

International Piano *meets* Rustem Hayroudinoff



POLINA KOGAN

Who were your principal teachers?

My teacher at the Specialist Music School in Kazan, where I studied from the age of seven to 17, was Marina Arbutova, who treated her students with unfailing kindness and patience. It was a fine school – Yuri Egorov and Mikhail Pletnev had also studied there – and thanks to her dedication I was accepted into the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatoire.

At the Conservatoire I studied with Lev Naumov, himself a pupil of Heinrich Neuhaus. He carried forward Neuhaus's principles, teaching through imagery and metaphor. His class was among the most sought-after and filled with extremely gifted young musicians. One had to measure up. If you didn't, he might quietly remark: 'You know, Gavrik [Andrei Gavrilov] played it better.'

I was, I believe, the first Russian student to come to the Royal Academy of Music, where I studied with Christopher Elton. His rare background as

a pianist and cellist gave him a unique perspective and a deep knowledge of music beyond the piano repertoire. At a decisive moment in my development, his guidance – and his insistence that I trust myself – meant a great deal.

Beyond your teachers, who have been the biggest musical influences on you?

In Moscow I befriended an exceptionally gifted fellow-student, Igor Girfanov, several years my senior. His manner could be direct to the point of bluntness, but I learnt a lot from him about tonal colour, phrasing and expressive freedom.

In London, several lessons with Murray Perahia were an eye-opener. We worked on Mozart and Bach; I remain indebted to him for sharpening my awareness of voice-leading and contrapuntal architecture. He was generous and encouraging, but at times it could still be a bit intimidating. On one occasion I arrived to find him listening

with friends to Horowitz's Hamburg recording of Mozart's Sonata, K333 – the very work I had brought. Wanda Toscanini had asked him to advise on its release. When it ended, he turned to me and said, 'All right – now you do it.'

If you could take just one recording to a desert island, what would it be?

One feels one ought to choose a supreme masterpiece – Bach's *St Matthew Passion* or Mozart's Requiem. Yet I suspect I would miss human vitality more than metaphysical depth. Carlos Kleiber conducting the Vienna Philharmonic in Johann Strauss II's *Die Fledermaus* Overture has precisely that irrepressible energy. It sparkles with wit and life. Sometimes one needs PG Wodehouse rather than Shakespeare.

What was your most recent musical discovery?

I recently realised – to my embarrassment – that Clementi wrote far more sonatas than I had known. There is amazing originality and invention in them.

What was the last thing you were practising?

Schumann's *Kreisleriana* and *Études symphoniques*.

Which solo piece would you most love to learn but haven't yet performed?

Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. I began learning them during the pandemic and have returned to them intermittently, but I have not yet performed them publicly.

Which piano concertos should be heard more often in concert?

Tchaikovsky's *Concert Fantasia*, Op 56 – fiendishly difficult yet strikingly original – and Dvořák's Piano Concerto, whose piano-writing may be awkward but whose music is very beautiful.

Which composers are most underrated or neglected?

CPE Bach and Clementi. Both are astonishingly original and imaginative. Also, I believe without their influence Beethoven would not have been Beethoven – at least not as we know him.

What major works are you performing in the coming months?

Schumann's *Kreisleriana* and *Études symphoniques*.

Do you have a personal favourite among your recordings?

Listening to one's own recordings can be uncomfortable: I hear most clearly the distance between intention and result. If I had to choose, the Rachmaninov *Études-tableaux* perhaps comes closest to what I wished to convey.

Do you have any concert memories that especially stand out?

At a recital in Japan a gentleman in the audience fell asleep before I began with Beethoven's *Moonlight* Sonata; he was soon snoring louder than I was playing. It was terrible – but no one intervened. I later learnt that causing someone to lose face is carefully avoided in Japan. At last, a young boy – mercifully less bound by etiquette – woke him up. The poor man, who had probably come to get some culture after a long day's work, was mortified and quietly left.