

LISA SMIRNOVA

PORTRAIT

The first thing that strikes one about Lisa Smirnova apart from her red, glossy hair is her hearty, loud laugh, her euphoria. “Enthusiasm”, she says, could summarise her life in one word were she only able to choose one. “Enthusiasm is the motor for everything; it carries one, no matter whether in life or in the arts.” And she has always been carried by it, in the literal sense, across two cultures, from the east into the west, from Moscow to Vienna, where she lives today.

She was not endowed with all this at birth. Born in Moscow, she grew up in a family that leaned more towards the sciences and the technical than the artistic. “My parents were teaching staff at the university, my mother in mathematics and my stepfather as a physicist. My sister studied business administration.” She saw herself as “very different”, felt like she was in a “cage of laws, customs and dogmas”; whether at the renowned Gnessin-School to which her parents sent their gifted daughter, or years later at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow, where she attended classes taught by Heinrich Neuhaus’s assistant and successor, Lev Naumov. She had constantly an “increasingly strong feeling that one had nothing to say there as an individual”. Her longing for “freedom” became insatiable, after all everything was regulated at the so-called “Special School of Music”, which existed in a form only known in the Communist system. “As an adolescent there, one had a work day like an adult. But that wasn’t actually the problem.” Worse for Lisa Smirnova was the paternalism that interfered in private issues, such as “what one could wear, how one had to behave”. Then came the battle for attention from teacher Anna Kantor, who she calls a very “experienced” piano teacher. Kantor’s piano classes, which Lisa Smirnova attended, included students ranging in age from five to seventeen years old. Shining centre of attention was Evgeny Kissin. Everything revolved around this “once in a century talent”. For good reason, Lisa Smirnova reckons, but to the detriment of the other students.

Lisa Smirnova could not resign herself to the limitations of the repertoire either; for historic-traditional reasons the romantic repertoire was preferred. Mozart and Schubert did not appear to present a great technical challenge, for which reason they were also disregarded. Instead, composers such as Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev and Scriabin were given top priority, coupled with the interpretation and preference for this repertoire; not to mention historical performance practice. “The Handel suites I have now

recorded would not have been possible. What one didn't know simply did not exist." And also in view of the score, that which the composer foresaw played a subordinate role. "The focus was more on musical instinct." But one thing still fascinates her about the 'Russian School': "The way to work with the sound, that's the most wonderful thing that a student can learn. This very special connection between body and instrument, between the ear and that which the fingers are doing is magnificent. And because one learns this as a child, one can always draw on it." And still the yearning for "freedom" gnawed at her, yet at the same time the sense of futility that "nothing can be done".

A student exchange in her last year of school brought her to London and Cambridge and led her to make her decision. "I spoke English well. The amazing thing was: from Russian propaganda television one could not have a clue about the West. But what I saw in London absolutely fitted my notions, to the smallest detail. I felt like I had already been there." With her host family "you could talk about anything. That was brilliant! They were so free!"

From then on she could not let go of the idea of leaving the country. Yet "I still had to do my A-level exams. Then I broke away". Secretly, because she knew that her parents, who to this day would still never think of leaving the country, would not accept her decision. She saved and signed up for a master class with the renowned piano pedagogue Karl-Heinz Kämmerling in Salzburg and, despite huge organisational difficulties, made her departure. With a small bag and a visa that was only valid for ten days, she arrived in Salzburg possessed by the thought: "If not now, then I'm lost." The meeting with Karl-Heinz Kämmerling was existential. "There was a musician who simply saw me." And so she confided in him. "You just stay here," he said spontaneously and was prepared to take responsibility for the nineteen-year-old. "You could call him at 11 o'clock in the evening and tell him what you were up to. He gave me support of a kind that I hadn't experienced before. We are still close friends." And to her he was a "superb teacher"; he began teaching exactly where there were still large gaps. "He felt out what was missing without destroying what was already instilled." Lisa Smirnova learned to understand the works in their context, to see behind the notes and to understand what held the musical universe together. She quickly made contacts and was able to finance her studies as a chamber musician. "I didn't have to sell any newspapers." Already at the age of twenty, she debuted in Carnegie Hall; since then she has appeared on the stage throughout the world. She has captivated critics, who rank her name alongside those of Emil Giles, Sviatoslav Richter and Friedrich Gulda.

Her great role model. In the basement of her two-storey apartment in Vienna she has a soundproof studio set up where she can work. Just as Friedrich Gulda once did. "His playing is the highest inspiration. I always dreamed I would meet him someday." And she

did meet him, even if the situation was downright mysterious. In 1999 in Salzburg she learned of his death through acquaintances shortly before a trip to Zurich. At Salzburg Airport she had a shocking experience: "I was sitting at check-in, turned around and he was walking behind me! I couldn't believe it! It was unthinkable!" Half a year later he was actually dead. Gulda had, on Mozart's birthday of all days, faked his own death – nearly a year before he died at the age of 69. "Austrian humour is very bizarre. I like it." Apart from Gulda she views Glenn Gould as "the absolute standard" for herself. "I can only humbly hope that I am going in the same direction." One can hear that in her current recordings of the Eight Great Suites by Georg Friedrich Handel from the year 1720 – her debut for the ECM New Series. Quietly but unmistakably, the music breathes through her; transparent, strictly rhythmic, precise and fascinatingly intense and intimate. In ECM – with mastermind and senior Manfred Eicher – she found exactly the dream producer with whom she could realise her musical vision. "Or better said, he found me. I very much like to work in the studio, I love the process and hate it when music is cut by the recording procedure." Why Handel? "As if struck by lightning" she heard his second suite by coincidence at the piano examination of a friend of hers. "I bought the entire book the same day and played everything through. I felt immediately that it does not work so quickly. One has to grow with the piece." Ten years passed. She worked meticulously through the suites, step by step, just as she climbed up Kilimanjaro and fulfilled a childhood dream for herself. "It was difficult, it was freezing cold, I was physically exhausted. There wasn't any room for fear; I could only take the next step." And on the summit? "I was so exhausted that I didn't have the energy to enjoy it. But I knew why I was there and I was thankful for the journey."

As a musician she knows: "One doesn't arrive. You complete stages." One doesn't play for a result. "It's the infinity that pushes you and as Gulda said: 'Play every note as if your life depended on it.' And that constantly, your whole life long."