

# Out of this world

For Yevgeny Sudbin, finding a galaxy of possibilities in Beethoven is a quest informed by looking as well as playing. He opens up to **Jessica Duchen** about the challenge of the late sonatas and the value of silence



**T**wo worlds meet and meld in Yevgeny Sudbin. The first is his native Russia: this soft-spoken pianist, 39 this year, has the full complement of passion, intellect and questing imagination that has characterised so many of the country's best musicians. Then there is the UK, and in particular London, where he has now lived for more than 20 years. His gentle Russian accent has gained an overlay of English self-deprecation and droll sense of humour. Except that when he says he has Nikolai Medtner's gas bills, he is not joking.

Medtner, too, was a Russian in London, living quietly between two worlds in Golders Green. Some years ago, out of the blue, Sudbin received a phone call. 'They asked if I would like to pick up some suitcases of things that had belonged to Medtner. Otherwise they would take them to the rubbish tip. They'd read an article about me somewhere and thought I might be interested. I ran round straight away.'

'There are some books – including poetry by Pushkin with Medtner's own annotations that he might have put into songs – as well as his gas bills. And a big sewing machine, and recordings, some his own ones and things he used to listen to, Russian pop music of the time. So it's a whole collection. He was quite a private personality, but fascinating.'

Medtner (1880-1951) looms large in Sudbin's spacious compendium of musical interests: this spring he is playing the Second Piano Concerto in Tokyo. Medtner deserves more exposure, he believes, his reputation having been undeservedly chequered: 'I've always felt that it was nothing to do with the quality of his compositions, but maybe more about unfortunate timing. His writing was quite old-fashioned; Rachmaninov, Prokofiev and Stravinsky were already taking music in a certain direction, and Scriabin even before that, sounding much more contemporary than Medtner did.'

**'Medtner is more like Beethoven than Rachmaninov: every note has a specific meaning.'**

Despite the pressures around him, Medtner held fast to his own musical vision. 'In terms of depth and quality, his Op 1 is not inferior to his last works in any way,' says Sudbin. 'He seems to have been an extremely stubborn person – he never changed his style! He had a perception that the ideas came to him from somewhere and he was just a vessel – that those ideas already existed. His role was just to bring them to life, and if they didn't come to him, they would come to somebody else. That's a fascinating thought. His writing is extremely difficult, musically as well as technically. He is more like Beethoven than Rachmaninov: every note has a specific musical meaning.'

## Sessions in the studio

Beethoven himself looms large in Sudbin's life at the moment: the Swedish BIS label is releasing his most recent recording of the two last piano sonatas and the Bagatelles Op 126, where the pianist steps into territory that one might think almost too well-worn, were it not for his fresh, heartfelt interpretations, delivered with fiery Beethovenian depth and radiance of tone.

'I was surprised I recorded that disc,' Sudbin remarks. 'Still, I have always felt comfortable in Beethoven and although people tend to request a lot of Russian romantics for me to play, I love Beethoven and feel at home with all his music. Late Beethoven fascinates me because it's beyond what we're used to hearing on earth. It's more... in space, ethereal. And in these particular sonatas and bagatelles, warmth radiates from it. You're used to his temperamental



**If you could play only one piece from now on, what would it be?**

I'd rather give up the piano than play only one piece.

**One composer?**

One who wrote a lot of transcriptions, which means I get to play everyone else's pieces as well.

**One pianist you'd travel long and far to hear?**

Rachmaninov. I'd enjoy the time-travel, too.

**One concert hall you'd like to play in?**

I like to go to places that are interesting to visit and photograph, so somewhere in Iceland or New Zealand.

**Any technical troubles?**

The only trouble I have sometimes is making myself practise! I don't think there's anything insurmountable if you find the right way to approach it.

**What advice would you give to an amateur pianist?**

If you can find out what your strengths are early on and build on that, it's a good place to start.

**If you weren't a pianist, what would you be?**

Fortunately I have a lot of interests – writing, photography, maybe teaching.

**One person you'd love to play for?**

Scarlatti, so that he could hear how his sonatas sound on the modern piano.

**A composer you're not ready for?**

A few. Most. All.

**What other kind of music do you like listening to?**

I enjoy hearing my kids' Disney songs in the car, because I associate them with happy children. But for myself, I like silence.

## YEVGENY SUDBIN ON... ASTROPHOTOGRAPHY

Someone gave me a camera when I was 10 years old and I've taken photographs ever since. There's a parallel with recordings. Sometimes in concerts there's a moment in time which is gone, and I miss it, but in recordings you can actually come close to capturing it. Photography is the same – you can capture a beautiful moment.

Looking at things like this has always appealed to me, especially with landscape photography. I enjoy being on my own with nature. It's quite different from being on your own on a plane full of people you don't want to be with! It gives me a lot of pleasure and it makes my brain clean.

Astrophotography is slightly different from a technical point of view and requires special equipment. I take pictures of deep space when I have the opportunity, but it requires a lot of time. One picture of a galaxy takes maybe a week, even a few weeks –

and maybe you have to wait until next year to finish it, when the galaxy comes back into the same place, and then it goes through all the filters... it's a complicated process. But I always was a nerd and found space fascinating, so I had this idea to take pictures of it.

You can do astrophotography from anywhere if you have the right filters. We have a lot of light pollution in London, which makes it difficult, especially for galaxies, but if you have special filters and a lot of time – which I don't – you can filter out much of it and see nebula gasses like you see in the Milky Way. It's better, of course, to go somewhere with dark skies, but there are not many such locations left. I've been three times to a place in Montana that has an amazing sky. It's almost pitch black and you can see the Milky Way with just your eyes, without any help. You wouldn't believe what's up there.

character, but there's also a lot of humour. I was always attracted to this diverse combination of qualities. I think it's important to absorb as much new experience as you can and put it into music, and in Beethoven there are always different qualities to discover.'

