

LEV OBORIN

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(Translated from the Russian by Margarita Glebov)

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Introduction by David Oistrakh

A book about my friend

I have been a friend of a wonderful pianist, Lev Nikolayevich Oborin, for many years by way of artistic collaboration. A fantastic musician, a great intellectual, a man of culture and of kind heart, Oborin inspires everyone who knows him and works with him.

Oborin is an excellent representative of Soviet pianistic art. His performance career is astonishing due to its diversity, the breadth of his repertoire, and the integrity of his musical conceptions.

Lev Oborin was the first ambassador of the Soviet musical culture, having won an international music competition. His brilliant appearance at the Warsaw competition of 1927 was of utmost importance for the post-revolutionary generation of Russian performing musicians.

An outstanding interpreter of Russian and foreign piano literature, Oborin was the pioneer of Soviet pianism. Dmitry Shostakovich, Aram Khachaturian, and Andrei Balanchivadze entrusted him with performing their concertos.

For more than a quarter of a century I have been continuously performing with Lev Nikolayevich in chamber ensembles. This collaboration provides me with true artistic joy.

Carrying forward the great traditions of the Moscow piano school, Oborin brought up a considerable number of musicians. His students are winners of many international competitions, and are professors at various conservatories in our country.

It is noteworthy that this book concerning Oborin's artistic life is written by his student. I remember that during the war Lev Nikolayevich told me about a particular student who joined his studio. She was a journalist and a pianist who was keen on Mozart and Schumann.

The combination of a deep understanding of the 'mysteries' of musical interpretation along with excellent writing abilities has allowed Sofia Hentova to create an interesting and informative biography of one of the most prominent Soviet pianists.

*Dedicated to the 100th anniversary of alma mater –
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The young generation of today familiar with the fifty-year-old Oborin considers him a mature, calm, precise, and composed pianist—a great master, moving confidently along the well-known paths of pianistic art.

At times he may seem too composed and maybe even outdated in his steadfast adherence to classical literature and to a style of playing which is intricate, natural, and reserved. Our turbulent century, however, appreciates originality.

But Oborin is not what he appears to be at first glance. Behind the calmness of his appearance are hidden an intense spiritual life, criticism toward oneself, reflections, changes, and a search for artistic personality. Oborin is a very vulnerable person, with a deep concern for sincerity, truth, and justice.

His artistic life is remarkable. It reflects an era when Soviet pianism was just beginning to form. Oborin's successes, sorrows, mistakes and failures are typical of the generation which started its career in the 1920s and now takes the leading place in the contemporary performing art.

The milestones forever associated with the name of Lev Oborin, as an outstanding representative of the Soviet piano school, include the first participation of Soviet pianists in international competitions; the birth of Soviet piano literature; the establishment of the Soviet interpretation of Chopin works; the development of ensemble playing; and the first triumphs of Soviet artists abroad.

I

Rachmaninoff's Parting Words

In the winter of 1917 at the Moscow Theater Zona, now the location of the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall, there was an announcement of the latest performance by Sergei Rachmaninoff. Apart from the Second Concerto to be performed by the composer, the program also listed his Fantasy "The Rock" and Second Symphony. The orchestra was conducted by Serge Koussevitzky, a virtuoso bass player, who was successfully working as a conductor and an administrator in the field of music. Rachmaninoff, being a friend of Koussevitzky, supported the undertakings of this multifaceted and creative musician.

For this concert Rachmaninoff was to arrive from Kiev. Koussevitzky took the risk of scheduling the performance for the day of the soloist's arrival.

The train was running late. The intermission after the long Symphony, which was performed without cuts, was being prolonged. The tired public began to leave the theater when suddenly, without any warning, there appeared a hunched, gloomy man in black slacks and grey frock-coat with a tie that was slightly off center. Without looking at the audience, he slowly came to the piano. The lights were turned on and orchestra members quickly took their places.

The pianist raised his hands and calmly, with a heavy, smooth gesture played the first chord. The audience was listening to the most loved and popular Rachmaninoff Concerto, sixteen years after the day of its first performance by the composer in October of 1901.

Among the listeners at the Zona Theater that night was a friend of Rachmaninoff, a music teacher from Moscow, Elena Fabianovna Gnesina. Along with her came a slender, nice-looking boy of about ten years of age. It was his first time being at such a concert and hearing such playing. Everything happening seemed to him like a fairy tale.

After the pianist, still with the same stern and gloomy appearance, played the B minor Etude-Tableau and the numerous curtain calls had ceased, Gnesina took the boy through the empty hall to the dressing room.

“Who is this child?” asked Rachmaninoff, greeting Gnesina.

“My student, Liova Oborin. He is composing a symphony and isn’t doing his homework.”

“Interesting,” smiled Rachmaninoff. “I would like to hear your symphony.”

“Well, where would I see you?” the boy asked plainly.

“You will come to my house and play the symphony. I will write to you. We definitely have to meet...”

The crowd was bustling in front of the theater as Rachmaninoff came out. With a frown on his face, he got into the car. People, enthusiastically greeting the artist, were running alongside, and among them was the boy whom Gnesina could not restrain.

Rachmaninoff had not forgotten about his promise. He came to Gnesina’s school to hear Oborin’s playing and, impressed by the boy’s talent, told him a few kind, parting words. He arranged another meeting at his house, but it had to be postponed. Gnesina received a brief message from the friend: Rachmaninoff was leaving Russia. The events of the Revolution were frightening him. Confused, he was leaving Petrograd, but with the hope of someday returning.

