

# GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Yevgeny Sudbin hasn't looked back since the release of his critically acclaimed Scarlatti sonatas debut in 2005. Five years and five recordings later, and having just signed up for a further 14 discs, he tells **Edward Bhesania** the story so far

It's a quiet Sunday afternoon in November in central London, but the Duke's Hall at the Royal Academy of Music is a hive of activity. On stage at the piano, under the glare of film studio lights and the gaze of television cameras, sits 29-year-old Russian pianist Yevgeny Sudbin. He is being filmed for a documentary for Russian television about his compatriot, the composer Nikolai Medtner, of whom Sudbin is something of a champion. The film shoot is over-running, and as the film crew gather to confer, Sudbin bounds over to apologise for the delay. Almost at the same time he is on his mobile, calling to let his friends know he'll be late for dinner. Such clashes of schedule are now part of the daily routine of a pianist who, since the first fruits of his recording contract with the Swedish label BIS in 2005, is increasingly sought after by concert venues around the world. The speed of his transformation – from being no more than a face in the pianistic crowd to being hailed in the press as 'one of the most important pianistic talents of our time' and 'potentially one of the greatest pianists of the 21st century' – must have taken him by surprise. Yet, as can be heard on his growing catalogue of recordings, he was evidently ready to take on an international career, both technically and artistically.

Finally filming is over and we have a chance to talk. Medtner seems like a good place to begin, not only in view of the film, to which Sudbin has brought items from his own 'treasure-chest' of the composer's belongings he has collected over the years – books, LPs, concert programmes – but also because he has performed a number of the composer's 14 piano sonatas in recital, and recorded the First and Second Piano Concertos.

'Some people say Medtner sounds like Rachmaninoff, which I think is completely wrong; other people say he sounds like a "Russian Brahms", which is also wrong. If there are any similarities, they are highly coincidental. He has his own voice, his own individuality. It would be nice to think that some time in the future people might say Rachmaninoff or Brahms sound a bit like Medtner!'

Sudbin's introduction to the Russian composer came through Horowitz's recording of the Sonata-Skazka (*Fairy Tale Sonata*), which he heard over a decade ago. 'It appealed to me because it was such a charming piece,' says Sudbin. He then turned to Hamish Milne's Medtner recordings, to Nikolai Demidenko's, and then to those of Boris Berezovsky. 'I was so surprised to come across a composer of such high

quality whom I hadn't known before. In my experience, lesser-known composers often seem to copy others, but with Medtner that was never true – he really sounds like Medtner, and nobody else.'

Sudbin accepts that the composer's sometimes complex lines can demand repeated listening 'before you get the idea of what voices are going where and how the music is developing', but another possible explanation for Medtner's neglect are the technical challenges he places on the pianist. 'I would say he's maybe more demanding than Rachmaninoff,' Sudbin suggests. 'When I was playing his concertos, gosh, there was no chance to catch breath – it just goes and goes. It's very "heavy" writing. In Rachmaninoff you can sometimes hide behind the many notes because they are sometimes for the sake of colour or for virtuosity. In Medtner there are also lots of notes, but you can't hide anywhere because every note is extremely important.'

This feature of Medtner's music may have seemed especially prominent when Sudbin was recording the Second Concerto with the North Carolina Symphony under Grant Llewellyn (released November 2009). He recalls how an error in the orchestral part in the finale's coda resulted in some instruments not playing when they should have been. With the session time nearly over, the coda had to be retaken. 'We had to do it in one go, because we literally had something like two and a half minutes left. That created a high-voltage atmosphere. We just went for it, and after it was done everyone was so happy.'

Four of Sudbin's five solo releases to date are devoted to Russian composers. His second disc was an all-Rachmaninoff affair, including a version of the Second Sonata based on Horowitz's own performing amalgams of the composer's original and revised versions. That was followed by a pairing of Tchaikovsky's and Medtner's First Concertos (with the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra under John Neschling), and then by an acclaimed Scriabin recital disc. Most recent is his Medtner Second Concerto paired with the original version of Rachmaninoff's Fourth. But for his first foray, back in 2005, Sudbin took something of a punt in going for a recital of Scarlatti sonatas. It won immediate acclaim, and rightly so – his playing on it combines bristling youthfulness, a sophisticated ear for style and an entirely unforced range of expression. The young pianist was suddenly being compared to the likes of Horowitz and Pletnev.

Even at the time of recording that Scarlatti disc, the 24-year-old was confident in his ability not only as a performer but also in the studio. ▶