

03 June 2010  
www.bcmagazine.net

**bc**

MAGAZINE

# breakup.hk

barbara wong

**asian arias**

a rare spectacle

**here be dragons**

tuen ng festival





# Ambassador for Emotion

words wilson fok

20

**There are so many emotions you can express with piano and you don't need anybody else – you can be alone and still do the job. – Katya Grineva**

She holds the record for the most number of appearances at Carnegie Hall by a female performer and is known all over the world for her highly expressive piano repertoire. Katya Grineva is a Russian pianist now resident in New York although she is a regular traveller to perform in countries throughout the globe. On June 17, she touches down in Hong Kong for a one-night-only concert of music from famous composers like Chopin and Schubert to those not so well known like Marcel Tyberg and Ernest Bloch. *bc* caught up with Katya Grineva to talk about musical interpretations, an unusual professor and kismet.

Listen to Katya Grineva's story and you might well get the impression her life is following some kind of almost mystical plan. Although a world-class pianist with annual concerts in Carnegie Hall, she wasn't, like so many of today's great musicians, an obvious child prodigy. In fact, even though her Muscovite parents were interested in the arts and music, they had no thought to give their daughter music lessons in her early years. Call it fluke, divine muse or as she says 'fate', she came to music quite unintentionally.

'Neither of my parents were musicians,' she says. 'My father was a cancer research scientist, and my mother was a historian. Our neighbours one day took their kids to the music school [the Moscow Music School] and asked whether they could take me along – it was a beautiful day to walk across the park. So they took me and I was accepted into the music school, just like the neighbours' kids. For the next 6 months I practised on the neighbours' piano because my family didn't have one. Later the teacher called my mom and said, "Your girl has talent and you should buy a piano." Only then did my parents invest in a piano.'

It was also perhaps fate that, when she was still a girl, took her father to work for a month at the Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo in the United States, where the director was Dr Enrico Mihich. The two men became friends and later her father invited Dr

Mihich to visit Russia where the then 15-year-old Katya played the piano for him.

Unbeknown to the Russian family, Mihich was the son of Dr Milan Mihich, who had been the friend and confidante of 20th century composer and conductor Marcel Tyberg. Tyberg's music had made a great impression in Austria and Italy (his home was in the little Croatian resort town Abbazia) in the first half of the 20th century. Although a Roman Catholic, he was 1/16th Jew and that was enough for the Nazis who took over the Italian-controlled regions, including Abbazia, after the death of Mussolini in 1943 to send him to his death in Auschwitz. But before he was seized, in some kind of premonition, Tyberg gave his entire musical portfolio to Milan Mihich for safekeeping and Mihich, in turn, entrusted it to his son, Enrico, before his own death.

Was it fate that when, in the 1990s, Enrico Mihich in collaboration with JoAnn Falletta, musical director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, decided to reveal Tyberg's music to the world, he remembered the exquisite playing of the Russian teenager and turned to Katya Grineva?

'The first thing they wanted to do was Tyberg's piano sonatas and they asked me to play them,' says Grineva. 'This year they just performed one of the symphonies with the Buffalo Philharmonic. I just think that the music is gorgeous. It's very dramatic and tragic, beautiful at the same time, though – the pieces I'm playing at the concert (*Legende* and the *Rondo* from Tyberg's *First Piano Sonata*) are gorgeous. I think it's great to bring back the music of someone who passed away 70-80 years ago. It's fantastic.'

Another relatively unknown piece in Grineva's Hong Kong programme is Ernest Bloch's *Poems of the Sea*. This, the pianist says, is very different from Tyberg's emotional music. Grineva loves travel and has spent time out on the ocean herself so has an affinity for these sea poems. 'When I read the music I felt the unusual part of it, so spiritual and impressionistic. It takes you to another realm. I don't think a lot of people perform it, but I really love it. I heard



Bloch's cello piece a long time ago and that was the first time I learned of his music. It was very spiritual and I wanted to learn something more about his music. It seems to me that he's always relating his music to some sort of saint, like he's linked to another realm or dimension.' Funnily enough Tyberg's friends said the same about him when he was alive, calling him a 'strange spiritual man' who appeared to 'walk a step further on this earth than was granted to most humans'.

