

FULL CIRCLE

Yevgeny Sudbin's lifelong love affair with Scarlatti has seen him return to the studio to make another disc of the composer's sonatas, 10 years on from the acclaimed debut recording of Scarlatti that thrust him into the public eye. *Jeremy Nicholas* meets an extraordinary musical mind who has been hailed as 'potentially one of the greatest pianists of the 21st century'

ST GEORGE'S, BRANDON HILL in Bristol is a favourite recording venue. A short step up the hill from Bristol Cathedral and just yards from a busy high street, the early 19th-century Greek Revival-style church turned concert hall is an unexpectedly quiet oasis. Yevgeny Sudbin and his long-time producer Marion Schwebel are halfway through three days of sessions allotted to the pianist's next release for BIS: a disc of Scarlatti sonatas. It's a landmark recording for the Russian-born pianist. After all, he first came to public attention and to near-universal critical acclaim 10 years ago with... a disc of Scarlatti sonatas.

As I join the session, Sudbin is working on a deceptively difficult Sonata in G minor (K373, *presto e fugato*), a *moto perpetuo* in all but name. The tricky articulation of a mordant is giving him trouble. He makes his way from the hall into the side room from where Schwebel monitors everything. Tall, slim, bespectacled, the 35-year-old pianist is dressed in a white T-shirt underneath an unbuttoned light pink shirt that hangs loosely outside his jeans. Headphones on, he and Schwebel listen intently to the last two takes. It's so nearly all there, except for a handful of bars.

'Is it possible to combine the two takes?'

Sudbin asks. 'No,' replies Schwebel, 'the volume is different. I can use this bit from the second bar but I need something new for the transition. I can try to find another version, but I think it's the only one. This one is a little softer.'

'Maybe it's better to play it stronger. Do you like it like that? Which do you prefer?' Sudbin persists. 'I prefer the last one, where it's stronger,' comes Schwebel's answer. 'It's very powerful – but it's up to you. It's your choice.' It's clear that this recording is a collaboration. Sudbin returns to the piano. He plays the short section required and then launches into the repeat section adding, to quite electrifying effect, his own embellishments.

Later that evening, during supper with Sudbin and Schwebel, I discuss the new recording and the success the pianist has enjoyed over the past decade. It's always nice to come back to Scarlatti,' says Sudbin, 'and I almost always play him in my recitals – he makes a great concert-opener or an encore. They are just wonderful pieces – so much variety. I haven't actually performed that many of them, but I've read through all 555 sonatas because I'm keen to commit to disc the ones that are less recorded. That's not always possible, because of course I want to play all the great ones too! So I mix the great with the unfamiliar. There's not yet

a complete set on the piano (there are one or two complete sets on harpsichord). The thing is, because there is no instruction or indication as to how to play them, you get a lot of very individual performances. It's sometimes not a good idea to listen to other recordings, because you might actually dismiss some good sonatas that were played in a slightly bland way.'

SUDBIN WAS BORN IN ST Petersburg in 1980 and began his musical studies at the age of five. 'The way I grew up was fairly standard. We had lots of LPs, lots of Melodiya recordings. We were listening to Gilels and Richter all the time. I played Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto by ear, just from listening to Gilels' recording. It's fairly straightforward.' (For some people, I interject, but not ordinary mortals!) 'I probably played a simplified version – I was only four or five – but I listened to it a hundred times a day so it was embedded in my memory. My parents were both musicians, pianists who met at the conservatory, so I heard them practising all the time. My father played Rachmaninov's First Concerto – that's why that piece is so special to me. We had just the one piano by a maker called Red October (they didn't