

PwoCVooClamia

A few years ago I heard Grigory Sokolov play for the first time, and everything I had ever learned, thought or felt about the piano and performance upon it went up in smoke. Sokolov, although a well-kept secret, is for many the greatest pianist alive today. Youthful celebrities with fast fingers, designer gear and slick photos pall beside such gigantic artistry, for Sokolov is

a pianistic Dostoyevsky, his music-making vast in scope, visionary and revelatory, squeezing out every last drop of meaning.

After much effort on the part of the Barbican press officer and Sokolov's agent, I manage to pin down the great Russian pianist for his first interview with a British journalist in nine years. It begins with his recital in the Palau de la Musica Catalana in Barcelona. This must be the world's most colourful concert hall: a Modernist

masterpiece ebullient with stained glass, statuary and bright-hued architectural detail. Watching Sokolov give a recital here is like seeing a black-and-white movie superimposed on Technicolor: a grey-haired man in black and white at an ebony and ivory piano, playing in a way that few pianists have ever played, certainly not since the 'golden age' of the early 20th century. The individuality of his musicianship harks back to another era as much as any classic movie.

Yet the colour in his playing is so vivid that it puts the Palau's visual richness in the shadow at once.

We talk backstage after the concert, aided by a Russian cellist as interpreter. Spain being Spain, the recital had begun at 9pm and, Sokolov being Sokolov, the encores are generous while the night draws on. By the time we sit down in the dressing room it is nearly midnight, but Sokolov is still in the midst of post-performance high. 'Now it is still *after* the concert,' he remarks,

“Anything that disturbs the music is against it and has no place together with it. If you like music, you accept that it's enough for your whole life

For many he is the greatest pianist alive, and yet Grigory Sokolov has never become a household name in the West.

Jessica Duchon finds out why in a rare interview

LAST OF THE TITANS

'but in three or four hours it will be the time *before* the next concert.'

Like Sviatoslav Richter or Glenn Gould, Sokolov is a musician around whom tremendous mystique has formed. He meets none of the modern expectations of a megastar; he seems to have stepped out of a different universe, a distant and purer world. If he's not yet as universally celebrated as he should be, that's because he doesn't like publicity, interviews or, indeed, anything extraneous to making music. His mind is phenomenally sharp and informed. He employs no gimmicks and he takes no prisoners.

I put it to him that he makes no concessions to the music

business's extra-musical demands. 'That's not a question, that's a compliment,' he exclaims. 'Yes, I don't like anything that is not a matter of music. Indeed, I hate it. Anything that disturbs the music is against it and has no place together with it. Naturally, if you like music you don't like those other things. If you don't like music you work in other areas. If you like music you accept that it's enough for your whole life.'

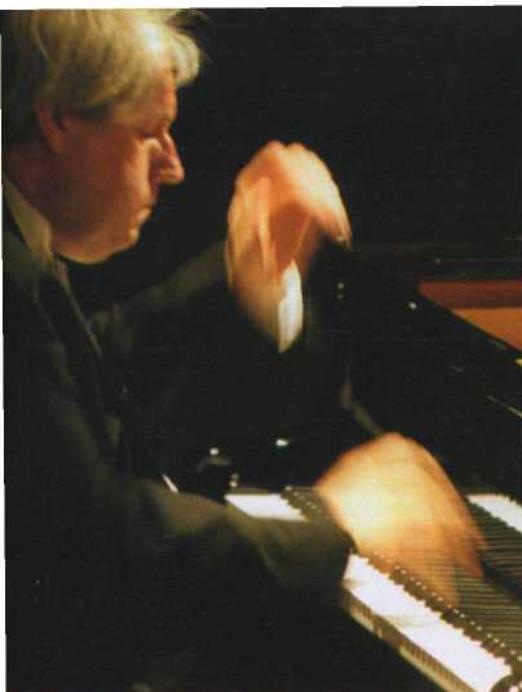
HE WAS BORN in St Petersburg and still lives there - 'theoretically. Practically, I live in the plane and the car.' He can't remember when his passion for music began: 'I can only explain what I know from my parents. They said that

if I heard music in the street, I stopped immediately and wanted to listen to it. At home we had some records, and I had a little podium and baton, and I conducted everything that was there! Then they asked a piano teacher what to do with me. She told them, "Wait until he is five years old and then start to study piano". When I received the piano, I forgot my dream to be a conductor and wanted only to play. Everything was the opposite way round from the usual: many pianists begin by playing and later they start conducting. I had already had it with conducting by the age of four.'

In 1966, when he was only 16, he won the International

Tchaikovsky Piano Competition, championed by the chairman of its jury, Emil Gilels. Despite the prestige of this prize, he remained relatively unknown in the West: he did not defect, and under the Soviet regime his travelling was limited. After perestroika that began to change. Now he gives around 80 concerts a year and fans snap up his rare CDs - infrequent releases recorded live in concert, he doesn't like to make studio recordings these days. The French director Bruno Monsaingeon captured one magical recital from Paris on film in 2002.

