

The New EUGÉNICS

Andrew Green meets the Ukrainian original, **GÉNIA**

First things first. Why GÉNIA? 'It's been my nickname since birth – my family and friends have never called me by my christened name, Evgenia [Chudinovich]. When I came to Britain from the Ukraine, many people found 'Evgenia' difficult to say... I eventually decided to just use 'GÉNIA'. It simplified things as a performer.'

GÉNIA could hardly have a better musical pedigree. Horowitz is in the family. Although GÉNIA's parents and grandparents were all scientists, she was introduced to the piano (at age four) by her great grandmother and piano professor Regina Horowitz – sister of Vladimir. 'She paid a lot of attention to the sound of the piano and expression; as examples she always played recordings of her brother. He used to call her from the States in the middle of the night and regularly sent her his recordings, which were a rarity in the USSR. Musicians and students used to come and listen to them – they held discussions which went on into the night.'

'Regina was a friend of Emil Gilels and once put him on the phone to explain to me why I needed to practise scales and arpeggios. He said, "I'm very old but still practise my scales daily". That actually made a difference!'

Piano studies continued at the Kharkov Institute of Arts. Eventually GÉNIA came to London, where she now lives, to study at the Guildhall School with such teachers as Joan Havill, Douglas Finch and Paul Hamburger. 'Add to this my interest in yoga and eastern philosophies and I think many things have contributed to my musical outlook.'

Concert work has taken GÉNIA around Europe, the USA and the Middle East. Often the musical fare is contemporary, a taste acquired since coming to the West. 'I'm very much aware that what we're creating in the present will be history 50 years from now. The older you become, the more you're aware of your responsibilities as a musician.'

GÉNIA's 'Innovations' programme, for example (which took her to Lewis University in Illinois) embraced film

alongside the work of composers 'who really use sound in an interesting way'. Her latest CD release (*Suite*) reflects her immersion in electro-acoustic music, collaborating with a string of composers and producers. April 2009 sees the release of an album of Gabriel Prokofiev's piano music (on the Nonclassical label).

An earlier concert project, 'Infrasonic', looked into the science of sound. 'I've always felt that on a subconscious level people react to sound first. Only then do they rationally start to analyse the music. The more variety of sound a pianist can produce, the more he or she can move people. The sensation of listening to sound is comparable to tasting food or smelling aromas.'

'When I'm practising, I produce a variety of touch on the piano and notice how it makes me feel. Sometimes working on one note or one chord can take hours. When we speak, we're aware that certain intonations can have a particular effect on people. When I produce a sound, I try to create a so-called intonation.'

The level of GÉNIA's commitment to work away from the concert platform, evidenced by a website that's a model for any 21st-century musician, is mind-boggling. Masterclasses, seminars and lectures are balanced by a deep involvement in individual tuition. She and fellow teachers in the GÉNIA Music Piano School work at a string of venues across London.

Nothing, though, is more striking than GÉNIA's Piano-Yoga set-up, an idea born following an engagement to perform the Rachmaninov *Paganini Rhapsody*. 'I needed to increase my hand-span but couldn't find one coherent course that would develop my stretch safely as well as build up my strength. At the time I was going to yoga classes and couldn't help noticing how it limbered and

opened my body up. My muscles became more toned. It dawned on me that if yoga works on the whole body, surely it should work on fingers and hands. This is how Piano-Yoga was conceived. I created what are now the Piano-Yoga exercises for myself, while taking a British Wheel of Yoga accredited teacher-training course.

'In the West, our familiarity with yoga is mainly through the *asanas* – the physical postures. However, *asanas* represent only one developing aspect of the practice of yoga. In practical terms, Piano-Yoga works on piano technique by utilising principles taken from *asana* and applied to the fingers, hands, wrists, arms, shoulders, back and sometimes even other parts of the body. Piano-Yoga also works with breath in a similar way to other yoga practices.'

'On a psychological level, Piano-Yoga sessions teach acceptance of and patience with one's self... especially useful when working through performance nerves or understanding the processes of learning and practising. It can also develop sensitivity and a heightened awareness. Piano-Yoga teaches you to listen to your body, to know when to push yourself and when to stop.'

Whatever the precise problem a pianist brings to a Piano-Yoga session, the work almost always involves playing the piano. However, the problems aren't always with the hands. 'I had a student who came for help with her technique but I realised there was no point working on the hands when her whole body was rigid and tense. We did yoga postures first to help her loosen up.'

For those unable to attend sessions, GÉNIA's first Piano-Yoga book offers a ten-week course, graded for all levels of student, aimed at building strength in the fingers and if possible providing an increase in hand-span. A second book is in preparation. The Piano-Yoga website also offers information and advice.

GÉNIA's web presence fully demonstrates an awareness of the musician's need today to think like an entrepreneur. 'I've just learnt as I've gone along, by trial and error, using good common sense and trusting instincts. An online presence is vital for performers today. You can communicate directly with a global audience and make contact with composers and other musicians.'

And the problems of combining entrepreneurship with pianism? 'Well, I'm still working on that! It's certainly a balancing act, but I have a great team of people working with me.'



Marriage of piano and yoga: GÉNIA