

## Kissin tells

He's been hailed as the greatest pianist of our time and plays at the Proms next week, but Evgeny Kissin still wishes London had a decent classical music venue. Jessica Duchen learns about life as a child prodigy and the genius of Chopin

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Evgeny Kissin has been an international sensation since the age of 10. Far from diminishing after the prodigy years, however, the Kissin phenomenon has actually grown. Now 27, he is reviewed by the most stringent critics in terms accorded to few other musicians. "The greatest pianist of our time," declared one recent headline. "True genius exists beyond affection. You don't have to like it: you just fall down on your knees and thank God it exists," wrote the Independent on Sunday's critic Michael White after Kissin's Chopin recital at the Wigmore Hall last December.

Perhaps this impression of genius concerns the sheer scale of his musical vision. You can love, hate, or argue with the details of his performances, but in his hands all the boundaries of even the most familiar music explode outwards towards a greater horizon than most of us could have imagined: Kissin almost always seems to see, and play, the bigger picture. This is confirmed by the way that, giving a rare interview, he will sometimes stand back from certain questions and offer a broader, simpler yet frequently deeper viewpoint than a more detailed argument might permit. That's not to say he is above telling the occasional funny story too.

He is, understandably, an intensely private individual; his deep seriousness and apparent introversion can seem disconcerting as he walks on to a platform towards a piano, long-limbed and unsmiling beneath his shock of dark curls. Perhaps the most surprising thing, nevertheless, is that he seems to have remained unspoiled by his success. He may be an unusual personality, but there is not a shred of phoneyess about Kissin. He has never needed to pretend to be anything other than he is. His job is to play the piano; it is up to others to do the analysing.

The chronicles of musical history are littered with performers (especially former child prodigies) whose early achievements went to the dogs, whether through complacency, disillusionment or the darker forces of drink, drugs or nervous breakdowns. Kissin, however, seems utterly unshaken by outside forces, perhaps because of the protective family cocoon in which he has always lived. For him, music is life and life is music. It's an attitude of great and rather unfashionable purity - but perhaps the best one can hope is that he should stay that way.

Since 1994, Kissin has been a Londoner, having lived in New York for several years after leaving Russia. "London is one of the few cities where I play on a regular basis, two or three times every year," Kissin says. "It now seems that I happen to play here more often than any other city | in the world. But for some reason, even when I was still living in Russia, our whole family were fascinated by London. We had a number of friends here and later on we even discovered that we had relatives here. Of course, it helped that we spoke English. And when living in America I always tried not to adopt the American accent."

But he has one gripe about London - a widespread gripe that Sir Simon Rattle has also aired vociferously and that is only slowly and reluctantly being addressed by those responsible for funding: "The only thing that upsets me about London in comparison with all the other cities of the world that I know is the absence of good venues, with the exception of the Wigmore Hall,

which has only 540 seats. There are several big concert halls that can seat many people, but none of them have decent acoustics. I can only hope that they will improve something at the Royal Festival Hall when they renovate it.

"You have such a perfect hall in Birmingham. I met its designer, Russell Johnson, there and I asked him whether he could help to improve a hall in London or build a new one and he said: 'Oh, that's a special story...' I am one of many thousands of admirers of his work. I played several times at the Meyerson Hall in Dallas, Texas, designed by him, and at his new hall in Newark, the New Jersey Performing Arts Centre; now there is a wonderful new hall in Lucerne designed by him. So I really wish something could be done in London. This great city deserves a good hall."

For any musician in London the Proms are the highlight of the summer and next Thursday Kissin will be taking centre stage there. In 1997, he made history by giving the Proms' first ever solo recital. "I like the Proms very much," Kissin says, "particularly because I think it will always be associated for me with the recital I gave there two years ago - it was a very special event for me, so I always return with great pleasure."

Kissin's Prom performance is one of a number of concerts that he is giving this season in commemoration of the 150th anniversary of Chopin's death. "Chopin's music has been very close to my heart ever since I was a child," Kissin confirms. The two Chopin concertos are especially significant to him since these works featured, either singly or together, in his debuts in Moscow, western Europe and the US. He has just begun performing them again after a nine-year break, and at the time we spoke, he was preparing to play them both in the same evening for his very first appearance in Poland, Chopin's homeland. "I am very nervous!" he admits. "I have been looking forward to performing there for almost as long as I have been playing in public."