In Moscow, the boy continued to persistently play piano and compose the symphony, all the while waiting for the meeting.

More than a quarter of a century had gone by. The great Rachmaninoff passed away.

The boy whom he met became a well-known artist, visited many countries, and experienced many exciting events. Yet he still clearly remembered, as if it had happened yesterday, the concert in the Zona Theater, Rachmaninoff’s playing, and the first gesture of his magnificent hand. Each simple word spoken then acquired a special meaning for Oborin as the time passed, as if it had been guidance for the future.

2

When Sergei Rachmaninoff left Russia and was followed by Alexander Siloti (Liszt’s student and Rachmaninoff’s teacher) and other outstanding pianists, it seemed that that would be the end of the glorious period of the Russian art of piano playing.

Music became of little interest in Russia because of the civil war. Moscow and Petrograd had shortages of food. There was not enough bread, clothes, fuel, or medication. Everything had to be built from scratch under the most difficult circumstances.

Nevertheless, Russia was still listening to music. Moreover, it was experiencing an insatiable need for music. The significant events intensified the feelings and sensitivity toward the arts. The halls were now being filled by a different kind of listeners. They sometimes did not

possess musical knowledge or education, but they felt the music with their hearts and were influenced by it emotionally.

To perform in front of this public was a very difficult but at the same time joyful task. Such was the experience of all the musicians of that time—Nezhdanova, Sobinov, Igumnov, Goldenweiser, and others. The new listeners uplifted the performers with their energy and faith. As a result, the ‘overplayed’ and ‘oversung’ pieces were being performed in a new way.

The Revolution put forth a new generation of musical talent. Everywhere in Russia, hundreds of gifted and hardworking children started to study music with great will and energy. The turbulent life events caused them to grow up quickly. Born in the years of Scriabin’s and Rachmaninoff’s triumphs and impressed by their concerts, this generation then went through a difficult school, in which the circumstantial matters had been sharply separated from the important and essential ones. No matter who the musicians were of this era, no matter what their participation in events, each one of them was affected by this difficult time.

Lev Oborin, a blond-haired boy who had received parting words from Rachmaninoff, belonged to the first post-revolutionary generation—a generation that opened a new page in the history of the art of Russian piano performance.

Oborin was born on August 29th (September 11th) 1907. He was named after Lev Tolstoy, who was born seventy-nine years and a day earlier. The father—Nikolay Nikolayevich Oborin, upon graduating from the Moscow Engineering College, decided to thoroughly learn the profession of railroad worker with all its complexities. A soft and compliant man, he was nevertheless persistent and unshakable in regard to this issue. In his serious approach to his work there was a similarity to the ideals of the writer and engineer Garin-Mikhailovsky, whom Nikolay Oborin admired.

The family moved to Belorussia and thus began their nomadic life. After working for a few months at one place, the father would change jobs as soon as he felt that he had mastered the job. They kept moving to different places: Gomel, Orsha, Vitebsk, Smorgon’, Minsk, again Orsha, and so on.

They did not have their own possessions. In each new place, the family (the Oborins had two children: son Lev and daughter Natalia, born in 1912) would receive an apartment from the government. The father, being a hardworking, trustworthy, and educated man, moved up in rank to the position of assistant railroad manager.

Nikolay Oborin’s everlasting passion in life was music. Once he would get enough money, he would rent a piano and play music in the evenings along with his co-workers. They sang romances and at times would sight-read an easy trio.

The boy listened to the music and played the tunes that he liked from memory. No one took his attempts at playing piano seriously. The mother was busy with other things: due to their nomadic lifestyle, Nina Viktorovna Oborina had gained practicality, common sense and a knack for housekeeping. She did not have time for art.

Departing from Moscow and moving from place to place brought the family some difficulties, but at the same time this was beneficial for the children. They were growing up freely, amid the fresh air, and among simple people. They did not have to deal with health problems, stuffy rooms, and noise—issues typically connected with the big, densely populated cities.

In 1913, Nikolay Oborin ended up at such a remote place in Belorussia that it was impossible to find a piano there. Music-making had stopped. The boy no longer felt the need to play music and had forgotten everything he learned. He was growing up just as any other good child, surrounded by the love and care of his family.

One evening, when Lev Oborin was about seven years old, he was walking close to a school in Viaz'ma and heard the sounds of a violin. The person playing violin was a local art teacher, an acquaintance of the Oborin family. The boy stopped and froze by the window until his worried mother forced him to go home.

This incident unexpectedly opened up his dormant fascination with music. Many years later, recounting this episode, Oborin insisted that it was precisely then that he felt for the first time the mystery of a singing sound, coming from the vibrato of the string. The sound stayed in his memory and the boy felt an unstoppable urge to learn to play violin.

He dreamt of playing on at least a toy violin, but no one would buy him one. So then he started to once again play some tunes on the piano—songs that he heard on the streets, in the village, and from farm workers; dances, and, of course, everything that his father played. There were some music scores at the house, mostly salon pieces and romances from the repertoire of Vyaltseva, a popular singer at that time. The boy would imitate his father, play by rote, and try to find notes on the staff. This is how he learned the treble clef, after which his father taught him the bass clef.

A perfect pitch and a good sense of rhythm prevented him from making mistakes in elementary music theory. Working hard, he learned on his own some simple rules of music notation. Just like many other talented children, he played everything with the wrong fingering, and made awkward movements with his weak hands. But he played with expression through which one could feel an innate ability to shape a musical phrase. Most importantly, he was not afraid of the keyboard, which he regarded as a living, close, and obedient friend.