Is it not intimidating to approach such ubiquitously renowned sonatas? 'After I finish some sessions I usually think, "What was I *doing*, recording this?" but I don't start out like that,' he replies. 'I always hope that there is something left that has not been said, or at least not with the same musical "words".'

Recording, he adds, is one of his favourite activities. 'You can be very creative in a recording,' he suggests. 'It's not immediately obvious and I know many colleagues who find the process too rigid or not spontaneous enough, but I feel that maybe you can push yourself further in recordings than you might in a concert, and you can pay attention to detail, especially with today's high-resolution recordings. People who are perhaps prejudiced against recording say that you can patch all the mistakes. But if you can't make a phrase speak, doing 500 takes isn't going to fix it. You can hide technique in a recording, but you can't hide musicianship.'

## Family first

Sudbin's musicianship has no need to hide. It was probably there from the start. He was born in 1980 into a musical family in St Petersburg. 'Both my parents were pianists,' says Sudbin. 'I heard music all around me at home, so it was natural that as a child I started wanting to play.' The family left Russia for Germany when he was 10 years old, not least in order to secure better treatment for his father's condition of multiple sclerosis. They were joined by Sudbin's teacher, Lyubov Pevsner, who had become a close family friend.

'I'd made good progress in Russia,' says Sudbin. 'I'd started giving some concerts and winning some competitions there, and the music school I attended sent me to do an international competition abroad in what was then Czechoslovakia and I managed to win it.' After that, 'it was all playing and travelling' until a friend suggested he consider coming to London to study at the Purcell School. There his teacher was Christopher Elton, with whom he subsequently continued his studies at the Royal Academy of Music (RAM).

At the Purcell School, he met Sally Wei, also a pianist. They married in 2008, on the day after his debut at the BBC Proms in the First Piano Concerto of Rachmaninov. Now living in north London, Sudbin keeps his touring under control not least with their three children in mind. 'I try not to be away for more than a couple of weeks at a time,' he says. This spring he tours Japan and China besides giving masterclasses at the RAM and recitals for the Chopin Society and the Harrogate International Festival, among others. He prefers to do no more than 60 concerts a year, often prioritising locations that are, he says, 'not necessarily good for my "career", but places I find interesting because I like to take photographs!'

## Making music personal

Sudbin's career really took off in 2005 with his debut on BIS: an album of Scarlatti sonatas that provoked breathless comparisons with the likes of Horowitz and Pletnev in this music. 'Sheer delight from start to finish,' said *Gramophone*, 'with performances of a superlative vitality and super-fine sensitivity.' This flood of attention had its drawbacks: 'I decided I wouldn't read reviews after that, because the positive reviews made me anxious,' remembers Sudbin. 'I kept wondering what would happen when people calmed down...'

If his attitude to scheduling and career events is unconventional, so is Sudbin's programming of recitals, which often include at least one of his own transcriptions. He used to be interested in composition, but lacks the time to pursue it. 'I do write transcriptions,' he says, 'which gives me that satisfaction – though sometimes there's frustration if I make it too difficult!'

'It often happens that I don't intend to make a transcription,' continues Sudbin. 'I set out to learn one by someone else – and then I realise I don't like it that much and it would sound better if I played it another way, and I end up rewriting it.' He recommends it as a musical discipline: 'Transcribing for piano, writing cadenzas, anything like that, can get you thinking about what music is made of, how it

works, how to put together something that sounds half-decent. That's important in order to understand the structure of pieces, to go really deep into them.'

Now a new generation of young pianists gains the benefit of his experience through his masterclasses at the Royal Academy of Music. 'I love it,' he says of giving them. 'A masterclass can make you analyse things you normally take for granted. Something that comes naturally to you may not be so natural for the student, and finding a way to put something into words that otherwise happens by instinct is very interesting and very personal. Each student requires a completely individual approach.'

'You can hide technique in a recording, but you can't hide musicianship'

'What I find problematic with teachers generally,' says Sudbin, 'is if someone teaches everyone the same and they all end up playing in the same way. You maybe need that at the beginning when the pupil is very small, because the talent then lies in imitation. But it's tricky to bridge the gap from that stage to becoming an individual with something personal to say. For these older students, really to listen to what they're trying to say and make that better is the approach that benefits them the most. You don't want everyone to play and sound the same! You want to make better what they already have.'

'It's a very creative process, and something that's quite important to me,' he concludes. 'It makes me feel more selfless. Sometimes I feel that giving concerts is quite egocentric. When you teach someone you feel you've done some good.'

We can all benefit from Sudbin's insights as the RAM masterclasses are open to the public. In the meantime, do listen to his Beethoven – and let the heavens open. ■



Yevgeny Sudbin plays at the Harrogate International Festival on 7 April (11am) in a recital of Scarlatti, Chopin, Beethoven and the Fifth Sonata by Scriabin. He gives masterclasses at the Royal Academy of Music in London on 29 and 30 April (both 2pm). He appears in recital at Suntory Hall, Tokyo, on 17 and 18 May. His latest album for BIS Records (above right) features Beethoven's Piano Sonatas No 31 Op 110 and No 32 Op 111, plus the Op 126 Bagatelles (BIS-2208).

The *Pianist* album this issue includes Sudbin performing two Scarlatti sonatas: K141 in D minor and K208 in A major. Both are extracted from his Scarlatti 18 Sonatas release (BIS-2138). [www.yevgenysudbin.com](http://www.yevgenysudbin.com)