

# From Russia, with fingers of steel

*Aged 25, Yevgeny Sudbin is already hailed as potentially one of the greatest pianists of the 21st century. He talks to Damian Thompson*

**Y**evgeny Sudbin, a 25-year-old Russian immigrant living in Middlesex, is good with his hands. He has just installed a catflap in a metal door – a fiendish business that involves drilling hundreds of precise metal holes. He could fix your computer, too, having once spent 32 hours debugging and rebooting a friend's messed-up laptop.

Such tasks are not exactly the best use of his time, however, since his hands can also perform miracles of keyboard colouring and voicing. Following the release of two CDs this year, critics are prophesying that Sudbin – who spent part of his childhood in the basement of a refugee hostel – will be one of the greatest pianists of the new century.

"In terms of aristocratic poise, he matches even Michelangeli," wrote Julian Haylock, editor of *International Piano* magazine, of Sudbin's debut disc, a Scarlatti recital issued by BIS. "This is staggering playing, so spontaneously alive that one can scarcely believe it was taped in the studio."

Sudbin's new CD, a Rachmaninov recital including the Second Sonata, has been greeted with similar rapture. "One of the most important pianistic talents of our time," said one critic. "Fingers of steel and a heart of gold," said another.

Most young pianists would be walking on air after reading those reviews. But I have met Sudbin several times in the company of mutual friends, and one thing that always comes across is his uneasiness in the face of compliments.

This is not just a product of his self-possessed manner, which is as poised as his playing. Sudbin knows that early critical acclaim can have a coarsening effect on a soloist's performing style. The cautionary tale everybody cites is that of Yevgeny Kissin, who was justifiably larded with praise in his teens and is

now justifiably savaged for his self-indulgent special effects.

Interestingly, Sudbin's fingers of steel are not matched by nerves of steel. Most concert-goers have no idea how unpleasant even seasoned performers find the 24 hours before they walk on stage.

"I prepare myself for a catastrophe before a concert," Sudbin says melodramatically. "That way I can relax and enjoy myself when I'm on the platform and it doesn't happen."

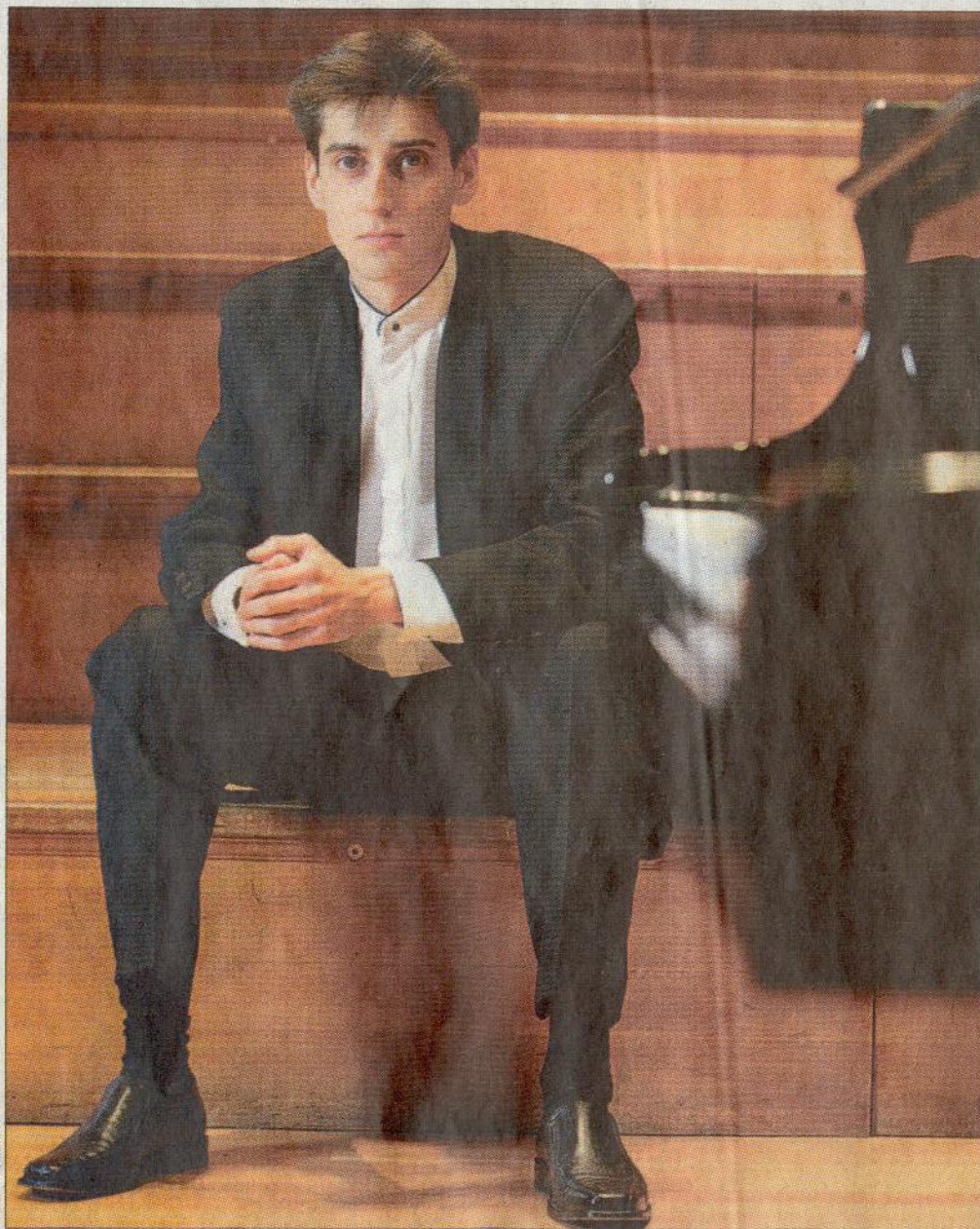
In fact, it is often the most electrifying pianists whose pre-concert butterflies flap most viciously. Martha Argerich was once so rattled by the bad omen of dislodging a contact lens before a concert that she had to be virtually pushed on to the platform.

