

PERFORMING ARTS: CLASSICAL MUSIC / DANCE / OPERA; Already Making Quite a Name for Himself; Ignat Solzhenitsyn is a son of the Nobel Prize winner, but he's grown to be a top pianist and conductor on his own.

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By music-world standards, he wasn't a child prodigy, says Ignat Solzhenitsyn. He didn't study piano until the advanced age of 9. Public performances didn't kick in until he was pushing 11.

"Most pianists who amount to anything begin playing at 3 or 4 years old," observes Solzhenitsyn, 25, who's making his Los Angeles Philharmonic debut Friday through next Sunday. "I had to make up for lost ground--and lost time."

By anyone's standards, he's succeeded--and then some. He was appointed assistant conductor of the highly regarded Concerto Soloists Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia when he was 21--the same year he performed with Mstislav Rostropovich and the National Symphony Orchestra in Moscow. Winner of a 1994 Avery Fisher career grant, he now travels the world, to New York, Japan, London and beyond, playing about 60 concerts a season. A few weeks ago, a New York Times review of his recital debut in that city praised his "technical facility," his "gorgeously voiced" playing and the "eloquent case" he made for the music. "Solzhenitsyn did not disappoint," the review said. "He also did not make things easy for himself."

Colleagues echo those sentiments. "Ignat clearly represents a composer's intentions," said Philip Maneval, manager of Vermont's Marlboro Festival, in which Solzhenitsyn participated in the early 1990s. "It's very difficult to play so that it's not the interpreter speaking but the music."

Adds his former teacher, Uruguayan pianist Luis Batlle: "He doesn't work with a safety net--he's constantly challenging himself. Ignat is a rare breed--very strong and very sweet."

In case you're wondering, Solzhenitsyn is the son of Nobel Prize winner Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Soviet dissident writer. Though a significant segment of the American population is familiar with his father, Solzhenitsyn says, in Russia he's nothing short of an icon.

"In America, it's much more about celebrity in general--being the child of someone famous whether it's Harrison Ford, Jimmy Carter or Larry King," he said on the phone from Phoenix, where he was appearing with the Scottsdale Symphony. "And it's hard to know whether it helps or hurts. The name arouses curiosity and opened doors, particularly early in my career. It also generates understandable skepticism and prejudice."

Alexander Solzhenitsyn and his mathematician wife, Natalia, were expelled from the USSR in 1974 when Ignat was a toddler, ending up in a farmhouse in Cavendish, Vt. Though the three Solzhenitsyn children, all boys, attended public schools, they were never allowed to forget their roots. Only Russian was spoken at home. Each day, he and his brothers were expected to memorize and recite poems by Pushkin or Lermontov. By the age of 13, Ignat had read "War and Peace"--in Russian. Twice.

"We come from disciplined stock," Solzhenitsyn said with a wry edge, in his ever-so-slightly accented English. "To this day, no one takes vacations. Still we're some of the happiest people I know--my parents did a remarkable job of raising us in light of the exile and isolation."

Solzhenitsyn's musical muscles were developed on an old piano left behind by the farmhouse's previous owner. Starting to play at the age of 6, he evidenced obvious talent. Fellow Russian emigre Rostropovich visited the following year and, impressed, recommended formal study. It took awhile to get the lessons going, but when he was 10, Solzhenitsyn won a Vermont music competition that led to a public performance of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 2. He was soon playing several concerts a year, and his father, who rarely appeared in public, attended all of them.

By then, Solzhenitsyn was sure he wanted to be a musician: "It wasn't so much that I wanted to perform as realizing that life without music would be meaningless."

Once again, it was Rostropovich who helped the boy on his way. The cellist hooked up Solzhenitsyn with famed pianist Rudolf Serkin, who lived in southern Vermont. He in turn led him to his assistant Batlle, a teacher at nearby Marlboro College. From 11 to 14, Solzhenitsyn studied with Batlle; after that, he spent three years in London working with Maria Curcio.

"Ignat really became a pianist under her guidance," said Batlle. "Instead of studying music in general, he focused on the instrument 100%."

Returning to the U.S at the age of 18, Solzhenitsyn pursued a double major in piano and conducting at Philadelphia's prestigious Curtis Institute of Music. Before finishing school, he was appointed assistant conductor of the Concerto Soloists Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia--a group that promoted him to principal conductor two weeks ago.

It's rare for someone so young to be equally proficient at playing and conducting, says the group's director, Marc Mostovoy. "A lot of conductors got famous as instrumental soloists and later gravitated to conducting," he said. "But Ignat is a great communicator with excellent leadership skills. He's learning what it means to be a master conductor at a very young age."

Solzhenitsyn said he felt up to the task: "I didn't feel like I was starting at ground zero, or that I had anything to prove," he said. "After the first concert, an older member of the orchestra was asked by a radio journalist how it felt to be directed by a kid. He said it's not the age of the conductor, but what is

happening musically."

In 1993, Solzhenitsyn played a 12-city tour in Russia, where his parents had returned post-glasnost. The U.S. has been good to him, he says, but in many ways, Russia is home. Philadelphia is his residence in America, but he spends two months in Russia each year.

"It was always clear that {my family's} exile was involuntary--that one day we'd go back," he says. "Setting foot again on Russian soil was a lifelong dream. The passionate, concentrated enthusiasm of those crowds is gold to a performer. Franz Liszt, Claudio Arrau, Glenn Gould have said Russian audiences are the best in the world."

Does he consider himself in the Russian school? Not really, he says. "I'd like to sound like an Austrian pianist when I play Mozart, a French pianist when I play Ravel and a Russian when I play Shostakovich, tailoring the sound to the score," he said. "One's personality can't be irrelevant or you turn in a bland performance. You have to say what you have to say--but it can't be the tail wagging the dog."

Solzhenitsyn is distinguished by the range of pieces he's prepared to play during a season. He's most drawn to Mozart (he'll play the Piano Concerto No. 25 in C, K. 503 with the L.A. Philharmonic), Brahms, Beethoven and Schubert--Austro-German composers whose music poses "difficult philosophical questions," he says. Bucking the trend toward what he terms "lowest common denominator" programming, he's not known for playing "crowd-pleasers."

Though he has no problem with popular works, he prefers music with a more "spiritual message."

"The Grieg concerto which I'm performing in Scottsdale, for example, is passionate, dramatic, enjoyable to play, but it doesn't probe the great depths we see in a simple two-minute Schubert song," he said. "Schubert was sick much of the time and died at the age of 31. That's why his most sublime works deal with the contemplation of death."

Down the road, Solzhenitsyn wants to conduct Bach's monumental St. Matthew Passion, with its split orchestra, dual choruses and phalanxes of soloists. Another goal: Mozart's Requiem, "one of the pillars of Western civilization."

"As the great pianist Artur Schnabel said: 'It's a privilege to perform music that is greater than it can ever be performed,' " Solzhenitsyn says. "And, without question, I'm getting better. If one isn't improving, one is regressing. In music, it's not possible to coast."

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LOS ANGELES PHILHARMONIC with IGNAT SOLZHENITSYN, soloist, and Lawrence Foster, conductor, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, 135 N. Grand Ave. Dates: Friday and Saturday, 8 p.m.; next Sunday, 2:30 p.m. Tickets: \$8-\$63. Phone: (213) 365-3500.

PHOTO: NECESSITY: Solzhenitsyn said he realized "that life without music would be meaningless."; PHOTOGRAPHER: J. HENRY FAIR

Credit: Elaine Dutka is a Times staff writer

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