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SOLZHENITSYN CLASSIC

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THE SON OF RUSSIA'S GREATEST LIVING NOVELIST BRINGS TO SOUTH FLORIDA HIS OWN FORMIDABLE TALENTS AS A CONCERT PIANIST.

When Ignat Solzhenitsyn was 6 years old, his father, the exiled Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, sat with him and his two brothers around the fireplace in their Vermont farmhouse and read one of his short stories aloud.

``I'll never forget that," says Ignat. ``That was the moment when I first became aware of what my father did. It was his way of introducing us to the fact that we were living with a writer, his way of saying, `Look, boys, this is why I'm always so busy in my study.' "

Around the same time, Ignat also become aware of another aspect of his father's life. One day he walked into his office and heard a Beethoven symphony, which struck him like lighting from a clear sky. ``What is that?" he asked. ``This is Beethoven," Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said simply, showing him the boxed set of Beethoven

symphonies he'd been listening to. `` That's how I learned that Beethoven was my father's favorite composer," he recalls.

Beethoven soon became Ignat's idol, too, along with Schubert, Haydn and Mozart, whose Piano Concerto No. 23 in A major he'll perform today and Monday in South Florida as soloist with the Royal Philharmonic led by Italian conductor Daniele Gatti. For even before he'd ever heard of Beethoven, Ignat had already discovered another musical attraction in his father's American home - the baby grand piano that came with the house, and on which he'd begun plinking out tunes when he was 5 years old.

Still, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, survivor of Stalinist labor camps and Nobel-prize winning author of monumental tomes about Soviet oppression, didn't take his little boy's interest in music seriously - let alone imagine that one day he'd be nurturing a concert pianist. He didn't pay much heed even to his friend Mstislav Rostropovich, the great Russian cellist, who had insisted Ignat receive piano lessons immediately, after hearing the boy play when he was 6 at the Solzhenitsyns' home.

But two years later, when Rostropovich discovered that Ignat had long been able to read music yet was still doodling alone at the keyboard, he took matters into his own hands. Rostropovich introduced the boy to pianist Rudolf Serkin, who lived just an hour away, and who arranged lessons for him with his assistants. The result: By age 13, Ignat was performing Beethoven's Second Piano Concerto right here in South Florida at the now-defunct Palm Beach Festival.

A fresh-faced, good-natured, blond-haired boy then, Ignat, now 27, exuded the same matter-of-fact affability he did as a child during a recent appearance on CBS' Sunday Morning show. And his unaffected frankness and sincerity came through again in a recent phone call from Philadelphia, where he lives with his physician wife,

a native of Lancaster, Pa. When he's not playing the piano these days, he's also principal conductor of Philadelphia's Concerto Soloists Chamber Orchestra.

``My goal for the foreseeable future is to play the piano and conduct," he explains. ``I wanted to conduct from an early age, but I always felt that if I did so, I had to be trained seriously and properly," which is why for several years, before becoming principal conductor of the Concerto Soloists last fall, he served as its assistant conductor and studied piano with Gary Graffman and conducting with Otto Werner-Mueller at Philadelphia's renowned Curtis Institute of Music.

Plainly, Solzhenitsyns do not take things lightly.

LIFE IN EXILE

Ignat was just 18 months old in 1974, when his father was charged with treason for exposing Communist brutality through his writings and expelled from the Soviet Union, settling first in Switzerland, then in the United States at a fenced-in estate in Cavendish, Vt. The boy attended school there, where he spoke English and made American friends, but at home both the language and atmosphere were Russian.

``The environment we had in terms of discipline was not obsessive," he says. ``My father didn't say, `You must do this, you must do that.' But there was an almost reverential approach to work; it was considered something very important. Also, while my brothers and I always had a clear sense of our father's importance and stature as a writer, there was no sense of self-importance from him. He's such a down-to-earth person and very simple man in terms of his daily life, which is almost monastic. He doesn't have any lavish requirements. While we lived in comfort in Vermont,

there was no opulence or luxury, and I think my parents imbued us very early on with a sense that it's what you do that's what counts, not who you are. We never felt a sense of entitlement to anything, but rather a responsibility to bear because of our father's name."

QUIET EMERGENCE

That's one reason why, until now, young Solzhenitsyn has emerged steadily but quietly onto the musical stage. He wanted to be completely ready - fully prepared.

`` After I played in Palm Beach in 1986, I really began my serious studies," he explains. He had already spent three years under the tutelage of Serkin assistant Luis Batlle, who grounded the fledgling pianist in music theory as well as keyboard studies. But at 14, Ignat left home with his parents' blessings to live for three years in London, where he studied with Italian pedagogue Maria Curcio, a disciple of the illustrious Beethoven pianist, Artur Schnabel.

Ignat's life in London gave him a tremendous sense of self-confidence and independence.

`` It's actually from that time on that I lived alone, just as some people do when they go to college at 18, except that in my case I was only 14. I was renting an apartment and living really on my own. So, for me, when my parents returned to Russia in 1994 I was fully prepared for that." So were his brothers, a city planner in Boston, and a management consultant who works for an American company in Moscow.

