

INTERVIEW WITH ANDREAS RADLMAIER



“Evgenia Rubinova is larger than life”, wrote the Washington Post about the prizewinning, widely hailed pianist, who has made herself a name in the world of classical music. Five years ago, she settled in the Bavarian city of Nuremberg with her family. She has been in possession of a German passport for a long time: “Germany is my home”. On 8 April she will be featured as the star soloist performing with the Nuremberg Symphony. Here she responds to questions on the subjects of child prodigies, the Russian soul, and pianists who insure their hands.

(Foto: Cristopher Civitillo)

ANDREAS RADLMAIER: Ms. Rubinova, you studied in Frankfurt and stayed often with your parents in Augsburg. What drew you to Nuremberg?

EVGENIA RUBINOVA: The reasons are private: my husband already lived here.

A.R.: How long have you now been living in this city?

I moved here five years ago. It allowed us to start a family.

A.R.: So, you have children.

Yes, my son is five years old, and my daughter is one and a half.

A.R.: How do you feel in the city you now call home?

Of course it always takes some time to start getting used to a new city. But now I really enjoy living here. Nuremberg is a practical as well as gorgeous town, with its own special aura and quality of life.

A.R.: The inhabitants of Nuremberg are said to be somewhat introverted.

It always takes some time until people start opening up and accepting you. It's an adventure. I had already gone through it several times before.

A.R.: Does that process get on your nerves?

Not at all. I'm a very curious person. I like it.

A.R.: You have evidently made it as a musician. Locally you are also in demand as a soloist. Did you have to do a lot of persuading to reach this point?

Well, I had already performed with the Nuremberg Symphony in 2003, long before I moved here. Now that I live here, previous connections have become more established and stabilized. Independently from that, you always have to convince and captivate your audience as a musician. That is essential.

A.R.: All those wanderings that have taken you through several nations and cultures have ended up reinforcing your self-awareness, as you write on your home page. How would you describe the Evgenia Rubinova of today?

Inside myself I carry different cultures that have exerted a strong influence: each one of them is a treasure and a foundation for my work as an artist. Moscow, Germany, international concert tours: all of those places automatically widen one's horizon. You always bring something back with you; there is something left of what you felt during your journey, and you put it back into the music. As time passes, you thereby achieve a kind of inner balance.

A.R.: You refer to yourself as a cosmopolitan.

That description for myself stems from a certain period in which I didn't want to be labeled a certain way: the Uzbek pianist, the Russian pianist... In the end, however, many new worlds opened up for me in Germany – a true kaleidoscope of sensations.

A.R.: What abilities must a pianist possess in order to draw attention to his/her individual, unique personality among so many great talents?

You need a mixture of different attributes. A great amount of experience and a sensitivity for life's emotions are all part of it: we are not merely supposed to put a historical musical exhibit on display. We artists are a channel through which the music needs to pass in order to be brought to life. In terms of our function as a medium, each one of us has to embark on his/her own journey. In the course of that journey I believe there are different phases. In the best of cases, it turns into an ongoing lifelong process, in the course of which we never cease to evolve.

A.R.: Which is the most important part of the body for you as a musician?

I couldn't say which one. So many are important. You have to feel as if you were forming one sole entity with the grand piano. The fingers only serve as connecting links with the piano keys, but the entire body should vibrate in resonance with the music, in order to let the soul speak through it. Those are the times when it works.

A.R.: The reason I am asking is because many pianists tend to insure their hands against accidents.

I haven't done that myself. I once considered it, but didn't find an insurance that suited me. Moreover, I don't go about any kind of dangerous sport, I don't go on ski vacations, I don't dabble in home improvement projects.

A.R.: Are you a career-oriented person?

Regardless of succeeding or not succeeding, I try to go about my work as best I can. Career orientation sounds too much to me like a way of striving for superficial success.

A.R.: *When you were young you were labeled as a child prodigy. Can you relate to such categories of fandom and admiration?*

No. A good natural predisposition is necessary, of course. But that is only the foundation.

A.R.: *Instead, do you prefer to hear praise such as the Washington Post's "Evgenia Rubinova is larger than life"?*

Of course we all enjoy praise, but one should never make the mistake of depending on it.

A.R.: *At any rate, you were an exceptional young talent: you gave your first concert in public when you were ten. Then you moved at the age of thirteen to Moscow, where you attended a music gymnasium. Alone. What led you to make that decision? Were there no such possibilities in Tashkent?*

Yes, there is also a renowned boarding school for musically talented children in the Uzbek capital. But Moscow had always been my dream, my goal. My teacher in Tashkent, Natalia Vasinkina, was a truly gifted piano pedagogue. In her class she had several young prizewinners, and that led to an invitation to teach at the Lyceum in Moscow. She was allowed to bring three of her best pupils along with her, and I was one of the lucky ones.