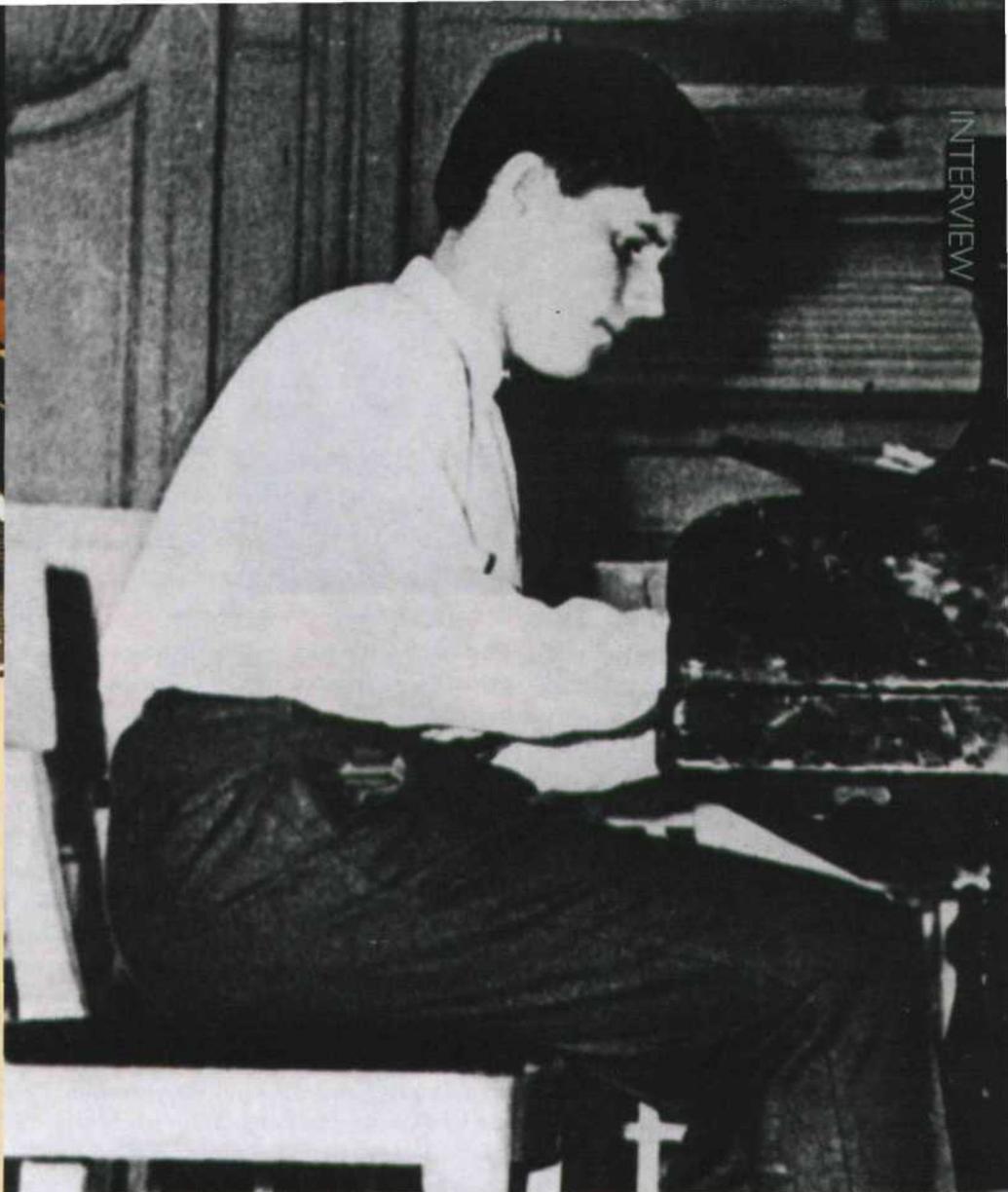
It's been suggested that he's the last great artist to emerge from the legendary 'Russian school' of pianism, after such giants as >



Above In recital, 2006
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Right Performing at the School for
Gifted Children in Leningrad, part of
the Conservatory, which Sokolov
attended as a young man

Photo courtesy Tiffany Pottw Clectal



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◀ Tatiana Nikolaeva, Richier and Gilels, but Sokolov himself discounts the lag. 'It would be very strange if all the pianists from such a huge country as Russia could be put together and display a sign saying "Russian school",' he says. 'All musicians are different, and each one's individuality is very different. If we don't talk about a school as a building, but in the sense of what is taught in certain parts of the world, I think it does not make much sense. If we go to a museum we see paintings by Rembrandt or Rubens, but also other paintings attributed to "School of Rembrandt" or "School of Rubens". That means, in principle, that people belonging to a "school" didn't have the personality

for us to remember each one as an individual artist. That personality is what's important in art.'