He felt the need to compose. But it was difficult for him to notate his primitive improvisations.

Music was gradually becoming of great importance to the boy. The inclination toward music which was discovered again after the break was now displayed strongly; the energy that had been dormant was now looking for an outlet. In one month Oborin learned on his own what some children, who were not as driven, would spend years studying. By the age of nine, he was an amusing, adorable, and brave self-taught pianist: a little ballroom pianist playing as a dilettante.

Was this peculiar way of initial study good for Oborin or was it detrimental? We will let the critics answer this question. One thing is certain: the child was learning freely, without any constraints that were frequently imposed on students at that time. Nature was taking its course. The boy was absorbing music spontaneously and was a source of constant joy and amazing discoveries.

At the end of 1916, Nikolay Nikolayevich received an offer to assume a prominent post at a Moscow railroad department. Tired from having to constantly move around, he accepted the new position. But the final factor that played a role in his decision was the necessity to provide his son with an education. The family wished to enroll their first-born child in a classical gymnasium, which would prepare him to enter the University's law or medical school.

The new post allowed the Oborins to rent a spacious apartment on Bolshaya Gruzinskaya Street, and purchase a piano. Their secluded provincial life had come to an end. Guests now came over to the house. To make up for what they missed in their youth, the Oborins became interested in theater and sometimes attended concerts. Nina Viktorovna had little faith in her son's musical talent and did not allow so much as a thought about having music as a profession. But she had nothing against the boy entering a music school.

They made the decision to enter a private school belonging to Getsevich, the mother of a then-famous virtuoso pianist and peer of Scriabin and Rachmaninoff, Vsevolod Buyukli.

Getsevich had been a student of N. Rubinstein and considered herself to be a bearer of his traditions.

In a dark classroom a tall and formidable woman with a low booming voice met with the Oborins. The boy got scared and started to cry, and so they were forced to leave.

Soon after, a school concert of the two Gnesin sisters was announced in the Maly Hall of the Conservatory. Nikolay Nikolayevich went to the concert with his son. The boy was very impressed with the singing of the choir.

"This is the school I want to attend," Oborin announced to his father.

Thus they turned to the Gnesins. But here, too, they were not immediately successful. Elena Fabianovna Gnesina, the director of the school, who personally listened to the entrance auditions of all new students, felt that the weak fingers of the nine-year-old boy were not well suited for piano playing. Their request to be enrolled in the violin department instead was also denied. In order to console the disappointed boy, he was allowed to sit in at one of the theory classes, which was taught by Elena Fabianovna's sister, Evgenia.

Upon checking the two-voice dictation that she had just administered to students, Evgenia Fabianovna noticed Oborin's rare gift of perfect pitch: he was the first one to complete the dictation and did so with no mistakes.

Now, together with Evgenia Fabianovna, he went to audition for the school's director one more time.

"The boy should be given a chance. He has something special," insisted Evgenia Fabianovna.

After checking his pitch, memory, and his sense of rhythm one more time, Elena Fabianovna referred Oborin to a student of hers, Nadezhda Nikolayevna Maliutina, for a trial run.

Half a year later, Oborin was already a first-grade student in the leading piano studio of Elena Fabianovna Gnesina.

II The Gnesin family

1

The Gnesin family had been famous in the musical world of Moscow. In terms of tradition, it resembled in a way the Bach family. Just as the many generations of Bachs—even prior to the birth of the brilliant Johann Sebastian—had worked for many years in the musical world of Germany, the Gnesins, too, had been quietly teaching music in small towns in southern Russia. The grandfather was a Jewish folk singer, who composed and collected national folklore.

The mother played piano; her sisters were singers, and one of them was later accepted to sing in Milan's La Scala.

At the end of the last century, the young generation of Gnesins, consisting of five sisters and a younger brother, moved to Moscow in the hope of getting an education at the Moscow Conservatory.

The director at that time, V. I. Safonov, assigned the most talented Elena, then Evgenia and Maria to the piano studio; Elizaveta to the violin studio. Their brother Mikhail left for St. Petersburg in order to study composition with Rimsky-Korsakov.¹

In the Conservatory, Elena Gnesina became friends with the young Rachmaninoff and Scriabin. They were her peers and classmates; her musical knowledge was forming through the process of interacting with these wonderful musicians.

For about a year she had studied piano with the renowned Busoni, who was invited at that time to teach at the Moscow Conservatory. The young pianist was greatly impressed by Busoni's personality, his exceptional intellect, virtuosity: an original take on aesthetic views and methods of teaching. But she was too young to absorb everything valuable that was taught to her by the great musician and thinker. Busoni was not the right teacher for those who were still learning the basics of pianism. He was rather an adviser and a mentor to those mature artists who were experienced enough to understand his original ideas. Moreover, Busoni's stay in Moscow had been very short.

This is the reason the development of Elena Gnesina's talent took place for the most part in the studio of Safonov.²

Safonov began to teach her the basics in a strict and methodical way, developing wide-ranging and professional skills. His instruction was based on technical exercises and such repertoire as classical sonatas and pieces by Schumann, Chopin, and Mendelssohn. Particular attention was paid to the teaching of finger exercises that were taken from Safonov's "New Formula." Throughout her life, Gnesina recounted in detail the aphorisms from the "New Formula," and suggested everyone to study them.

Numerous exercises and a special concern toward technical development could have made Safonov's teaching dry and formalistic were it not for the attention that he paid to the production and color of sound. Safonov demanded that each student have sensitivity towards the production of sound, something that was ideally realized by Scriabin, whose lessons Gnesina heard on many occasions.

