



Mark Harrison

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◀ 'It's something I always felt I could be good at,' he says without the slightest hint of immodesty. 'In the studio I get into a state of mind where it's possible to achieve even higher levels of perfection and expression, because for me it's like a concert situation. So if I record for three days it's always filled with adrenaline, and usually after recording I need a week or two to recover.'

Sudbin's phone vibrates intermittently during our interview – his dinner companions are chasing him, but he remains relaxed, open and quietly charming. His tall frame is folded elegantly into his chair and he sports a sharp, fashionable brown suit. His English is refined and idiomatic, with a soft Russian inflection. With his sculpted Slavic features he could be descended from Russian aristocracy; in fact his parents were both pianists. Born in St Petersburg in 1980, Sudbin entered the specialist music school of the Conservatory in 1987. 'I got through tons of repertoire there: they made you play a new recital programme every couple of months.' From the earliest age pupils were encouraged to develop their musical personality, and at age nine Sudbin won his first international competition, the Aussig Piano Competition in Czechoslovakia. Two years later his family fled Russia for Berlin, partly because his mother was Jewish and partly because his father was suffering from multiple sclerosis and was likely to receive better treatment in the west. They left on a visitors' visa carrying

a single suitcase which, Sudbin remembers, contained mostly his music. The Berlin Wall had recently fallen and Sudbin remembers this time in his life as 'very exciting and adventurous'. He fell in with a piano teacher he knew from St Petersburg, Galina Iwanzowa, and took lessons with her at the Hochschule für Musik, which soon provided him with a piano. The family still had no home and was living in a hostel for refugees, where the piano was housed in a basement. Some months later the publicity Sudbin gained after winning a federal competition prompted a kindly businessman to provide a house for the family. By 1997 Sudbin felt it was time to move on and broaden his musical outlook. It perhaps didn't help that the emphasis on technique at the Hochschule had meant practising numerous exercises. 'I just found exercises boring and they made me play a lot of them. I always prefer playing pieces and that's how my technique actually developed – through playing works rather than exercises. I couldn't stand scales or Hanon or anything like that.'

So Sudbin left Berlin for London, studying with Christopher Elton first at the Purcell School and then the Royal Academy of Music. 'That move was more difficult because I didn't know anybody.

I didn't even speak English – that was a different type of adventure. In London the focus was really to find my own voice, and Christopher Elton gave me a lot of freedom. He never imposes himself; he listens to your ideas and helps you to form them. I suddenly discovered that you can think for yourself and make your own decisions. It was as if suddenly I grew wings and I could express myself much better. I think if you don't make that jump – between studying with someone with a very strong personality and becoming your own individual – then things can be tricky.'

That Sudbin had formed his own personality early on is clear in his Rachmaninoff recital disc, released in 2005. However steely his fingerwork and however thunderous the chordal playing, the textures teem with detail; the brilliance goes far beyond the surface. One reviewer noted that Sudbin had outgunned Horowitz, and pianists' pianist Stephen Hough, with whom Sudbin has briefly studied, described the playing here as 'audacious, stimulating, heartfelt and utterly alive in every moment'.

So far, so good: Sudbin had worked with teachers in three important musical centres. He'd also made the difficult transition between student and fledgling artist. But what was the next step? He had already come to the attention of artist manager Nigel Grant Rogers, who now represents him, and Rogers kept pestering Rob Suff, A & R Director of BIS, to listen to the pianist's demo disc. Although BIS had at the time put new artist acquisitions on hold, Suff was so taken by Sudbin's playing that he convinced his boss Robert van Bahr to offer the pianist two discs. 'BIS gave me so much freedom in terms of repertoire and decision-making,' says Sudbin. 'I've never encountered a situation where I've said I'd like to record something and they've turned it away. And they have first-class producers. I think I was very fortunate.'

In addition to his playing, Sudbin has also taken to writing the occasional transcription and to composing concerto cadenzas where he feels a good one is lacking. He also writes his own eloquent sleeve-notes, not only illuminating the background to the works but also offering his personal responses to them. For instance he describes his obsession with Scriabin with suitable abandon: 'Once one is bitten and the venom, in the form of his sound world, enters the body and soul, the effects become all-encompassing, even life-threatening'. He goes on to pose the question, ▶