

words by Emma Baker

Yevgeny Sudbin

The young Russian pianist has a star quality that shines through on his discs of Scarlatti and Rachmaninov

WHAT SETS A YOUNG PIANIST APART FROM THE CROWD of technically assured virtuosos? You know it when you hear it – it's something subtle about their playing that stops you in your tracks. It's a magic ingredient that 25-year-old Russian pianist Yevgeny Sudbin has in abundance. His debut disc of Scarlatti's quirky, colourful sonatas caused a sensation and won unanimous praise from critics. His second disc, which includes Rachmaninov's thundering Sonata No.2, is receiving a similar reception. The esteemed British virtuoso Stephen Hough described it as 'truly wonderful... his playing is audacious, stimulating, heartfelt and utterly alive in every moment'.

Leaving Russia behind

Like many children of former Communist Russia, Yevgeny had a geographically unsettled childhood. He was born in St Petersburg in 1980, and was initially taught the piano by his mother. He made rapid progress and was subsequently enrolled in the St Petersburg Conservatory at the age of seven. 'From what I remember, it was a very disciplined and hard-working environment,' he says.

When Yevgeny was 10, his family moved to Germany. 'It was very difficult to leave Russia at that time, so my parents, sister and I went out on a tourist visa. All I had were some clothes and a bag of music. We arrived in Berlin and sought asylum. It wasn't clear if I'd ever play the piano again as we didn't know anyone in Germany.' But the 10-year-old soon found support from a fellow Russian. 'I played to a teacher at the Berlin Conservatory who said she'd like to teach me. Then somehow, a piano arrived! The conservatory had got me one, as a present.'

Fluent writer

Yevgeny's talent soon brought him to Britain where he was awarded a scholarship to London's Royal Academy of Music. 'Learning English was much easier for me than learning German,' he claims. The day we meet for the interview, Yevgeny has just handed in his final dissertation for his masters degree. 'I was up all night finishing it off,' he admits. Wasn't it strange going back to music college and taking exams after the success of his debut disc? 'Actually, academic exams always gave me a lot of diverse brain activity, so I enjoy having to write an essay for a change.' Now fluent in English, Yevgeny has another string to his bow – he's an eloquent writer who has provided all the booklet notes for his recordings. They certainly make a good read: he describes Scarlatti's sonatas as containing 'impressionistic transcriptions of day-to-day life, church bells, howls in the street and abrupt gunshots'.

So what does this piano polymath have planned for the future? He is scheduled to record music by Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Scriabin and Haydn. 'I like to play very contrasting repertoire – I thrive on diversity,' he says. 'And now that I've finished at the Royal Academy I'm free to focus on what I really enjoy doing: playing the piano, recording, and giving concerts. It's a bit of a scary feeling though, being out there!'

He has no reason to be scared – this young Russian has all he needs to become one of the greats. ■

HOT SPEC

Born 19 April 1980, St Petersburg
Studied The Purcell School, Harrow; Royal Academy of Music
Mentors Christopher Elton, Stephen Hough, Murray Perahia
Prizes First Prize in the Steinway Piano Competition
Fascinating fact Yevgeny describes himself as 'the only pianist I know who enjoys skiing'

ON DISC

Rachmaninov: Piano Sonata No.2; Chopin Variations
 A pianist who 'outguns even the mighty Horowitz' and has 'fingers of steel and heart of gold' is how our reviewer described Yevgeny Sudbin last month
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