



Hitting a high note

“AFTER COMPLETING MY STUDIES in the UK, I would like to stir up the music scene in Dubai. It would be great to nurture young talent, organise educational programmes and have a permanent concert hall with a steady stream of artists coming to play here.”

My parents appreciate good music.

My mother used to put me to bed with Mozart and Beethoven playing on the record player in the background so I grew up listening to classical music.

Unlike many musicians, I did not go to a music school as a child. I had a very normal childhood. I enjoyed sports and socialising. When I eventually started music lessons, I was able to find a balance between attending school and practising the piano. This meant that I could enter the world of music naturally as it was not forced on me at all.

My parents have been very open-minded and supportive of my career choice.

It's not an easy job being a concert pianist but for me, it's the right path.

I was five years old when my brother started piano lessons. I would get very quiet when my brother started to play and my parents assumed that I was

interested in music. But I was always waiting to play the instrument for five minutes after my brother's piano lessons were done. Those five minutes became the highlight of my day and I looked forward to them.

Initially, I didn't take music seriously. It was a pleasant surprise to my teachers and friends, because they didn't know that I played the piano until one evening when I played some Chopin at a school concert.

However, by the time I was 14 playing the piano became a preoccupation of mine. I entered the Young Musician of the Gulf competition and won the prize for playing the piano as well as the award for the most promising under-15 player in February 2005.

That year, I performed Saint-Saëns Africa with the Dubai Chamber Orchestra. I was keen to hone my talent and decided to enroll into Chetham's School of Music

in Manchester. I recall mastering Rachmaninov's 3rd concerto and Prokofiev's 2nd concerto. I performed the latter piece during the audition to enroll in the school. They offered me a scholarship which I took up a year later, after finishing my GCSEs in Dubai.

I was 16 when I started performing with various orchestras in different countries.

I performed the Prokofiev 2nd concerto with the Istanbul State Symphony Orchestra in Turkey under Alexander Rahbari. I played at the opening ceremony of Steinway and Sons Middle East at the Burj Al Arab. I also won the Chetham's Concerto Competition. This led to my performance with Chetham's Symphony Orchestra under Franz Anton Krager. I played solo and chamber music in Moscow, and of course, performed all over the UK.



SEVA BARONKIN

When it comes to performing, I am usually very calm.

My heart does race, but only from excitement. A few seconds before I sit down at the piano, I concentrate on what I have prepared for that particular concert and give my best to make sure the audience gets to hear just that.

This reminds me of Vladimir Jurowski, the Principal of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, who uses the term 'ecstasy' regarding a pianist's performance. The performer experiences ecstasy when he knows that all his hard work and preparation and how he wants the music to be perceived, is going according to plan. He experiences a connection with the audience and vice versa. From the audience's point of view, they feel their heart swell with the same passion that the musician is trying to convey. This is what I aim to do when I perform.

SNAPSHOT

For those aspiring to become concert pianists, my advice is...

Playing the piano is a career that requires a lot of sacrifice. You need to have

a passion so strong that you will not allow any obstacle to stand in your way. Being half-hearted about the piano will not get you anywhere. Be prepared to spend a lot of hours

alone practising as well as travelling. However, when the audience connects with you through your performance and when you feel that 'ecstasy,' then you will know that it was all worth it.

As a naturally curious person, I like to find out what the composer was experiencing in his life at the time of composing.

I once read Prokofiev's diaries and I was surprised by some of his entries. His personal life and his musical life were often completely disjointed. The best music doesn't require the performer to have any historical or analytical knowledge to put the piece into context. Music should be good on its own merit, because someone who is listening to Brahms symphony without having any information about that piece of music, can be just as overwhelmed by the beauty of the music.

For me to be completely happy, I need to be composing.

I composed a piece which I call *Fantasia*. It was well-received both at the 2009 Al Ain Festival and at the Royal College of Music in Manchester. I wanted *Fantasia* to flow naturally and so I did not structure it in a mathematical way. It had a lot of Arabic textures musically - an influence that I attribute to my childhood in Dubai.

I am considering pursuing conducting as a career. The conductor has to know the topography of the piano keyboard very well. The piano, essentially, is a symphonic instrument that gives its performer access to a rich amount of colour, tone and dynamics. Owning a piano is like having a mini-orchestra at your disposal, so it makes sense that the conductor should have a good knowledge of it.

I do not see a need to relax away from music as I don't think of music as being my job.

I usually relax with music. I may listen to music from another genre, such as Frank Sinatra, to take a break from the piano. I appreciate a wide genre of music. I've recently taken a liking to Jeff Buckley and Amon Tobin, among others.

I am always touched when people come from far and wide to listen to my music.

I'm happy when my music reaches more people. With fame also comes increased popularity and it's a wonderful thing when people want to hear more about you and your music. There was a family that had come to my concert in Turkey. It was snowing heavily that day, yet they waited out in the snow, along with others just to meet me! In another case, an elderly gentleman travelled all the way to Manchester just to hear my music. Such incidents are very rewarding to me as a musician.

The hardest part of being a concert pianist is that one has to make a lot of sacrifices and spend long hours practising.

One day I may have to work for 14 hours and the next day take a train to London to meet a conductor and return home to practice again. It gets exciting when you suddenly get a call to perform somewhere the next day. I like spontaneity and would never consider switching to a 9 to 5 job.

Music is the single most popular thing in the world.

Unfortunately classical music has had to take a lower stand in general, perhaps because there are many people who think that it's old-fashioned and rigid. Having said that, every city in the UK has its own cultural hub where people get together to either listen to concert music or visit art galleries and theatres. Dedicated audiences come from far to watch live music performances.

In the UAE, Abu Dhabi has taken a step in the right direction, thanks to the organisation of the Abu Dhabi Classics music festival by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage. Abu Dhabi has had a season that rivals the very best concert series and festivals the world over, and the artists are already confirmed for the next classical season.

I believe that there exists a strong possibility that wonderful musicians can emerge from the UAE itself.

- As told to Preethi Janice D'Sa,
a Dubai-based freelancer