"Let me tell you what happened to me," says Sudbin. "Not only did I lose a contact lens before the concert, with no spare, but when I put my glasses on this happened," and he pulls his hands apart to signify snapping specs.

He reckons he could have performed in a myopic blur because, on the advice of his mentor, Stephen Hough, he sometimes practises in the dark. Fortunately, he managed to buy disposable lenses at the last minute. "But I thought it was bad luck. I suppose it was that Russian superstitious thing."

**A**lthough Sudbin's parents both played the piano, they were originally against him becoming a professional musician. But when the five-year-old boy listened to LPs by the great Russian pianist Emil Gilels and started reproducing the music by ear, they changed their minds. He auditioned for a specialist music school in St Petersburg.

"I was completely terrified and thought I played rubbishly," he recalls. (Sudbin's English is almost faultless, except for the odd neologism.) "Also, the panel told me off for not cutting my fingernails



**Poised:** Yevgeny Sudbin was 10 when he won his first international piano competition

properly. But when a teacher patted me on the head I knew all was not lost."

By the age of 10, he had won his first international piano competition. But then his parents left Russia and the family found themselves living in the crowded basement of a converted hospital building in Berlin. "I didn't know if I'd ever play the piano again," he says.

A local high school heard about the prodigy and a piano arrived. "It had broken notes and made a horrible sound, but I was so grateful. And then, remarkably, my former teacher from Russia arrived in Berlin. I started appearing on German television. I was so excited when I got my first fee of

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100 Deutschmarks – I rushed out to buy a doll's house for my sister."

Sudbin moved to England to study at the Purcell School; his teacher there, Chris Elton, also taught him at the Royal Academy of Music. "He has been such an inspiration to me," says Sudbin.

As a schoolboy, the young Russian was shocked by the laziness of some of his fellow pupils. He's not lazy himself, but he does keep odd hours. Nigel Grant Rogers, his agent, has tried suggesting that the most promising virtuoso of his generation should get out of bed before eleven in the morning.

"No! I practise better in the

evening," says Sudbin. He concedes, however, that he ought not to leave so many household chores to his girlfriend – "though I always do the Hoovering, and, if I say so myself, I'm pretty good at it. Very thorough."

Sudbin is not a big-boned performer in the old Russian tradition. Hough uses the adjectives "audacious and stimulating" to describe his playing. Jaw-dropping pianistic tricks never distract from the musical architecture. Unlike some of his flashier contemporaries, Sudbin specialises in tiny gradations of touch and tone; it comes as no surprise that he is obsessed with that subtle and elusive composer, Nikolai Medtner, whose first Piano Concerto he is about to record.

A good way of exploring the musical personality of a pianist is to ask whose playing he or she dislikes. Sudbin is happy to play this game – but, being only at the start of his career, doesn't want me to print the names of any living pianists.

"His style is so sterile, so surgical," he says of a household name. And when I tell him which set of the Scriabin sonatas I own, his big eyes widen in horror. "He is the worst! The absolute worst!"

He mentions another pianist. "Is she dead? Yes? OK, then you can put down Tatiana Nikolayeva. But you should also say that I revere Grigory Sokolov."

**A**fter our last conversation, Sudbin emails me some photographs of his 25th birthday party. "It was great to see Stephen Hough talking about poetry and literature while my other friends drank tequila and acted like monkeys," he writes.

There's a wistfulness in his tone: if he continues to perform as spectacularly well as he does today, his life will change beyond recognition. It's a pity, given his skill with the appliance, but Yevgeny Sudbin may already have hoovered his last carpet.