Safonov was abrupt, but honest and fair, and was able to attain the love of his students. He was strict; he valued discipline and order, could not stand selfishness, and demanded that the students devote themselves completely to music without dreaming of being famous or profiting financially.

Although Safonov did not belong to the category of pedagogues who were inclined to change their teaching methods in accordance with the personality of the student, he nevertheless understood and took into account the capabilities of each student. Most importantly, he was able, without instilling false hope, to steer them in the right direction suitable to their talent.

Elena Gnesina did not possess great virtuosic skills, nor was she particularly interested in a concert career; however, her intelligence, her skillfulness at being observant and organized

¹ Evgenia Gnesina also took a composition course from S. I. Taneyev and A. S. Arensky; the youngest sister Olga began her piano study later, already under the guidance of Elena Gnesina.

² Later, Elena Gnesina studied for some time with P. Schloezer, an experienced Conservatory teacher and author of unforgettable etudes for piano.

would allow her to become a successful teacher. Safonov started to entrust Gnesina with observing classes and checking homework of the younger students, and recommended her to teach some private lessons. Gnesina tried to learn everything from Safonov and imitated him in all aspects, something that was not detrimental in those beginning stages, since the person she was copying was sufficiently accomplished.

Thus, by the time Elena Gnesina graduated from the Conservatory she already had some pedagogical experience. She knew what she wanted to do and did not hesitate.

The Gnesin sisters decided to dedicate themselves to the advancement of musical education in Russia. They were inspired by the idea of having a career in the music field. Later, Mikhail Fabianovich Gnesin expressed this idea in the preface to the book about his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov. “We contemporary musicians have to completely abandon the artists’ tendency to retreat into aesthetics... Wanting to work for the future, we have to infuse art into the thick of various human activities, seeding everywhere the love for art and extracting from everywhere material for our own artistic inspiration.”³ Recounting the thoughts of his teacher, Gnesin stressed that “music has the ability to spread through all layers of society. Stemming from the mass curiosity, the wide-spread beloved music ‘craft’ could be born by way of schools leading an active musical life and being open for everyone.”⁴ These words sum up the credo of this wonderful family of enthusiasts and music educators.

Initially, the Gnesin sisters intended to teach adult students, but soon Elena Gnesina realized that the time had come to make some changes in the way children were being taught piano.

During the 1890s, when Elena thought of opening an affordable music school, this kind of pedagogy in Russia was just being born. Children were being taught by people with very diverse pianistic skills: from salon pianists and overconfident ladies claiming to be students of Anton Rubinstein, to such talented artists as Alexander Diubiuk, a student of John Field and teacher of Balakirev. In affluent families it was fashionable to invite teachers from abroad, from countries such as Germany and France. The young Claude Debussy started out in such a way, being employed as a musician at the house of a well-known Russian patron and Tchaikovsky’s friend, N. von Meck.

Among this diverse group of pedagogues, there were such talented teachers of children as Nikolay Sergeevich Zverev. He had taught Rachmaninoff and Scriabin and devised his own system of instruction for gifted children. But even Zverev, who was famous and well-respected in the musical circles for his work, remained a solitary, one-of-a-kind teacher, with very few opportunities.

At the end of the century, the system of the home-based children’s education had exhausted itself. There began an intense process of democratization of piano art. Now there was a need for educated and professional musicians. The brilliant pianism of the Rubinstein brothers, the wonderful accomplishments of Taneyev, Essipova, Ziloti, Medtner, Lhevinne, and Igumnov were the reasons that the general level of performance had risen. Consequently, the demands on students entering the Conservatory were strengthened as well. At that time there was already a need for a separate, specialized school at the Conservatory for younger gifted children; otherwise, the wide range of students’ ages would have stood in the way of successful education. At the end of the century, Zverev was essentially the one who fulfilled the requirements of gifted

³ M. Gnesin. Introductory article to the book N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov. Musical articles and notes. Saint-Petersburg, 1911, p. 43.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39

children's comprehensive preparation for refinement of virtuosity in the Conservatory's advanced classes of such famous artists as Ziloti, Pabst, and Safonov.

The level and the type of musical education were undoubtedly influenced by the first Russian Revolution of 1905. The Revolution brought the musicians closer to the public. "I waited for and craved the Revolution for a long time," Gnesin recounted later. "I wanted to see how the relationship of the artist and the public would be transformed... This was an inspiration!"⁵

The first free-of-charge National Conservatory for the instruction of singers and various instrumentalists was founded in 1905. Many outstanding Russian pianists enthusiastically entered this Conservatory as pedagogues. Among its first graduates were students of A. Goldenweiser and B. Yavorsky. Choral societies and concerts for all the public were being organized. Musicians now became an important part of society, driven by those who craved learning.

The general excitement captivated the Gnesin sisters as well. Even though the sisters founded their school in 1895, it was not until the turbulent years of the Revolution that they realized how important and extensive their goal was. Once they grasped the importance of the events that were taking place, they became confident in the significance of what they set out to accomplish.

Elena Fabianovna revealed her superb organizational skills. With astonishing energy, she overcame stagnancy, misunderstanding, and, at times, resistance toward their new undertaking. Without ever losing her spirit or giving in to meaningless complaints, she was able to infuse people with enthusiasm and faith. Everything she was doing turned out well.

