

Nina Milkina

Russian émigré pianist at the forefront of the Mozart 'gold rush'

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Nina Milkina, who has died aged 87, was a pianist of exceptional sensitivity and great musical empathy. Trained initially in the distinguished Russian tradition, she went on to become a much-loved figure in British musical life, particularly for her broadcast recitals.

Born in Moscow, Milkina shared her birthday with Mozart. Her father was an accomplished artist who drew characterful portraits of celebrated Russian musicians including Prokofiev and Mussorgsky. Her mother was a harpist, and Milkina later recounted that in the years after the 1917 revolution, she was usually paid for her performances with a pound of flour or some salted herrings.

The family left Russia in 1926 and moved to Paris, where there was a large émigré community. "Even the taxi drivers were Russian princes then," Milkina remembered. There were fine musicians, too, and the talented young girl took piano lessons with the well-known Russian teacher Leon Conus and studied composition with the elderly Alexander Glazunov.

The latter dubbed himself her "grandfather" and set her studies and contrapuntal puzzles to resolve, as well as encouraging her to play "games" such as transposing Bach fugues. At the age of 10, she played to the visiting Rachmaninov, daring to perform one of his own preludes; she treasured the letter of recommendation he subsequently wrote for her. Aged 11, she made her first public appearance in Paris with the Lamoureux Orchestra.

Part of Milkina's family had settled in London, and Nina began to shuttle between the two cities. During one visit to England, she met Ralph Hawkes of the music publishing firm Boosey & Hawkes, who took an interest in her compositions and published several of her works under the anglicised name Nina Milkin. Her piano suite *My Toys* showed a lively musical imagination, but was described by critics as too difficult for children - although the composer was all of 11 years old: "If I remember correctly I was paid five guineas for each masterpiece and was then given a few sixpences to spend as I liked in Woolworth's."

During the 1930s, London became her permanent home. There she studied with Tobias Matthay and Harold Craxton, the two leading British piano professors of their day; fellow pupils included Myra Hess, for whom Milkina later composed cadenzas for several piano concertos.

Resident in Belsize Park, she lived upstairs from another pianist, Clifford Curzon, who was to remain a great friend and colleague: "Upstairs, me; downstairs, Clifford. It should have been the other way round."

Milkina's career was disrupted by the outbreak of the second world war, which put paid to a planned concert tour in the US. She remained in the UK and performed frequently to entertain the troops. Visiting Bournemouth for one such appearance, she met her future husband, Alastair Sedgwick, who was then in the army; the pair were married in 1943.

She broadcast frequently, sometimes in the middle of the night for the BBC World Service, and performed at Hess's series of lunchtime concerts in the National Gallery, and at the Proms with Sir Henry Wood: here she was the soloist at the last wartime Prom in the Royal Albert Hall, after a bomb fell nearby.

When the BBC Third Programme started in 1946, Milkina was invited to play the complete Mozart piano sonatas in a weekly series. Mozart was her abiding musical passion, along with Schumann and Rachmaninov. On the bicentenary of Mozart's birth in 1956, she was invited to give the celebratory recital at the Edinburgh Festival, half of which she performed on the fortepiano. During what she described as the Mozart "gold rush" in the 1960s, when many of his more neglected piano concertos were triumphantly rehabilitated, she was at the forefront of Mozart performances in London.

Raising her son and daughter, Milkina was less free to travel than some colleagues, but maintained a high profile in Britain for most of her performing career. A battle with cancer ended it in 1991; although the disease had spread widely, she made a miraculous recovery. In 2001 her husband organised the reissue of several of her recordings, including the Chopin Mazurkas and a fine recital recorded live at the Wigmore Hall in 1972.

A favourite figure among London's community of younger pianists of all nationalities, for not only her exceptional musical background but also her personal sympathy, intelligence and wry humour, Milkina always continued to enjoy "all the good things of life"; among these she numbered chess and fishing.

She is survived by her husband and children.

- Nina Milkina, pianist, born January 27 1919; died November 22 2006