

Inese Lūsiņa

SEE HOW DIFFERENT WE ARE!

The Osokins dynasty of pianists

This summer, for the first time, all three pianists from the Osokins family gathered together on one stage – distinguished professor and performer Sergejs Osokins and his talented sons, Andrejs and Georgijs, both of whom have won international competitions and are internationally recognised concert performers. This past winter, after winning the international Frederic Chopin competition in China, 18-year-old Georgijs surprised an audience back in Latvia with his first solo concert at the Riga Great Guild. His debut album will be released this autumn, and before that he will appear in Germany, France, Italy and Poland. His older brother Andrejs has also had a successful year this year, winning the prestigious International Pianism Forum audience award in Frankfurt, also becoming the first musician from Latvia since the restoration of the country's independence to take part in the famous Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. The father of the two young musicians, Sergejs Osokins, is a past recipient of the Latvian Great Music Award, and among his major projects in recent times has been a partnership with the Radio Latvia Choir, concerts and master's classes in Scandinavia, and work at the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, where he continues to train young pianists.



Andrejs Osokins: This was the first time that we appeared together, even though we had been thinking about it for some time.

Q: Is a family ensemble advantageous in that you very easily understand one another?

A.O.: I think that the most difficult, yet also most interesting thing is to preserve our individuality, because we play the piano differently and are different people. Given that, the most interesting and difficult challenge is to establish a whole organism of three pianos without losing individuality.

Georgijs Osokins: The three of us played Johann Sebastian Bach's concerto *After Vivaldi*, which Bach transposed for four harpsichords and a chamber orchestra. I arranged it for three pianos and an orchestra.

Q: You also were brilliant as individuals at the concert, playing Tchaikovsky's monumental *First Piano Concerto* and Chopin's lyrical *First Piano Concerto*.

A.O.: I played Tchaikovsky's *concerto* and Georgijs played Chopin's *Concerto*. I hope that it was interesting to compare two brothers, two different composers, and two different instruments – a Steinway piano and a Yamaha piano. My brother prefers the Yamaha piano, and it was brought from Germany specifically for this concert.

Q: Georgijs also played his first solo concert on a piano brought to Latvia for that purpose, allowing us to enjoy the sound of a Fazioli instrument from Italy.

G.O.: I try out various pianos.

Q: I believe you are also the only one to bring a special piano bench with you.

G.O.: Yes, that is my bench. Now you see how different we are.

Q: I will ask the father how he deals with these differences as a pedagogue. Were you always certain that they would be successful?

Sergejs Osokins: I don't think that any pedagogue can be certain about that, particularly at first. Each musician develops in a very different way, and it is impossible to say that this one will be an artist, and this one will not. That is just not possible. It takes a long time for an artist to emerge. Many children at music schools play the instrument the best at age 11 or 12, and no one knows what will happen then. There are young pianists, who reach their heights at the age of 16. Our goal is different – to ensure growth for as long as possible and to the highest possible level.

Q: I have noticed that musicians, even those who are the best teachers, prefer to entrust their children to other teachers. Surely a student will not tell a stranger that he doesn't want to play the music, he's tired of it, he won't play it.

A.O.: You're right. Ours was a unique case in that my father taught me from childhood, even when I was in the preparatory class of the Emīls Dārziņš School of Music. That is unusual. I think it is a great psychological achievement for my father that we have never had any major quarrels. Lessons were a very normal part of how we grew up. He never told me that I must be a virtuoso, that I must rehearse for 12 hours a day, or that it would be a bad thing if I did not learn the scales. We had simple conversations during which I learned my weaknesses and necessary areas of improvement. It was my own motivation to rehearse more and to learn a new repertoire. I can talk about my father's pedagogic method. It is very closely linked to the mind of the student and not just to the development of finger techniques. My father encourages and accepts any original approach to an opus. There are many professors whose students play the same style, repeating their teacher's views about a specific sonata or concert. The situation with my father is exactly the opposite,

because he always looks for new sounds, helping students to do the same, and that allows both of them to discover the composition anew. That is why my brother and I developed very differently in terms of aesthetics, repertoires and our approach to playing the piano. Even if my father plays the composition, we can start with a blank sheet of paper, as opposed to someone saying that this measure should be played in this way or that. That's something that teachers often do.

Q: Andrejs, how did you feel in master's classes and studies at the Royal Academy of Music in London, where you were taught by different professors? Was it worth it?

A.O.: Absolutely. My father was the initiator of the process, because at the age of 19 I did not want to study anywhere else. That was the only time that he put a bit of pressure on me and said that I must change my environment and thinking and learn from other teachers. I think that a musician gains something else from each teacher and every major concert, thus helping to shape his own style, just like a bee gathers nectar from many different flowers and then produces honey. That's what happened with me. I studied in England and also took part in master's classes taught by Russian teachers to merge both schools.

Q: Georgijs, you decided to attend Julliard in New York?