On Dog's Square (Sobachya plotschadka), in a quiet Moscow alley, Gnesins rented a small merchant mansion. The older brother installed electricity and fixed the plumbing on his own. They created a small recital hall with about one hundred seats by joining together two spacious rooms. In the other rooms they put used pianos and their own furniture. The atmosphere of the school, as of the building itself, was that of simplicity, coziness, and comfort.

There was no need to be worried about finding teachers: there were enough sisters to teach the main subjects. Elena and Maria took on piano classes; Elizaveta (later, the wife of a well-known violinist, Vitacek)—violin classes; Evgenia—solfege and theory classes; Olga helped out with administrative work and household issues. Every once in a while, Mikhail, who had become one of Rimsky-Korsakov's favorite pupils and was successfully pursuing composition, came to visit from St. Petersburg. On the occasions when he visited the school, he also joined in by giving lectures, checking theory assignments, and most importantly, helping those students who were drawn to composition.

Even though the school was the center of life for the Gnesins, the sisters did not by any means limit themselves to pedagogical life. Being hospitable and sociable, they maintained friendships with almost all well-known Moscow musicians. Elena Fabianovna idolized Rachmaninoff, who responded with adoration and from time to time visited the school. In 1909, Scriabin, having just returned from abroad, moved in with the family, not far from Sobachya plotschadka, in another quiet Arbat alley. After a day of work, Elena Fabianovna would drop by her famous friend's place and participate in philosophical arguments with Scriabin and the Scriabinists.

⁵ Quotation from P. Glezer's article "Musician-citizen," *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 5 (1957): 78.

Other peers of Gnesina gladly offered the school help in practical matters: R. Gliere and A. Gretchaninov began to teach the harmony class; G. Konyus taught the course in form analysis, promoting his own original theory of analysis.

Gradually this small school, founded by the efforts of one family, acquired an artistic atmosphere that was beneficial for everyone who studied there. This was especially true of the gifted children who were provided with many tempting opportunities.

The academic organization of the school was based on a number of main regulations, from which Elena Fabianovna never strayed in her entire artistic life. "To be successful," she wrote, "innovations are not as important as structure and order."⁶ Students who dedicate themselves to music should first develop personality and character, which will at the end determine their success. But most importantly, the student should acquire a will, organizational skills, a strong nervous system, survival skills, and modesty in the assessment of his own possibilities. Gnesina maintained that "character and personality are the basis from which the musician's talent develops." Every student had to grow without artificial efforts or coaching, in accordance with their nature, and each one was in his or her own way valuable and close to Gnesina. Gnesina had a similar relationship with all of her students, not depending on the level of their talent or other factors such as social standing, financial situation, and nationality. Thus the music teacher, in Gnesina's mind, must act as someone who nurtures the child.

Completely dedicating themselves to doing what they love and not having their own family or personal life, Elena and Maria treated their students the same way mothers would. Oborin recounted later that "sometimes a student from a poor family would come to school in worn-out clothes, go upstairs to the Gnesins' flat, where Elena Fabianovna would start taking care of him. She fed him, clothed him, and only then let him go to class."⁷ The school and these children were the sisters' life, and it was impossible for this self-sacrifice not to have had an influence on the way the school was run.

The Gnesins were not striving to make their school a hotbed for producing virtuosos. The country was in need of musicians and scholars who were modest, self-sacrificing, and skillful workers. **(PIC 22)**

The cultivation of such a musician determined the types of academic programs. Thus, besides the private lessons, theory classes also played an important role. All six grades were taught solfège; the students wrote two- and three-voice dictations and were proficiently skilled at transposition. They were taught music theory, harmony, and form analysis in the same thorough way. Gretchaninov, Gliere, and Konyus tried to awaken in students an artistic and individual way of thinking.

The music history class at the school was called "Music Encyclopedia." The textbook for this class was a book by Sakketti widely used at the time; however, there was also much emphasis put on teaching the evolution of styles. Students were praised for knowledge of music literature and a fluent grasp of the score. Acquaintance with music literature was not confined to the "Music Encyclopedia" class. It was considered mandatory to sight-read symphonies, operas, and chamber-music pieces during private lessons. Students were taught ensemble playing, accompanying, sight-reading, and four-hand playing from an early age. All students sung in choir, and small ensembles were formed from various instrumentalists. Elena Gnesina did not

⁶ Quotation from conversation between Elena Gnesina and the author. Other statements of E. Gnesina not cited are taken from the same transcript.

⁷ Quotation from conversation between L. N. Oborin and the author. All other statements of Oborin not cited are taken from the same transcript.

mind spending time on this, believing that exactly this kind of upbringing would be beneficial to the development of a performing artist.

2

As a piano teacher, Elena Gnesina followed many principles that she learned from Safonov. In spite of her characteristic independence, she was not striving to rethink the old and search for new ways. On the contrary, she was against risky innovations and experiments. She considered the successes that the previous generation had reached to be unshakable. She steadfastly admired Safonov's ability to have raised so many wonderful Russian pianists. But Gnesina did not trust anything new that appeared in piano pedagogy at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, such as the controversial books by Steinhausen, Breithaupt, and Elizaveta Koland, which she had heard about.

Thus in 1916, when Oborin ended up in Gnesina's studio (she was then a little over 40 years of age), her teaching was based on traditional methods partially derived from teachings of Safonov and from the beginners pedagogy of Zverev.⁸ But it was perhaps more simple in its basic principles.