A.R.: *In Moscow you lived in your piano teacher's home. Your parents continued to live in Tashkent, and could only see them once a year. Do you think that deprived you of enjoying a carefree youthful period when you were a teenager?*

It was certainly not an easy time. I had to spend three days on the train when I traveled to see my parents. But I wouldn't miss that period of my life for anything in the world. In fact, I was happy during every phase of my life. I have been able to learn so much, and I did enjoy my youth. In Moscow I had many friends and attended a good school. It was just that I played piano instead of watching television.



A.R.: *I suppose one hour a day was not enough.*

No, since playing the piano and studying recital programmes was my passion. It was not an obligation.

A.R.: *Did you miss your family?*

Yes, of course. But I always had, and still have, a close connection with my parents. Perhaps the distance made it feel less necessary for me to set myself apart from them, as teenagers usually tend to do.

A.R.: *Is music just as important for you today as when you were younger?*

Music is as important to me as the breath that gives me life.

A.R.: *You were born into a musical family.*

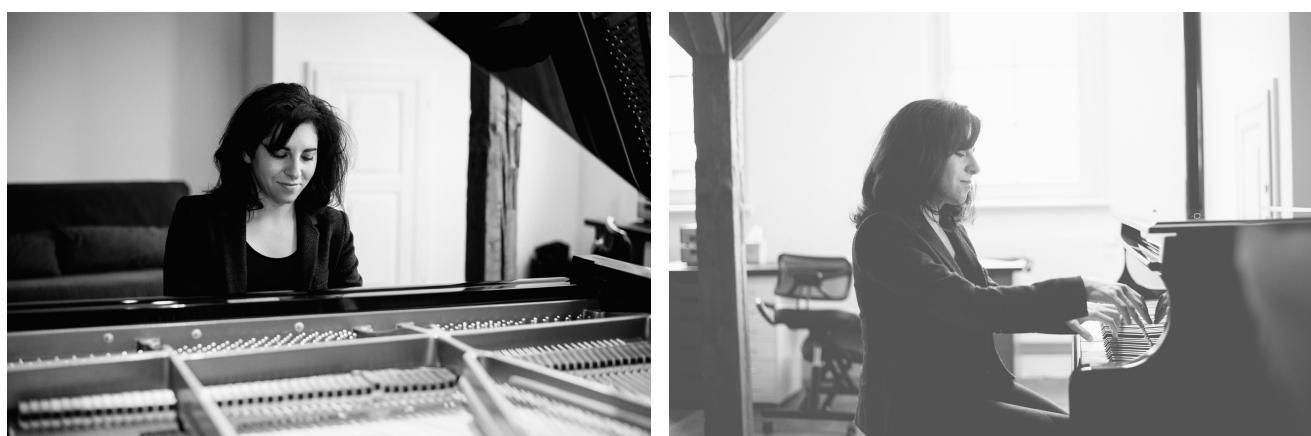
Indeed, my father was a violinist in Tashkent Philharmonic Orchestra, and my mother is a pianist.

A.R.: *You like to talk about the solitude of the soloist. Have you gained this view from all the long, hard years of practicing and training you underwent?*

You cannot become an artist if you can't stand solitude. In our profession, that's just a fact. Solitude has nothing to do with being in a sad mood, but with concentrating on the work of the mind. Learning to know oneself, to fathom oneself, to open oneself. We communicate with others – with the audience, with other artists – but whatever we are doing, we are ultimately doing it alone.

A.R.: *On 8 April you will perform in the Nuremberg Meistersinger Hall as a star guest of the Nuremberg Symphony. You'll be featuring a "Russian warhorse", as you call it: Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto. How would you describe the fascination that piece exerts to someone who doesn't know it?*

I wouldn't exactly call it a "warhorse". Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto is a gem of piano literature: it is very clearly structured, and it offers a great range of different impressions that are simply fetching. I would say that it is one of the most beautiful piano concertos ever written, and one of the most excellently composed.



A.R.: Rachmaninov is reportedly your great piano hero. Why is that?

I don't know if he's my greatest piano hero. But for certain he was one of the greatest pianists of the 20th century. His playing was refined and clear, with its own individual pulsation and sound.

A.R.: You also admire him as a composer. Could you imagine composing yourself?

When I was a very small child, yes, I composed. Then I decided to leave it up to others. Since then, I have made transcriptions, and there are other interesting tasks as well.