G.O.: Yes, this September, and I hope that my teacher will be Sergei Babayan, who only teaches eight people now in his class. I have met and worked with him, and I think that we will be able to find common ground. I visited him last winter, and we met in Italy this summer. The school of pianism is interesting, and I think that it is right that in our family we are eager to learn about different schools. Globalisation has led to a situation in which there is no "pure" Russian school, German school or French school of pianism. Today you have to take elements from all of them and create something that is your own.

Q: What can you tell us about everyday life? Is it not too much to always be together and to communicate in a narrow circle of people?

G.O.: It is very advantageous for my brother and me that our father is our pedagogue. We can talk to him at any moment about music, art, life, anything at all. Artists very much need to know and think not just about music, but about everything. Having our father as an advisor is a great advantage. I would not say that we spend too much time together. My brother lives in London, my schedule of foreign appearances is quite active, and I will soon move to another continent. My father, in turn, always has a lot of work to do.

A.O.: I would add that it would be an illusion to imagine that we spend every evening at home talking about classical music and nothing else. That happens seldom, though sometimes it is valuable after a lesson to talk a bit not about the details, but about the main aspects of composers or musical eras. That stimulates one's imagination.

Q: Are we seeing an era of great pianists and great musical ideals today, or is that a thing from the past?

S.O.: That depends on you and how you view that matter. If you think that everyone is average, then that is your desire. I think that the era is still here, and we hope that what we are doing could also be art. Everyone plays the piano, but what are you actually doing? Do you want to put together something real – perhaps something that is small, but artistically valuable and true?

Q: Are there major guideposts today such as Vladimir Horowitz and Glenn Gould in the past?

S.O.: Grigory Sokolov, and not only him. Arcadi Volodos. Martha Argerich. Mikhail Pletnev.

Q: Why?

S.O.: Why is a genius a genius? It's because he's a genius. That is brilliant art at a very, very high level.

G.O.: It is art that will remain with us for a very long time.

Q: Why did you encourage your sons to play the piano in specific, as opposed to some other instrument?

S.O.: Because pianism is a mental disease in our family. We love it. We love the sound of the piano and piano music. My wife is also a pianist.

Q: Do you want this “disease” to be transferred to future generations? I can imagine the surreal scene of a group of Osokins pianists from four different generations.

S.O.: It is not the case that from the very beginning I would tell a child who is interested in music that he must play the piano. The child has to understand that he wants to do so. It was a process, and at one moment it became clear that Andrejs can try his hand at it. The same was true of Georgijs. At the Dārziņš School, he first studied with Ilze Treija for two years, and then we began to work together. That does not mean that I wanted to turn both of them into pianists. At the same time, though, I wanted both of them to play the piano. As I said, it’s a disease.

Q: At the Music Academy, do the Osokins speak differently than at home? At school did you say “please, teacher” to your father?

A.O.: I remember that our attitude and behaviour were different at school, and we had more respect and discipline. We were not allowed to be late for a class that my father taught.

Q: What happened if you did?

A.O.: Very harsh criticism, as was the case with any other student.

G.O.: We had to set an example for others, and we had to observe discipline.

Q: Professor, how many students do you have now?

S.O.: There will be seven this year, plus one student at the Dārziņš School. Georgijs, who has completed one year of studies at the Latvian Music Academy is “only one-half” on the list, because of the studies in America.

Q: Do you have any common interests or hobbies outside of music?

A.O.: My brother and I both play tennis, but my hobby is travelling. That is inevitable for musicians, because it relates to our profession, but I enjoy it. I like arriving in new cities and meeting new people and new languages. That is nice.

G.O.: My hobby is more related to composition. I am composing music for a silent short film about New York that is being produced in America. The music will express the contrasts and emotions of the city. I establish my own vocal and orchestral arrangements and transcriptions for my concerts. In Naples, I performed a transcription of Ādolfs Skulte’s *Arieta*, which is a very simple but beautiful miniature that is often learned by children. I remember playing it at age seven, and now I have produced my own version with variations and a rich texture. It’s interesting for me to work in this direction, and I have a few other ideas.

Q: Andrejs, do you regret that at the prestigious Peter Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow this summer you were not among the leaders?

A.O.: Perhaps, but I have taken part in so many competitions that during the past five years I have travelled there only to get a good attitude from the jury and perhaps some concert offers. Competitions are another academic level, another level to motivate myself, work, perform at a very

good level and overcome my nervousness. My best impression this year was from a competition in Frankfurt, where I won the audience sympathy prize and offers to perform in Germany and France. Sometimes a smaller competition is more useful than one that is organised with a lot of paths. In April Georgijs took part in the qualification round for the Chopin competition that will be held in October in Warsaw, and a few weeks later I received a letter from Japan in which I was asked for contact information about my brother so that he could be invited to perform together with an orchestra in Japan.