Gnesina taught piano in a simple manner. From the first stages of study there was great emphasis on exercises. Their goal was to make the fingers stronger and to teach the correct and firm position of the hand. The exercises were not limited to the generally-accepted five-finger patterns. At that time, Gnesina had already come up with piano exercises for beginners, which she later recorded in the "Piano Rudiments," "Little Etudes for Beginners," and with most of them being in "Preparatory Exercises for Various Types of Piano Technique." Here are some of the patterns, the knowledge of which may be useful to teachers.⁹ (p. 24, 25)

From these examples, it is evident that Gnesina was not only concerned about the speed of fingers, but also about the independence of hands, arch movements, legato, correct phrasing, and elements of polyphony. All of these skills were learned from the simplest material that lacked any artistic value. The technical task was separated from the artistic task, and this was a cause for serious criticism. Gnesina's exercises and pieces were subjected to this criticism during the Soviet time. But at the same time, it should be noted that during the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, this kind of separation of "functions" was typical for the system of education at the Conservatory. The classes for younger students at the Conservatory were regarded as a course of technical preparation and building up of repertoire, whereas, for older students, they became a course of artistic polishing and wide-ranging types of instruction.

Gnesina started to work on scales quite early, in the first grade. All types of scales were taught thoroughly. Students were trained in "instant reaction" to tonality, the ability to quickly change from one scale to another. Each year there was a special technique exam on scales and exercises, which was a new prerequisite in schools at that time. Only after completing the

⁸ From Zverev, Gnesina particularly learned the work ethic, scheduling, caring about the comprehensive education for the students, and the organizational skills for students' semi-independent study under the general supervision of the teacher.

⁹ In different editions of the mentioned collections, the list of the formulas expanded, but the essence remained constant.

requirements of the technique exam was the student allowed to take the transfer exam that comprised significant and wide-ranging repertoire.

At the core of the repertoire were the classical composers: Haydn, Clementi, Mozart, Beethoven, as well as classical polyphony. The program, which was compiled by Elena and Maria Gnesina, only approximately determined the level and amount of repertoire for each grade. Copies of the program's examples were distributed to students' parents so that they could obtain the scores for the entire school year in advance.

In accordance with the program, each student was required to learn in one year no less than five or six fugues. At the lesson, the form was analyzed under the supervision of the teacher, after which there was discussion about the theme being presented in different voices. Although the fugues performed by students sounded elementary, with "bringing out" of the theme, nevertheless the knowledge of polyphonic literature and its rules was of great benefit to them.

Out of the classical pieces, Gnesina preferred Mendelssohn's Songs Without Words. Everyone, without exception, learned them, and developed from this material legato playing, following of the melodic line, and the singing quality of the melody.

These "Songs" were considered as a preparatory step and the 'key' to Liszt's opera transcriptions as well as to Chopin's Nocturnes, Ballades, Waltzes, and Mazurkas.

In the process of working on a piece, Gnesina focused on the logic of the musical thought. Correct articulation and understanding the significance of rests was considered of foremost importance for a successful performance of each piece. The students were not taught how to perform any particular piece, as it were; rather, they were taught musical literacy and expression in the process of playing the pieces. Thus it was not just the hard work that was valued but quick, disciplined reasoning and understanding of different ways of learning. Consequently, Gnesina did not insist on many hours of practicing. Like Safonov, she demanded concentration and productivity. Three or four hours spent practicing piano was deemed sufficient for success. The time was divided in approximately the following manner: exercises – half an hour; current repertoire – 2 hours; practicing previously learned repertoire – 1 hour.

Gnesina demanded that the student keep the entire learned repertoire memorized. At any given lesson, the teacher could ask the student to play any piece. Elena Fabianovna would get extremely angry at anyone who was not ready for this test. This sort of control was the most reliable way of memory training. Here one could not hope to memorize a piece gradually, in the process of working on it. One had to put in effort to memorize. To train the memory, Gnesina would ask to start a piece at different places in the score, but more often, she would ask to play in slow tempo, without the score. The latter method took away the automatic muscle memory, activated the hearing memory, and made one acknowledge the logic of the music. This method was used in the Conservatory by Igumnov, who followed Elena Gnesina's example.

Realized systematically, these kinds of simple but effective techniques, in combination with a calm working atmosphere and a general sense of love, made concert performances for students a customary and pleasant aspect of study.

Recitals were being held every week in a small, cozy hall with palm and ficus trees. Every time a student learned a new piece, he or she had to play it at the recital. And since Gnesina picked repertoire according to the student's ability, it did not take more than a month for them to learn a new piece. That made it possible for a student to play new repertoire at a recital at least seven or eight times a year. These kinds of systematic performances promoted positive feelings toward recitals. Students were not afraid to go out on stage. They got used to it, and those who were artistically naturally gifted, loved performing.

However, while encouraging performances, Gnesina warned students against becoming arrogant and conceited. There was a certain ritual of behavior on stage: the way one came up on stage, sat at the piano, and bowed. Everything had to look modest, dignified, and proper.

Owing to the strict order, the quality of education, and personalities of the Gnesin sisters, the school acquired a great reputation by 1916, the year Oborin was enrolled. The educational establishment had its own ‘image.’ The students of this school, as individually gifted as each one was, all had one thing in common: they all possessed elements of professionalism, knowledge, and a developed sense of duty and responsibility.

The Conservatory gladly accepted ‘Gnesinists’ into their establishment and appreciated the teaching of Elena Gnesina, who became at that time one of the leading children’s piano teachers in Moscow.

