

arts

Here's your Prom date: Russia's new piano dynamo

Daniil Trifonov, the finest young pianist in the world, is playing not one but two concertos in a night at the Albert Hall, he tells **Richard Morrison**

Passers-by stare, not at the ghostly-pale face of the young man opposite me, but at his fingers. Delicate and surprisingly small — given his profession — they continually form piano chords on the table as he speaks. It's as if Daniil Trifonov is simultaneously sustaining two mental states: one fielding questions from *The Times*, the other processing the music swirling through his brain. Or perhaps it's simply that he would be much happier expressing himself in music (although his English is perfectly fluent).

The 24-year-old Russian is without question the most astounding young pianist of our age — as the Albert Hall audience will discover when he appears at one of the summer's more bizarre Proms tomorrow. Valery Gergiev will conduct all five Prokofiev piano concertos, with Trifonov one of three pianists sharing the solo honours. He plays Nos 1 and 3, his teacher Sergei Babayan plays 2 and 5 and another Russian, Alexei Volodin, tackles the "left hand" concerto, No 4. Trifonov doesn't agree that playing all five concertos in one concert is

strange. "It has already been done in St Petersburg and when you hear them all together it's almost like a unified piece: a big five-movement concerto," he says, his fingers seeming to run through one of Prokofiev's harmonic thickets as he talks.

Like many post-Soviet Russian musicians, he prefers to see Prokofiev's music as a personal (not political) statement. "One big source of inspiration for people playing Prokofiev is his two volumes of diaries," he says. "They give a lot of insight into his mental state when he wrote the concertos. For instance, the Second Concerto is dedicated to his best friend and the diaries show Prokofiev's grief when that friend committed suicide."

What of the concertos that Trifonov will play? "The Third is fascinating because it is full of references to Prokofiev's ballet music and vocal music, so there's a hidden story," he says. "The First, by contrast, points to his Russian heritage. It's a parody of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto, but with everything upside down, including the main theme." Trifonov sings, as well as plays on the table, to demonstrate his point. It was that barnstorming Tchaikovsky concerto



Daniil Trifonov will play two Prokofiev piano concertos

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that turned Trifonov from prodigy to superstar. In 2011 he decided to enter two piano competitions — the Rubinstein in Tel Aviv and the Tchaikovsky in Moscow — in quick succession. "The last event for the Rubinstein was in the morning, then I flew to Moscow and did the first round of the Tchaikovsky that evening," he recalls.

The contrast could not have been greater. "In Tel Aviv all the contestants were in a hotel by the sea; there was almost a holiday atmosphere. In Moscow, the intensity was terrifying. Especially for me: a Russian who had studied there for eight years. Yes, it played on my nerves."

Maybe, but Trifonov responded brilliantly. Having won the Rubinstein, he stormed through the Tchaikovsky, taking not only the gold medal but also the audience award and prize for best chamber concerto performance. The veteran pianist Martha Argerich — no pushover when judging emerging talent — was blown away. "He has tenderness and also the demonic element," she declared. "I never heard anything like that."

Where did all that come from? Trifonov was born to a composer father and a music-teacher mother in Nizhny Novgorod. Unlike many prodigies he was all of five before he showed unusual talent. Oddly, the

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piano didn't trigger it. "My father, for his compositional needs, brought home a MIDI keyboard, and for me this was a fascinating technological device," he says. "You could play one note and a whole lot of different sounds came out. We also had a piano at home, of course, but for some reason I didn't pay attention to it before then. When the synthesizer came, however, I started playing the piano and composing as well."

His progress thereafter was lightning-fast: first solo concert at seven, first concerto (Mozart) a year later. "I remember it chiefly because one of my milk teeth came out during the first movement," he says.

His parents, realising their only child was a genius, gave up their jobs, moved to Moscow and installed the ten-year-old Daniil in the "hothouse" Gnessin school of music. (Trifonov hints, but gives no details, of the sacrifices the family made on his behalf.) Life there was competitive and intensely disciplined.

"We lived in a distant suburb, so I had a 90-minute journey each way by bus, train and Metro, sometimes seven days a week. There were about 20 pianists in my year, and besides instrumental tuition and general



Rachmaninov has inspired Trifonov

subjects we were given advanced training in aural tests and harmony. It was very serious. I remember that in my last year the aural tests included writing down six-part polyphony by ear."

At 18, Trifonov decided he needed a change. His teacher at the Gnessin, Tatiana Zelikman, recommended he study with Babayan, based in Cleveland, Ohio — so Trifonov headed for America. I ask him what Zelikman and Babayan, the two great musical influences on his life, have in common. "Both emphasised the importance of subtlety," he replies. "Attention to microscopic details — of touch, phrasing, pedalling, colour. Extreme attention. I would call it 'Nobody who has heard Trifonov play would doubt that he completely absorbed the lessons in subtlety.'"

His new recording, *Rachmaninov Variations*, has a curious link with his lonely first year in Cleveland. Alongside three sets of Rachmaninov variations is a work called *Rachmaninoviana* composed by Trifonov. "I was away from home for the first time and certain nostalgic feelings were visiting me," he says. "Many of them resulted in material for this work."

"Oddly, at that time I hadn't played a note of Rachmaninov; that came after winning the Tchaikovsky competition. Yet I see the five pieces of Rachmaninov as contemplations on that great composer." Since then he has written a piano concerto that is by all accounts tempestuous, brilliant and impossible for anyone except the composer to play. Just like Rachmaninov.

This summer is a whirlwind of festivals: Prokofiev at the Proms, chamber music at Verbier, recitals in Gstaad and a voice-and-piano appearance (with Matthias Goerne) in Edinburgh. That is the life for which Trifonov was meticulously prepared. I ask how he copes with living out of a suitcase. "By concentrating on basic things: sleep, nutrition, exercise, practice and recuperation," he replies.

"And also warming up properly — not just your fingers but your emotional state. In the dressing room I always try out different emotional responses to the music I'm about to play. You don't want to lose total control, but do want to react to particular circumstances. Otherwise, your reactions become dull. Your spontaneity disappears. That's the worst thing that can happen."

Trifonov performs at the Proms, Albert Hall, SW7 (0845 4015040), tomorrow and at the Queen's Hall, Edinburgh (0131 473 2000), on Aug 29. *Rachmaninov Variations* is on Deutsche Grammophon.