

Is he the next Horowitz?

Russia-born pianist Yevgeny Sudbin has music critics comparing him to the late great Russian pianist Vladimir Horowitz – and he's just all of 26 years old

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THIS year is proving to be the busiest yet in the life of Russia-born pianist Yevgeny Sudbin.

In the past few months, the 26-year-old has become the newest name to watch on the classical circuit, thanks largely to his debut album last year of Scarlatti sonatas.

After reviewing the album, music critic Daniel Steans of Piano magazine trilled: "Both musically and technically, this debut is on par with those two greatest of Scarlatti pianists, Horowitz and Pletnev."

Fellow critic Harriet Smith of International Record Review underscored the Horowitz comparison, while Gramophone magazine's Bryce Morrison said in November last year: "You will be hard-pressed to recall a more talented or deeply engaged young artist."

Lucky for Singapore, then, that Sudbin is making his Asian debut here today with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. He will play Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 in B Flat Major.

The concerto is one of the two recordings on his latest album with Brazil's Sao Paulo Symphony Orchestra, which will be released worldwide on the BIS label in December.

Nursing a Coke at the Conrad Centennial hotel here on Thursday, Sudbin says quietly: "I don't want to be the next Horowitz."

"I would like to be the first Sudbin."

It's not arrogance talking, though. As the lanky, soft-spoken virtuoso puts it: "I'm afraid of this comparison, really uncomfortable about it, because 'The Next Great Thing' never lasts."

"You have to be a good thing over and over again to have a longer run."

True success to him, then, would be staying at the top of his field "for more than 20 years".

That's because he sees the classical circuit as "very volatile".

"Audiences notice you very quickly, but they also forget you very quickly."

Which, he adds, is why he's putting his chips on recordings because they reach a wider crowd – in his case, classical music lovers in 48 countries.

That also explains why he's recorded four albums in quick succession in the past 12 months, including his debut LP of Scarlatti.

The son of pianists in St Petersburg, Russia, he learnt to play the piano from his mother when he was four. "As long as I can remember, I remember the piano," he says with a smile.

But, fearing the looming political upheaval in Russia, his father moved the family to Berlin in 1990.

At 16, Sudbin went on alone to study at London's Purcell School of Music and the Royal Academy of Music.

Today, he lives alone in London with his cat, Molly. But, sorry girls, he's taken – by his half-British, half-Chinese girlfriend, Sally.

For someone who's making such a mark in the music world, he gives only 40 concerts a year, compared to the average 70 or so by most career soloists.

Sudbin, who has a lyrical, sensitive touch, says: "I don't really want to do more because in every concert, I give out so much that I need time to recharge my emotional batteries."

What of the future then, now that he's a star?

He allows: "I'm crazily overwhelmed, but am still in control. Basically, I'll still be doing more of the same."

► The Singapore Symphony Orchestra plays the Shostakovich Centennial with Yevgeny Sudbin and guest conductor Okko Kamu in the Esplanade Concert Hall today at 7.30pm. Tickets from \$11 to \$60 are available from Sistic on 6348-5555 or book online at www.sistic.com.sg

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