A.R.: You are known to particularly cherish Russian repertoire. Nevertheless, in the course of the last years, you have mostly been featuring Bach, Beethoven and Brahms in your performances. Is it Germany that is "rubbing off" on you?

During my time in Russia I was already playing the three "B's" quite frequently. I enjoyed access to German culture thanks to my grandmother: she was a professor of linguistics, and of the German language in particular. What is more, the Russian piano school has German roots. Neuhaus and Richter were of German descent. Anton Rubinstein and Siloti studied in Germany. Conversely, a Slavic influence on German music is often quite evident: in Haydn, Beethoven, Brahms, and others.

A.R.: What would you describe as "typically German"?

One can only answer such questions with clichés. But I'm more interested in what is individual than in what is typical.

A.R.: Then is there such a thing as a "Russian soul"?

That's just another cliché. Of course you can always find music that goes well with certain moods. But that's no reason for jumping to conclusions.

A.R.: Well, then there is no such thing as "German" music, either.

Indeed. Back then, the Russians studied in Europe and brought European culture back to Russia. European music formed part of a Russian education. That connection between Russia and Germany is something which indeed interests me very much.



A.R.: *Do you have your grandma to thank for that?*

Not only her. It is true that German language and German culture were the object of her special love.

A.R.: *Why did your family move to Germany?*

It was a quite normal case of immigration. My parents wanted us children to be able to achieve our full potential: in the US, in Israel, or in Germany. But since European culture was so deeply rooted in our family, the choice of Germany was quite clear.

A.R.: *You stem from a Jewish family. Is that important?*

It's hard to say. It is part of my existence. But I am not religious.

A.R.: *Why don't you perform in Uzbekistan or in Russia?*

It has simply so happened that I've focused on other countries. One needs to concentrate on certain things. At one point I also received engagement proposals from Russia and from Uzbekistan, but you just can't accept everything that is proposed. Such requests will probably turn up again in the future.

A.R.: *Maybe that was your way of making a political statement.*

Other artists may choose to intervene in such matters, but I stay out of politics.

A.R.: *Does something such as homesickness exist? And, if so, homesickness for what?*

Nature in Russia, the wide landscapes, the language, and the colors were always of special importance to me; such memories I hold dear.

A.R.: *You are in a good position to make a comparison: is music training in Russia stricter than in Germany?*

Perhaps at a certain time that was the case. But strictness has waned in Russia. Of course, one needs to have discipline in any kind of training. But the image of a teacher who smacks the pupils with a ruler is just another cliché. I never experienced such violence.

A.R.: *Was your piano teacher strict?*

I love having strict teachers. All of my teachers were admirably strict. I never had a problem with that.

A.R.: *Are you also a strict teacher?*

Maybe you should ask my students.

A.R.: *You teach piano at the Leopold Mozart Centre (LMZ) at Augsburg University. What do you get out of working with students, with young talents?*

I get much out of it. Some have reached a fantastic level. My student Evgeny Konnov has just won First Prize at the Maria Canals Competition in Barcelona.

A.R.: *Can you tell if interest in classical music is declining?*

Interest in classical music does not seem to have declined. It has just shifted somewhat. Our society is always offering new possibilities to spend one's leisure time.

A.R.: *Do you think classical music is outdated?*

Perhaps to many people the way classical music is presented must seem outdated. I have the impression that there are many people out there who are truly interested in classical music, but who don't want to have to sit through 2x50 minutes within the formal framework of a concert or a recital. It would be interesting to invent and introduce a series of innovative presentation formats in many different kinds of venues. One could present a concert series as a meeting point that offers the possibility of informing oneself and starting a discussion with others in a relaxed atmosphere. As long as the music is still the focal point and the quality doesn't suffer. What is more, children should definitely be brought in contact with music when they are quite small. There is certainly much to be improved in this sector: more engagement for the broad masses, at a more intensive level, and at the same time finding ways that are suitable for children.

A.R.: *Do you ever deal with pop music, cinema or art?*

Certainly, as long as the quality is good. It doesn't always have to be classical music.

A.R.: *Your children probably make sure of that. In what language do you read to your son? In German? In Russian?*

We are bringing up our children bilingual. We just read fairy tales to them.

A.R.: *Do you know the Grimm fairy tales?*

Of course. They're very popular in Russia. The Arabian Nights as well.

A.R.: *Might you soon find yourself packing your bags again to go broaden your horizon elsewhere?*

To broaden one's horizon, one doesn't necessarily need to pack one's bags. However, one can certainly get a better feeling for the rhythm and local color of different cultures by experiencing them firsthand. In language as well: so much in music is associated with language. If you can't get a feeling for the melody of the language, you can't express the music clearly.

Evgenia Rubinova was interviewed by Andreas Radlmaier