"Especially for his time, in terms of piano technique, Chopin was a revolutionary," Kissin says of this greatest of pianist-composers. "I can't think of any other composer - with the possible exception of Scriabin, who in his youth was very influenced by Chopin - the performance of whose music requires so much flexibility in the hand. It was no accident that most of his creative output was piano music. At the beginning of his composing activities, his friends were trying to persuade him to write operas. But of course, like any real genius, he knew what he should do - and time showed that he was right. I think every genius has great instinct, great insights, and should know what to do."

Kissin himself must have known what to do from the very beginning. He has been playing the piano for longer than he can remember. "I was two, according to my parents' reminiscences," he says. "I remember myself when I was about three-and-a-half. I was sitting at our old Bechstein grand playing and singing something, and my father was recording me with a huge machine and a giant microphone."

Finding the right teacher for such a child was not easy. One of his early teachers was a professor at the Gnessin Institute in Moscow, a music college for over-18s. "But it didn't work because, as he admitted, he was used to teaching older people, not little children. I was five."

The Kissins were recommended to another professor at the Gnessin Institute, Anna Pavlovna Kantor, who has remained Kissin's mentor ever since and lives with the family. "She is really a person of great integrity," says Kissin. "She dedicated all her life to teaching, and as she says, 'Had I been born again, I would have chosen this damned profession again!'"

But neither his parents nor his teacher ever pushed him to perform, Kissin stresses - if anything, the opposite, since his parents had hoped at first that he would become an engineer like his father. "The only way I was pushed, which my teacher could not help, was being asked to play in gala concerts of the government."

The Russian tradition of pianism, one of the most respected in the world, dates back to the influence of the great pianist and composer Anton Rubinstein in the late 19th century. Kissin's playing has many of the broad characteristics of the so-called "Russian school": the big-boned seriousness combined with fluid virtuosity, the beefy tone, the careful layering of contrapuntal

voices, the singer-like phrasing and intense, emotional melodic cantabile. But none of this seems particularly relevant to him when he is asked whether he sees himself as part of this tradition.

"I don't think I would ever think of myself in this way had your journalist colleagues not made me to," he responds. "I remember, when I first came to New York, I had an interview with the famous critic Harold Schonberg and he mentioned that to me. I was so puzzled by his remark that he wrote a few days later in his article something like: 'Mr Kissin himself is sceptical about the Russian tradition but despite Mr Kissin's disclaimer there is a Russian tradition of piano playing and he is an integral part of it.'"

"Whether or not I am an integral part of the Russian tradition, I can say that the Russian tradition naturally became an integral part of myself. But I don't try on purpose to play in the 'Russian way'. It's just that Russia was the country where I was born, where I studied and grew up and lived the first 20 years of my life. Therefore if some listeners think that I belong to the Russian tradition of piano-playing, I think it's only natural. But I don't think it's my business to analyse these matters."

Many observers have commented on the gradual disappearance of such different national "schools" of pianism today. Kissin again takes a wider view. "Not only music, but any great art on the one hand has distinctive national features to a greater or lesser degree, but on the other hand it's very cosmopolitan as well. I think that, first of all, many things in the world were always interconnected; secondly, I think God first created human beings and only then countries and nations. And therefore whatever differences the inhabitants of this planet may have in our cultures, we are nevertheless first of all human beings and in many respects we are still the same."

Next year, Kissin will be performing Beethoven's Third Concerto and Brahms's Second for the first time, and he is currently preparing solo sonatas by these composers. But in the longer term, he is aiming to develop his repertory "in many different directions", and his voice lights up with sudden enthusiasm as he talks about the range of music he would like to play: Debussy for the first time; 20th-century composers such as Bartok, Hindemith, Shostakovich and Samuel Barber's Sonata, for which he has a special fondness; music by the Spanish composers Albeniz and Granados; more sonatas by Mozart.

And he would love to play more chamber music, although coordinating schedules with partners makes this difficult. But Kissin is not one to rest on his laurels. He has often surprised fans and critics; the chances are that he will continue to do so.

- Evgeny Kissin performs Chopin's Piano Concerto No 1 with the Bavarian State Symphony Orchestra conducted by Zubin Mehta next Thursday (7.30pm, Royal Albert Hall), broadcast live on Radio 3.