3

Energetic, kind, powerful, and short-tempered, Elena Fabianovna Gnesina belonged to the type of teachers who considered themselves responsible for the student’s life and destiny. She grew to love Oborin because of his talent and personality. But Gnesina did not find Oborin to have great virtuosic skills. In her opinion, he had the artistic imagination of a composer. Therefore, she did not insist on him being particularly outstanding at playing piano, but rather encouraged his studies in theory classes and his own exploration of literature, instrumentation, and counterpoint. Mikhail Fabianovich Gnesin, having arrived from St. Petersburg, confirmed his sister’s “diagnosis.” Oborin showed him a few of his pieces, including a sonatina. In this piece, the boy imitated Clementi and Mozart. The form of the sonatina was logical and its melodic lines natural.

In order to receive systematic instruction in composition, Oborin was enrolled in Gretchaninov’s studio. At the same time he continued to take piano instruction, which did not take up more than two to three hours a day. Nevertheless, the boy was achieving astonishing success. Gnesina’s method was astoundingly well-suited to Oborin’s individuality. Having started systematic studies rather late, Oborin was now in need of a thorough technical training, which would help him catch up. Even intense finger drills, on the whole, were useful for his weak fingers. Gnesina’s somewhat dry and stereotypical approach was not damaging. The reason for this was that the boy already had his own quite clear idea about music and was used to being independent when he came to Gnesina at the age of nine. His spiritual world was rich, his imagination bright and ambitious. The talent, the turbulent times, and the circumstances of life—all this made him mature quickly. He was eagerly absorbing knowledge and skills which made it possible for him to reveal interesting, albeit not yet explicit, artistic intentions.

In the first two years of study, Oborin had already become proficient at scales and had learned about twenty Czerny Etudes, Tausig’s “Daily Exercises,” and around thirty elementary polyphonic pieces. His fingers became strong and got used to playing legato, non-legato, and to articulation in general. The involvement of the shoulder while playing was limited. Throughout his life, Oborin remained reserved in his movements at the piano and was against raising the hands too far and excessive body motion. Playing the piano cost him minimal effort.

In the interpretation of pieces, he did not imitate the teacher’s playing, something that was so common in children. Gnesina did not play for Oborin, but rather talked about the piece, sometimes sang, and explained the meaning of the melody. Oborin’s archive contains scores with Gnesina’s markings, which indicate that she paid special attention to fingering and phrase

structure. Oborin learned early on that a comfortable hand position and fingering that suits the phrase structure were necessary for a successful performance. Every year he learned no fewer than forty pieces of varying degrees of difficulty.

The following is a list of some of his repertoire for the school years of 1916-1921: J.S. Bach—all the two- and three-voice Inventions, 30 Preludes and Fugues from the Well-Tempered Clavier; Czerny—four books of Etudes, Op. 299, some Etudes from Op. 740; Etudes of Liutsh, Leschorn, Berens, Cramer, Moszkowski; a number of Etudes from Clementi's *Gradus ad Parnassum*; Mozart—10 Sonatas; Beethoven—Sonatas Nos. 1, 4, 5, 8, 18, 19, 20, 24; Mendelssohn—10 Songs Without Words; Chopin—10 Etudes, First Impromptu, *Fantaisie-Impromptu*, Third Ballade, various Preludes; Glinka-Balakirev—*The Lark*; Liszt—*Etude Waldesrauschen*, *Valse-Impromptu*; Grieg—a number of Lyric Pieces, Sonata; Tchaikovsky—*Children's Album*, pieces from Op. 40; Concertos by Haydn—D major, Mozart—A Major, Beethoven—C minor, Schumann—A minor, Mendelssohn—D minor.

The focus on polyphony, etudes, and classical sonatas is apparent; so is the preference for Chopin's works and Mendelssohn's Songs Without Words.

An excellent memory, concentration, and infallible pitch helped Oborin to quickly learn pieces and bring them up to the concert-level standard required by the school. He began to perform on the Gnesins' stage at the age of nine. It was also then that Oborin played his first performance at the annual school concert at the Maly Hall of the Moscow Conservatory. His debut did not go without a curious incident. Elena Fabianovna was adjusting the bench to help all the young students to sit down comfortably at the piano. The boy got distracted by this procedure, bumped into the organ and fell down on stage, to the laughter of the children and frightened screams of his mother. After being spanked by Gnesina, he played a two-page piece by Wolf, with tears in his eyes. The audience applauded enthusiastically but it was impossible to make the boy take a bow. From then on, the fear of bumping into the organ in this hall never left him. And to the surprise of the audience, he would always carefully go around it.

Three years later, Oborin performed in this hall once again, playing Chopin's A-flat Major Ballade. Nikolay Orlov, a talented Chopin interpreter, attended this concert and noted the boy's exceptional artistic talent.

But Gnesina continued to view Oborin's pianism with skepticism; at the same time, however, she did not hamper his pianistic development. The school did not follow formalistic terms of education: those students, who had done more than planned in the program and were especially gifted, were able to graduate ahead of time. Oborin was able to pass theory and piano exams for the 4th and 5th grades at once. Consequently, by shortening the course of study to five years, he ended up in the graduating class by the time he was thirteen.

For his final examination program, Gnesina included J.S. Bach's B-flat Minor Prelude and Fugue from WTC I, the Schumann Concerto, Chopin's *Fantaisie-Impromptu*, and "Lark" by Glinka-Balakirev.

The exam took place during the day, in the school's concert hall. The examination committee, which consisted of the school's teachers, was headed by A. B. Goldenweiser. Oborin was calm, confident, and focused. The hall was filled with a tense silence, which always accompanies performances of those artists who are able to captivate and conquer the audience.