Perhaps it is not then so surprising that Grineva was exclusively chosen to revive, in our modern age, the piano works of Tyberg. For her playing has been described by the New York Times as 'liquid, dreamlike' and by the Buffalo News as 'lyrical... exquisitely refined....' Foremost among modern romantic pianists, she places most importance on her own sensitivities to interpret the music she plays. That, she says, is a legacy from her mentor at the Moscow Conservatory.

'I had the most amazing professor. When he gave me new pieces of music to learn he wanted me not to listen to others' recordings, he wanted me to feel and learn my own way. It's an unusual approach, because it's artistic – I had to use my own emotions and approach to the music I learnt. I remember one day I had to perform a lot of pieces in an exam, but the day before I went to a concert because some famous musician came to perform at the Conservatory. My professor was really upset because he didn't want me to become absorbed in all the energy and excitement from others' musical performances. He wanted me to be myself. He was a sensitive musician. He was probably right, and that's why I learned how to express my emotions and own feelings instead of copying others.

'That's why I have such distinct interpretations, because I think he was such a huge influence. Most teachers are not like that – they give you something to listen to and copy. But this is about creating my own variation of the piece, it's a complete respect for what the composer is asking. It's just great, I think.'

Another consequence of this individual approach is the respect and distance Grineva gives to other musicians' interpretations. 'I don't need to make my interpretation stand out among all others,' she says, 'and you'd be surprised to find out how simple all of this is. I make sure I do well on my interpretation and nothing else. I never compare. Everyone lives life differently and it's the same with music, music is like a living thing. You can't copy anything alive, you can't copy someone else's interpretations. When you perform, people need to feel that it's real and not stale. It has to be alive.'

Although Grineva has been praised wherever she performs as an outstandingly poetic

artist, she has also been recognized since 1998 by piano makers Steinway and Sons as a Steinway Artist for her considerable musicianship. How has she mastered the technical side of playing and in particular does she find she has to balance technical against emotional demands? 'I think you have to master all your life,' is her comprehensive reply. 'Always, the technical things must be there. It's like an athlete has to run a certain number of miles every day to run a marathon. As pianists, we must practise over and over again, for a long time in order to perform. This is mandatory and there is no short cut. Emotional things are different – that's expression. We have to practise the technical part, and learn to express emotions. But I don't like the technical side to overtake the emotional side, because you need emotions at a concert. That is why you go to the concert in the first place, to hear music.'

And she doesn't see any need to change her approach for different works – especially between those she is familiar with and those new to her. 'I just feel the music without much thinking. I just feel my way through,' she says and refers back to the variation between the music of Tyberg which is 'very emotional to begin with. It's written in a late romantic period,' and Bloch who is 'more spiritual, more expressionistic'. Although the music is very different, her approach to both is the same.

What about the rest of the programme she'll be playing in Hong Kong Cultural Centre's Concert Hall? 'I love Chopin and that's why I'm putting his pieces in the programme [the *Nocturne in E-Flat Major, Op 9, No 2* and two waltzes – that in *C-Sharp Minor, Op 64, No 2*, and that in *E Minor*]. I also love Schubert for a little classical flavour in the programme. [She'll be playing Schubert's *Impromptu in A-Flat Major, Op 90, No 4* and Schubert/Liszt's *Swan Song*.] Then there is the new impressionistic Bloch and the unfamiliar Tyberg. And also Spanish music (Granados's Spanish dance *Playera*), which is fun and beautiful. Astor Piazzolla's tangos, and then most importantly there is Maurice Ravel's *Bolero*, which is very popular, but nobody plays it on the piano even though it sounds fantastic on the piano. The programme has a lot of variety.'

She has played this programme all over the world from Kenya to New Orleans and, although it goes for 2 hours, her audiences tell her it feels like it only lasts 10 minutes. 'It seems short because you are presented with so many different moods – you go through different emotions. When I play Chopin, Bloch and then finish with Spanish music it contains so much energy. It's so much fun for me, I feel rejuvenated. I love the programme and its selections.'

*Katya Live in Hong Kong: 8pm, 17 June, at the HK Cultural Centre Concert Hall. Tickets are \$580, \$480, \$380 and \$280, from Urbtix, 2734 9009.*