

TURNING POINT

As Covid lockdown ended, Yevgeny Sudbin found himself facing a fearsome personal crisis. He talks to **Jessica Duchen** about his darkest moments and how he emerged – with a little help from his equally gifted pianist daughter Bella – out of the shadows



A few years ago, the Telegraph's music critic termed Yevgeny Sudbin 'potentially one of the greatest pianists of the 21st century'. Sudbin, 42, who left Russia to study at the Purcell School in his teens and has lived here ever since, is blessed with dizzying virtuosity and a feel for lyricism, colour and atmosphere second to none. He is also an expert at making sparkling piano transcriptions of orchestral favourites.

Sudbin, however, has recently been through the type of personal horror that many musicians – indeed, people from all walks of life – sometimes hesitate to talk about. Following a devastating nervous breakdown, he says he has decided to speak up in the hope that his experience might help others confronting something similar.

The pandemic took a tremendous toll on mental health all over the world. In Stanmore, where Sudbin was isolating at home during lockdown with his wife, Sally, and their three children, its tentacles enwrapped him, to alarming effect.

On tour early in 2020, shortly before Covid-19 hit the headlines, Sudbin came down with a chest infection. 'Testing was not yet available, but I suspect it was Covid,' he says. 'My last concert was supposed to be in France, playing the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No 1, but the day after the rehearsal I developed a fever. I didn't get to play the concert.' Realising that the outbreak was about to become a world-changing event, he hastened back to London: 'My instinct was to keep my family safe.'

At first, lockdown proved a welcome relief from his intense schedule. 'I'd been doing too many different things, travelling so much, playing 14 different concertos in the space of a few months, and I wanted to take some time off and regroup a little bit. For the first half-year I was at home with the kids, doing all the things I had been putting off for lack of time.'

That involved writing some new transcriptions, including

Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* Fantasy-Overture, and duet versions of waltzes from *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker* – all of which feature on the Tchaikovsky album that he was starting to record. The intention for the duets was that he would play them with his gifted 12-year-old daughter, Bella.

Delayed reaction

It was only when the lockdowns began to ease and concert life was slowly resuming that the trouble started. 'I've been giving concerts since I was five years old, more or less non-stop,' Sudbin says. 'The feelings that you experience around a concert – the low before it and then the high during and after – had become almost like drugs to me. That was so much a part of my life that I began to miss these ups and downs.'

One morning he woke up feeling dizzy. 'I started to get terrible headaches, accompanied by a very strange anxiety.' As the days and weeks progressed, his anxiety attacks grew progressively worse, accompanied by a sense of bizarre energy: 'It was like the nervous energy when you're about to play a concert, but multiplied by a billion, and there was nowhere to release it. This feeling became more extreme until I wasn't sure what was happening. At some point, I remember, the world went completely dark, like I just dissociated from it, as if a switch was flipped.'

He could not sleep ('maybe one hour a night now and then'), and found himself unable to leave his room even to make a cup of tea. 'It took a while for me to understand what was happening,' he says, 'because in that state I did not feel as if I was myself. And at first I was put on medication that actually made it worse. It took a while to find the right doctor and the right treatment.'

After a long and appalling period, medication was found that could help him; and over several months his symptoms slowly began to dissipate. 'At some point, my wife would drag me

out of the house for a walk in the park – I would force myself sometimes, but I'd found doing anything unbearable. Then in spring last year, I remember looking at trees and flowers and it didn't feel so alien any more. Before that, every memory I'd had, in every relationship to a place or a person, would send me into tears, because I wasn't experiencing feelings in the way I used to. I could almost feel a disconnection in the brain. I could not hear music without bursting into tears and I was convinced that I'd never be able to play again.

'Very gradually, I was emerging from that horrible state – I managed small steps, like helping my children with their homework, or being able to sit with other people. But there was one thing I felt the most sorry about: the prospect that I couldn't complete the Tchaikovsky recording.'