`` My father had always believed he would outlive communism and return to Russia before he died. And considering the things he went

through in his life, he is remarkably healthy now at 80, delighted with the fall of communism and, on a personal level, very happy to be back in Russia," says Ignat. `` But he is also very saddened by what has happened there because he predicted a lot of it. If the reforms were not properly instituted, he warned, there would be chaos, and there has been. He knows Russia and the Russian people."

SINGULAR DEVOTION

Though Ignat is thoroughly bicultural and multilingual (he speaks Russian, English, German, French and Italian), when it comes to piano literature, his range is self-limited. Though steeped in Russian culture, musically his great love, like his father's, is German music. He concentrates mostly on playing Schubert, Mozart, Bach, Beethoven and Brahms, and admires master pianists of Teutonic bent like Claudio Arrau (with whom he intended to study when the 88-year-old virtuoso suddenly died).

`` For me it's absolutely essential to play only music that I truly love and revere, and the German repertoire is where I think the greatest piano literature lies. Being Russian, of course, I do love some Russian music dearly." He plays one Rachmaninoff blockbuster (Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini) and some solo piano music by Prokofiev and Shostakovich. But their bravura concertos are not his musical meat, nor does he dote on Tchaikovsky's ever-popular piano concertos. `` There's some music it's nice to just let other people play," he says.

Solzhenitsyn's penchant for thinking man's music and his `` no-frills" piano style - clean, clear, well-outlined phrasing, with no attention-grabbing lingering over phrases or idiosyncratic tempos - may be the product of his no-frills upbringing, and of the music he first heard at home.

`` I got a good deal of music listening at home, but it wasn't as broad a spectrum as I would have had perhaps growing up in a musician's family. There were many composers my parents never listened to, not for any lack of empathy, just because they may not have been aware or had recordings of them."

But his aversion to showy piano music and to what he calls `` personality cult" pianists like the late Vladimir Horowitz or the legendary Franz Liszt, may be rooted in his parents' preference for modesty versus show.

`` I think Horowitz did some great and beautiful things with the piano, but I also believe he often drew more attention to himself than the music he played. He was a cult figure - which is part of the problem, people went to hear Horowitz and not what was on the program. For myself, I would much rather that people come to hear this extraordinary concerto of Mozart I'm going to play than saying ` We're going to hear Solzhenitsyn.' "

Curiously, one composer Ignat barely plays is one of the greatest composers of piano music: Chopin. Why? `` I think most pianists miss the mark with Chopin, whose music is very rarely sentimental. Yet so much Chopin interpretation we hear is nothing but sentimental gushing. Very few artists are able to capture the almost bizarre combinations and contradictions in his music and which inhabited his soul. And I'm not sure I'm able to play Chopin the way he should be played yet."

In fact, Solzhenitsyn could barely mention a single pianist whose Chopin he enjoys, except for Arrau in the Nocturnes, and the late Mieczyslaw Horszowski, a Polish pianist much less famous a Chopin interpreter than, say, Arthur Rubinstein. Solzhenitsyn's all-time favorite pianist - Sviatoslav Richter - had wider-ranging tastes,

playing everything from Bach and Chopin to Bartok. So what does this young pianist like so much about Richter? `` He found each composer's voice," he says - seemed a specialist in whatever composer he played; also, `` he showed reverence for music."

FATHER'S WORK

Perhaps Solzhenitsyn's own greatest reverence, understandably, is reserved not for music but rather for his father's extraordinary work in literature. The pianist may choose to ignore some Chopin or Tchaikovsky, but he has read virtually every one of his father's massive works.

`` There was never any pressure from my father or mom, such as, ' Look, your dad wrote this, you'd better read it.' It was just there on the shelf and we knew, because our parents always led by example. They never had to preach about anything, we saw how they dedicated themselves to Russia and to their work and how meaningful their lives were in that sense. I do remember that I tackled the Gulag Archipelago [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's powerful saga of Stalinist prison life] at the age of 8 or 9, and that was an extremely important experience, and I've read all 10 volumes of The Red Wheel, twice."

After all, Ignat Solzhenitsyn may not be able to consult Beethoven or Mozart about a particular bit of phrasing or in getting a tempo right, but in re-reading his father's masterworks he can pick up the phone now and then, or send a fax asking a question about a passage or one of the characters in one of his dad's classics.

`` I suppose," he says, with just a barely detectable tinge of pride, `` that is one of the greatest perks and privileges of being Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's son."

James Roos is The Herald's music critic.

IF YOU GO

Ignat Solzhenitsyn will perform Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23 in A major, K. 448, with Daniele Gatti conducting the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, also in Brahms' Variations on a Theme by Haydn and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, at 3 p.m. today, Broward Center for the Performing Arts, 201 SW Fifth Ave., Fort Lauderdale; and 8 p.m. Monday, Miami-Dade County Auditorium, 2901 W. Flagler St., Miami. Tickets, \$20-\$70. Call 305-532-3491 in Miami-Dade; 954-523-6116 in Broward; or fax 305-532-2119.

Illustration: color photo: Ignat Solzhenitsyn (n); photo: Ignat Solzhenitsyn

(PIANO)

Ignat Solzhenitsyn was just 18 months old when his father, author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, was expelled from the Soviet Union.

Ignat Solzhenitsyn, 27, who performs today and Monday with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, has been playing piano since the age of 5, when he began plinking on the baby grand in the American home of his father, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

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