



The shopping channel virtuoso

Acclaimed pianist Katya Apekisheva played Brahms on QVC. She tells Jessica Duchon why

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Devotees of the Leeds International Piano Competition may remember Katya Apekisheva in the final in 1996, playing Rachmaninov's second piano concerto. She was just 20 and her performance earned her a top prize, even if not the number one slot some thought she deserved.

Looking back at Leeds now, at the age of 34, Apekisheva admits that that concerto was "on the edge". "I didn't expect to reach the final," she recalls, "so I hadn't even taken along the music of the concerto. I had to track down a copy at a day's notice. It was a very high-pressure event, broadcast live on TV and radio, and Simon Rattle was conducting. My teacher nearly killed me!"

The incident has not hurt her in the long term, though. Apekisheva, who plays at the Wigmore Hall next week, has won plenty more prizes, the prestigious London Philharmonic Orchestra's Soloist of the Year among them. Her most recent CD, Brahms's complete violin sonatas with the violinist Jack Liebeck has brought the pair's well-established musical collaboration to prominence. Critics praised her as "outstanding".

Apekisheva's piano playing is grounded firmly in the Russian tradition that underpins her musical and family backgrounds. Her parents are both pianists, and as a child in Moscow she shared a teacher with fellow Jewish pianist Evgeny Kissin. Members of Apekisheva's family was allowed by the Soviet regime to be in the first wave of Russian Jews to move to Israel. She first visited the country when she was 14. "I'll never forget the scenes at the airport," she says. "So many families were being reunited - people were in tears everywhere."

After two and a half years there, she won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London. A shock followed, though, when she finished college and began trying to earn a living as a professional musician. "It was incredibly tough," she says. "You can never feel truly secure. I do think music colleges should do more to prepare students for what life is like in the profession. I had no support from anyone. I did accompanying, teaching, any job people offered me."

Apekisheva has an extra advantage, though - she loves playing chamber music. "It's wonderful to be able to work with great musicians who are completely different from you. And socially it's so much fun - playing solo all the time can be extremely lonely," she says.

She and Liebeck have recently found a new way to sell CDs. "We did a guest spot on the TV shopping channel QVC, playing Brahms to promote our disc. It was strange - they were talking about Brahms one moment and shampoo the next - but they sold around 200 CDs in half an hour." So, is that the way forward for recordings of classical music? Apekisheva grins: "Whatever works!"

Katya Apekisheva is at the Wigmore Hall, London W1 on September 15. Box office: 020 7935 2141. Details www.wigmore-hall.org.uk