Indeed, Sokolov's interpretations span a spiritual galaxy light years away from anyone else's. It's not only the vast range of his expressive capabilities, from the filigree ornamentations of works from the French Baroque to the gargantuan power and ferocity of such works as Prokofiev's Seventh and Eighth Sonatas, with the tone always speaking and rounded, no matter the volume. This is just the beginning.

INEVITABLY, SOKOLOV has been labelled 'eccentric'. He refuses to compromise his standards and so, to others, his demands may seem

extreme. For instance, he likes to spend an entire day working with the piano in the hall before a concert, and instructs the tuner in precise detail about what he needs from the instrument: 'You need hours to understand the piano because each one has its own personality, and we play together,' he explains. His exacting nature has now spurred a decision significantly to reduce the number of concertos he performs with orchestra. This sounds like a huge loss, but Sokolov says: 'It's very simple. For piano is written an ocean of music, and during your lifetime you are not able to play even a small part of it. Then with orchestras it's not easy to find enough time to rehearse, or to find an orchestra

which is interested in the final product and not looking at their watch. It's also not easy with conductors, because you must find the combination of a very good musician who has this special talent to follow and to understand the music in the same way as you. It's very seldom, I must say! And then maybe the worst: if you play a solo piece several times over several days you will develop, going to another level with it. But with a concerto you play this piece more and more, but with each orchestra and conductor you must start again from zero at the first rehearsal. So, if you spend so much energy that you could use much more effectively for recitals, why do you do it? I very much like •



Let It Recital, 2004

Above: Sokolov's hands. He now gives around 80 concerts a year
Below: With Myung-Whun Chung, conductor of the Orchestra of the Accademia di Santa Cecilia, rehearsing Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia, Rome, 2001

Photo courtesy of Artists Management Company

◀ the fact that everything I make depends only on me. With a hundred people it's almost impossible. You have not the responsibility.'

To Sokolov, music remains fresh at every performance. Indeed, he feels it is impossible to play a piece the same way twice: 'First, because every day we are something different,' he says. 'Next, you have another piano, and you play together with the piano; you have another concert hall and another acoustic. Even in the same hall on the same piano it can't be the same.' His programme in Barcelona included music by Bach and Beethoven, with the second half consisting of Schumann's F sharp minor Sonata - an unusual, problematic work, but in Sokolov's hands full of exposed depths, ghostly voices and unimaginable tenderness. He does not

wax lyrical about it in words, though: it's a beautiful piece," he comments briefly. 'Schumann is a very good brand!'

His Bach is replete with intricate details and moments of startling poetry, delivered with a clarity that would turn many harpsichordists green with envy. I ask what he thinks about the era, now receding, in which purists habitually decreed the piano the 'wrong' instrument for Bach, i can't believe that a young musician can grow up without playing Bach," he begins. 'If you're not allowed to play Bach, then why can you play Chopin? Is that not allowed because it was another instrument in Chopin's time? This is completely the wrong idea, as is the idea that it's possible to have one museum interpretation. First of all, you can't find an old instrument with a very good

equivalent quality now. If you make a replica, it means that you have made a new instrument. Next, Bach was universal from the point of view of the instrument; each of his concertos for keyboard and orchestra were originally written for violin; some we know, some are lost. There is a wider distance from violin to keyboard instrument than from cembalo to piano. Back then the same piece was played on the clavichord, which was very popular because it was very close to violin; the system of the clavichord was that when you touched the string you made a vibration. The problem was that the sound was very limited and it was impossible to play in a bigger room. Then there was the chamber organ. Three keyboard instruments which are completely different. Next, on whichever instrument you play Bach, the public and you have another problem: you can never be the public of that time. That means that a museum interpretation is impossible. Of course, if you want the sound to be exactly like the cembalo, then play cembalo. If you play the piano and you don't understand that the sound and other things have another nature, it's also not the way. But if you enter the world of this composer, then you can play it on almost anything.'

Although in the past Sokolov has occasionally played programmes consisting of just one composer, he

currently has no plans to join the roster of pianists performing complete cycles such as the Beethoven sonatas. 'I don't understand the way of thinking where people think "OK, now I play all the sonatas" and then they look at what they want to play. If they want to play one particular sonata, they must play this. A pianist should only play what he feels inside. It must feel natural. I don't like to play every one of the 32 sonatas; I have played many of them and if I play in the end all of them, then maybe to play them together is OK. But every one of the piano sonatas of Beethoven represents a different world.'

HIS RECITALS USUALLY end in standing ovations and a jamboree of encores. In Barcelona we heard some astonishing Rameau, three Chopin impromptus, a mazurka or two and a touching, quiet waltz. Why so many? Sokolov laughs: 'i like to play piano,' he says, 'so if people want...' And people certainly do. Sokolov's magic is at last reaching music lovers across the globe, transforming our expectations of everything a piano recital can and should be. My final impression is of this last of the Russian titans approaching his tea in the same way he approaches his piano: pressing the teabag insistently, squeezing out every last drop of flavour.