G.O.: I'm not happy about the fact that I have to take part in competitions, but there is no other option. Competition is like a sport, and it has nothing to do with art. I believe that competition in the world of art is very problematic. It is even difficult for me to listen to colleagues, because I instinctively sense competition. It develops an athlete, not an artist. Still, there will be competitions. I got through the first round, and in October I will compete in the Frederic Chopin Competition in Warsaw. I believe that I will be the first pianist from Latvia to do so. My brother was the first one to enter the Tchaikovsky Competition since the restoration of Latvia's independence.

Q: Andrejs, are you planning to plant roots in London and become a British citizen?

A.O.: Because I travel so much, I spent as much time in London as in Rīga last year. This year I have spent a bit more time in Rīga. Friends say that if I'm at home only three months a year, then it doesn't really matter where the home is. Thanks to the new technologies that lots of people criticise, I can communicate with anyone from any part of the world and talk to those who are close to me. That really helps the artist who travels a lot. I don't think, though, that living in Rīga would be bad for my career. On the contrary, I think that perhaps I should not leave and burn all my bridges.

G.O.: I don't want to leave at all, because I love my country and my home, but from the career perspective, alas, I have to be where there is a cultural centre. I will walk out from the doors of the university, and right there will be the Metropolitan Opera, where Latvians sing, as well as the Lincoln Centre, the Avery Fischer Centre, Carnegie Hall – all the places where outstanding soloists perform. Still, I don't want to leave. I feel best here at home.

Q: How important to you is the support of understanding friends?

G.O.: I hate crowds. I don't like regular contacts with friends or anyone else. Of value to us as artists is the ability to take an abstract look at life and society from the sidelines. That's where we find story lines, as if from a distance. My life method is to talk to myself.

A.O.: That's absolutely not true for me. I love to gain inspiration from people and conversations. Each person with his characteristics and worldview can become a character and hero in my interpretations and my musical world. When I spend a long time alone with the piano, I see that I have nothing to say to the instrument. I need inspiration from other people.

S.O.: From very few people, just a few, but at the same time, from everyone and everything, from books and nature.

Q: What has been the most difficult thing about raising your children?

S.O.: Basically I'm lazy. I like to work when I am interested in what I am doing. It's always been interesting with them. There was never a moment when I wanted to bang my head against a wall and say "That's all."

Q: Do you think the musicians lose their childhood?



From the left: Georgijs, Andrejs and Sergejs Osokins

G.O.: On the contrary, I had a saturated childhood, because we were always in the world of art, which is much more interesting than playing football with my friends. I used to play football, too, but that changed when I was a teenager.

S.O.: There are a great many children, not just in the world of music, who want to work, not play.

Q: Your decision to perform together was a one-off experiment or the beginning of a new tradition?

A.O.: It would be great if there were a continuation.

G.O.: That depends on the audience, because we artists, after all, are bound by public interest. After all.

Q: Why do you say after all, and twice?

G.O.: Because my personal goal is not always to perform before an audience. I do not always have to bow before the desires and tastes of the audience. It is dangerous if a brilliant musician has a good sense of what audiences like and begins to adapt to that. If the goal is to get the audience to like you, then that destroys everything, and art is gone. It is important for me to abstract myself from this issue. To be honest, when I play for many people, I forget all about them. I imagine myself playing in a room, perhaps with someone in the distance hearing my music, because the door is ajar.

Q: So you play for yourself?

G.O.: Yes.

S.O.: I feel the audience internally and how it breathes. Perhaps that is just a matter of illusion or imagination, but I do have that illusion, and I have a dialogue with the audience.



A.O.: During concert performances, I have energy that comes from above, from space, not from me. It passes through me and enters the audiences. Afterward people can formulate their emotions in one way or another, but the main thing for me is that I really believe that people who attend concerts change, perhaps only while they are in the auditorium, but nevertheless. That allows me to hope that music will influence their lives. Perhaps that is an idealistic goal, but I always feel that the audience is there and that the audience wants to listen to my music.

Q: Finally, what did you think when you heard the words “dynasty of musicians”?

A.O.: When people talk about dynasties of musicians, I always think about the Bach dynasty. The main thing is that many Bach opuses are exercises for children. It is didactic music, but it is so beautiful and deep from the perspective of spirituality. I am fascinated about how much he loved his children and what a great pedagogue he was in composing music that allowed children to develop their performance technique. These opuses are masterpieces, and people today are amazed by them. I believe that the experience that people hand down to others in terms of art can be shown and taught only with your own example or hands.

G.O.: It's like a family restaurant, which has recipes that are kept by the family. I think that there are things about us about which no one else knows, things that only we feel. Famous in the world of pianism is the legendary Neuhaus dynasty, and there are many examples of such dynasties in the world of which we are not aware. The family has to have a father who is a musician, and that is usually the case for great musicians. Nothing appears from nothing.

S.O.: None of that was expected or planned, but if that happened, then that is great.