He had already recorded most of it; all that remained was the waltz duets with his daughter. Now he was reaching the point at which he felt this was not out of the question. 'I said to myself: this is what I have to do – I want to complete this recording. And for my daughter, it's also such a great experience to be able to record and play in such a high-profile scenario. It felt like a big undertaking that I might or might not be able to fulfil, which bothered me, but it was something I felt I could aim for.'

Rebooting the emotions

At last he and Bella set out for Austria. 'We managed to complete the recording, in a studio next to the house where Liszt was born,' Sudbin says. 'I wanted to do this so much that it was almost a survival instinct for me, to get to that place and see it through. That was the first hurdle.' What about Bella? 'She was totally cool about it,' Sudbin says, venturing a smile. 'We rehearsed and practised at home and when we got there she was completely fine with the recording situation.'

'I can't explain how much we take mental wellness for granted,' he adds. 'When the emotions gradually began to come back to me, it was an amazing sensation, after having been devoid of it for so long. I was lucky with the support I had at home and finding the right doctor, because it can be hit-and-miss.'

He went to Italy to give a recital and slowly became able to restart his concert life. 'It did feel strange at first, especially since I had been convinced I would never be able to play another note. But that rush of emotion after a performance – I could still feel it afterwards. I'm so grateful that it has come back to me.'

The Tchaikovsky album, released earlier this year, is a stunner. It includes his magnificent, refulgent transcription of *Romeo and Juliet*, the dazzling Glinka *Ruslan and Lyudmila* Overture, extracts from Tchaikovsky's collections of solo pieces including *The Seasons* and the Op 72 set, and the two ballet-score waltz duets with Bella in accounts that are chock-full full of joie-de-vivre. Father and daughter bound through the *Sleeping Beauty* extract as if with India-rubber-tipped fingers and play the 'Waltz of the Flowers' from *The Nutcracker* with affection brimming out of every phrase.

For Sudbin himself, back on stage, the recovery continues. For the rest of us, there's the recognition that music, love and family can help to bring healing even to the darkest times of our lives. ■

Yevgeny and Bella Sudbin's Romeo and Juliet: Tchaikovsky on the Piano album is out now on BIS Records (BIS-2198).



YEVGENY SUDBIN

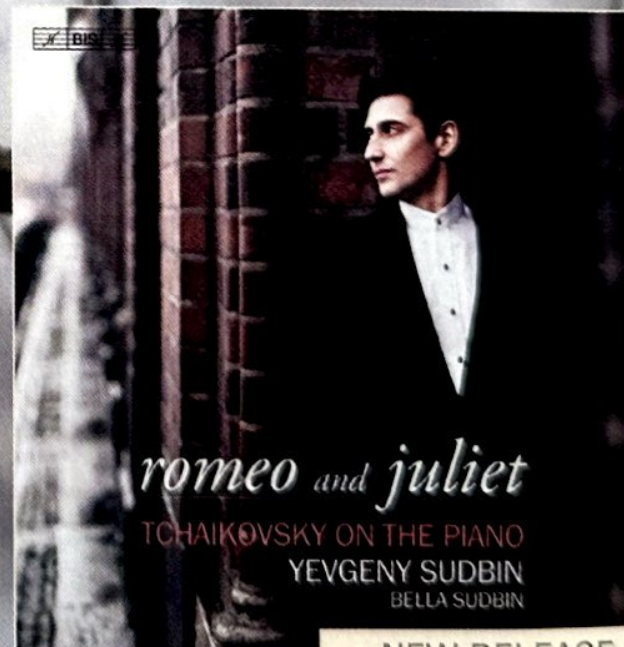
on BIS Records



BIS2138 (Hybrid SACD)

ALSO AVAILABLE

© Peter Rigaud



BIS2198 (Hybrid SACD)

NEW RELEASE

“scintillating, and then some”

Gramophone Editor's Choice, April 2023



Marketed and distributed in the UK by Naxos Music UK Ltd
Available for download in studio master quality from www.eclassical.com
For international distribution see www.bis.se