

About Vladimir: *The Man Behind the Piano*

Vladimir Odnokikh may not be comfortable behind the wheel of a car (he learned to drive at a late age), but put him at the piano (which he learned to play at an early age) and his hands dance over the keys with the fluid grace of a ballerina. “When I play the piano,” Vladimir says, “I feel like myself.”

In everyday venues, Odnokikh is shy, avoids conversation and keeps to himself, a hard image to conjure when he’s seen playing the piano, where he’s most comfortable. Despite his disdain for conversation, Odnokikh speaks three languages: Spanish, English and Russian.

Finding the Piano

Born in Russia, Vladimir began his studies in Weimar, East Germany where he lived until he was 6 with his parents and older sister. It was at the age of four, when his older sister had just completed her piano lesson, that he climbed up onto the piano stool and began to play everything the teacher had just shown his sister. His parents, realizing both his talent and enthusiasm for, made sure he received lessons.

Once his family returned to Russia, his parents enrolled him in a special music school for gifted children. “I didn’t have a traditional childhood,” Vladimir says. “I liked to stage my own mini-performances of operas with my sister’s dolls (I think they were her dolls –I don’t really remember). I was happy to study hard and practiced several hours a day. I probably only slept about five hours a night.”

As he successfully completed each stage of education offered through the music school for gifted children (his parents incorrectly assumed he would eventually be dismissed into a more traditional school), Vladimir went on to acceptances at Russia’s finest music institutes – the Tchaikovsky Conservatory and the Gnessin Institute of Moscow, where he received bachelor’s and master’s degrees in music, both with diplomas of outstanding achievement – the equivalent of an Artist’s Diploma. He studied with some of Russia’s finest pianists and completed almost all of his coursework for a DMA. A stubborn streak got the better of him: He didn’t see any educational benefit to completing the required course *The History of the Communist Party* and as a result, relinquished receiving his DMA.

An Army “Interlude”

As with all young Russians, following completion of his formal studies, Vladimir had to put in his mandatory one-and-a-half years in the military. It was a different kind of life, but he found a musical niche none-the-less which allowed him to play piano for the Army Gymnastics Team.

“The only way for a big career was to win the competitions.”

Following his stint in the Army, Vladimir moved on to benefit from his high level of training during a time when the Soviet government lavishly supported its great artists. He was in fact granted the highest paid status available to musicians, because of his exceptional training and musical accomplishment. Vladimir explains, “They were very strict about who they allowed to travel internationally to perform and compete. The only way for a big career”, Vladimir says, “was to win the competitions.” And win he did.

Vladimir’s career as a pianist included competitions, festivals, solo and collaborative performances and many invitations to perform internationally. He was accepted to compete in the First Rachmaninoff International Piano Competition, won a prize in the Russia National Competition, won First Prize in the Chamber Music Competition of Soviet Composers, and participated as a collaborative artist in the International Ponce-Scriabin Festival, the first Bach Festival in Peru and the Isadora Duncan Festival in London.

As a soloist and chamber musician, he has performed with leading Soviet artists, including tours with famed Russian mezzo-soprano and international recording artist Valentina Levko, and performed in concerts with prestigious organizations such as the Rosconcert and the Moscow Philharmonic. He worked with the world-famous composer Alfred Schnittke, premiering and performing some of the composer’s works throughout Russia, and later in Mexico. At one point, Vladimir estimates he was playing about 50 concerts a year, although one year he managed around 90 concerts. He also taught piano and chamber music at the Ippolitov-Ivanov College of Music in Moscow and made recordings for radio and TV.

Internationally, Vladimir has appeared in England, Germany, Czechoslovakia (at the age of 15 – he can’t remember which concert hall – there have been so many), Poland, Bulgaria, Peru, the United States, and Mexico.

In 1995, Vladimir accepted an invitation to teach at the Alicia Urreta Center for the Arts in Mexico City. He spent three years teaching there and performed extensively throughout Mexico and the world. Later, he returned to Mexico for a year as a professor of piano and artist in residence at the Conservatorio de las Rosas in Morelia.

Coming to America: “I don’t parallel park.”

Vladimir had always wanted to emigrate to the US and in 1998, he was lucky enough to be selected in the Green Card Lottery program, which allows a certain number of immigrants to move to the US each year. This is where the driving comes in. Vladimir didn’t have to drive in Russia or Mexico but, when he knew he was coming to the US, he figured he better learn. He contacted a Mexico City school and was about to start lessons when he was told that, if he simply paid 40 Pesos, he could get a license without the exam. “A friend laughed at me,” he says, “about how I had lived in Mexico for so many years and still didn’t know how the system worked.” Unlike his approach at the piano (which is confident), Vladimir is a wary driver. “I avoid changing lanes,” he says. “And no parallel parking.”

Now, Vladimir is very happy to be a US Citizen. He continues to visit Russia about once a year, where his parents and sister still live.

“Music is My Life”

Vladimir’s favorite piano is his own Pleyel grand piano, which he purchased in Boston around 2004. Produced in France since the early 1800s, Pleyel pianos are famous in the piano world and have been the choice of composers such as Chopin, Liszt, Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky. “It matches my personality,” says Vladimir. “It has a beautiful and mellow tone. It’s best for chamber performances; it’s intimate.”

With regard to his work as a church pianist and accompanist, Vladimir says: “My goal is not to show off. But I believe music is a spiritual experience, that you can reach people spiritually through their ears. And it is so important for me to play for people. Music is my life.”