maybe five minutes long, but I remember it was absolute hell. You are actually supposed to play it with the music, which I didn't realise at the time!'

Even after he'd launched his concert career, Sudbin stayed on at the RAM for post-graduate studies. Last year, he wrote his masters' thesis on Rachmaninov's Chopin Variations. The Variations, he feels, are underperformed because 'they're extraordinarily difficult and Rachmaninov hadn't yet found his own voice. Early Rachmaninov has lots of notes and pianists shy away from that.'

After finishing the masters' work, why didn't you continue to PhD level?, I ask him. 'I considered doing a PhD because I really enjoyed writing. But I thought writing my sleeve notes is just about enough satisfaction.' You can read some of his thoughts on the Chopin Variations on the sleeve notes for his Rachmaninov disc. He also often writes programme notes for his recitals. 'I don't even know if it contributes to a better performance, but I certainly enjoy getting to know composer as much as possible so I can focus more and have a picture in my head of the music I'm playing.'

Sorting out Scarlatti

Sudbin came to Scarlatti through the recordings of Horowitz and Pletnev, and it was two Scarlatti sonatas on his demo disc that convinced BIS to let him make the all-Scarlatti disc. Was it daunting to record those sonatas? Apparently not: it was the process leading up to the recording that was really daunting: 'I had to decide between all the 555 sonatas. That took me a month. Practising actually took less time than deciding which sonatas to play.' His recitals now include the sonatas that didn't make the cut, along with some that did. 'They're very nice to start a recital with. They sort of clean your ears.'

If you were...

...a fictional or historical character, who would you be?

Harry Potter. When I was young, I wore glasses and people told me I looked like him

...a book?

A biography of a musician

...a type of food?

Sushi or sashimi.

Name me one Russian who doesn't like sushi

...a wine?

A New Zealand wine that doesn't cause too much of a headache

...a piece of music?

A song by Medtner

...a tempo?

Very rubato. I change a lot, both in my working rhythm and life in general

...a quality?

Luck. You can't really have that by working hard; everything else you can develop

...a fault?

Prioritising. I sometimes spend so much time doing something utterly unimportant!