The boy played with freedom, relying upon his inspiration and exceptional musical instinct. It was apparent that for this artist music was a life necessity and that he is a true musician with disciplined, bright mind, with ability and knowledge that were acquired as a result of persistent work and polishing.

Gnesina was proud of her student. This was not just her pedagogical triumph. She considered Oborin's success to be a victory of her pedagogical method, an accomplishment of the school, and a token of her prosperity.

Oborin left the school loving his teacher and he carried this feeling for the rest of his life. Gnesina's wishes remained for him of great importance. He listened attentively to her opinion. Oborin always pointed out the best parts of Gnesina's pedagogy and fought for their acceptance, believing that musicians were not always fair in judging this wonderful teacher and organizer.

III Pianist or Composer?

1

Lev Oborin entered the Moscow Conservatory studying both composition and piano. In 1922, he additionally began to study conducting, which he continued to do for one and a half years.¹⁰

At the age of fifteen, when the *wunderkinder* are usually already giving triumphant concerts, Oborin did not yet know which profession appealed to him. He did not even ask himself these kinds of questions. It seemed that he was not ambitious, was not aware of life's difficulties, and was indifferent towards his appearance. A thinly-built teenager dressed in a *tolstovka* (a man's long belted blouse) and fustian, worn-down pants that he wore constantly, Oborin came to the Conservatory with a tremendous supply of energy and an unusual craving for musical knowledge. He was possessed by music: no matter where he was, be it at home, on the street, on a walk, in a movie theater, or at a party, he never stopped thinking about music and coming up with ideas. In his youth, Oborin had been known for his quick temper, the boldness of his reasoning, and a sense of independence.

The first post-revolutionary years were a turbulent time in the history of the Conservatory. The educational process was being significantly reformed; there was a search for new ways of schooling, and the relationship between students and teachers was changing. The older professorate, acknowledging the Soviet system, continued their work, though now under new conditions. Student organizations participated in the management of the Conservatory. The new student body—children of the working class, former workers, and retired soldiers, bravely declared their demands and breathed new air into the academic establishment.

Not everyone who was interested in music and strove to make it their profession, entering the Conservatory with this goal in mind, possessed sufficient talent. Soon these people who had been genuinely interested in music ended up being left out. But one thing is indisputable: all students of this time—a generation of faith, inspiration, of passionate and pure aspirations, were full of enthusiasm.

The spirit of the epoch produced the need for communication. Arguments and discussions became an integral part of the Conservatory life. The formation of student clubs united those possessing similar views on art. In these clubs, students played new compositions and shared thoughts about art and social events.

After Oborin entered the Conservatory, he found himself among many talented, ambitious young musicians who later played a marked role in the formation and development of the Soviet musical art. Oborin's classmates in the composition department included V. Shebalin,

¹⁰ Oborin attended a conducting class of K. S. Saradjev and took one lesson each from B. Walter and G. Abendrot.

M. Starokadomsky, D. Kabalevsky, V. Beliy, F. Fere, A. Davidenko, and Z. Levina. “We frequently gathered at the Oborins’ place on Solianka,” recounted V. Shebalin. “Lev Nikolayevich’s father, a railroad engineer, loved music passionately. In our company there were also M. Cheriomuhin, Yu. Nikolsky, and M. Starokadomsky. We played a lot of music and covered much territory: the classical period, Russian and European music, and everything new that we could get ahold of.”¹¹ Frequently, the group would go to the “Musical Exhibits” of V. Derzhanovsky, a critic and a musicologist, who was familiar with the new compositions from Russia and abroad. In the building of “Mezhdunarodnaya Kniga,” on Kuznetsky Bridge, Derzhanovsky held free concerts that were mostly attended by young people. Here one could hear compositions by Prokofiev, Medtner, Hindemith, Bartók, Casella, and Richard Strauss. When Oborin started to be noticed for his exceptional talent and knowledge, he was invited to a group of the Conservatory professor P.A. Lamma, whose members included N. Ya. Miaskovsky and A. F. Gedike. At the same time rumors started to spread in Moscow about the audacious talent of the young Shostakovich. Oborin wanted to instantly meet this awkward young man, who impressed him by abruptness and severity of his beliefs. When coming to Moscow, Shostakovich stayed at the Oborins’ apartment and always played through his new works for his friend. Shostakovich introduced Oborin to Ivan Ivanovich Sollertinsky. Oborin recounted: “I understood then what knowledge was, and felt ignorant. I had to immediately begin studying, reading books, and learning languages. I started with Dante, which Sollertinsky had read in the original. The meeting was an inspiration to my spiritual life.”

How was it possible for Oborin to deal with the abundance of impressions he was under and with the complex tasks of three chosen professions? How was he handling the intense mental, physical, and nerve-racking pressure?

What helped him was what he had learned from Gnesina: organization and self-discipline. The working regime was also enforced by his mother, who was demanding and strict towards children. The organization of the Conservatory studies was also of help. Attending lectures was not mandatory: students went to those classes which they considered interesting and which were taught by artistically brilliant musicians. Excessive guidance was frowned upon in the Conservatory. Oborin studied many subjects on his own and took the exams at different times. But most importantly, in this life full of tension, he felt the presence of Rachmaninoff, “burning a candle at three ends” – composition, pianism, and conducting. The memory of the meeting with Rachmaninoff remained with him, generating energy and will.

The composition studies began unsuccessfully. Oborin ended up in the composition studio of G. Konyus, a serious and businesslike musician who taught at the Gnesins’ school. At the Conservatory, Konyus persistently promoted his own method of analyzing musical compositions. The students’ well-founded opinion of this method was that it contained elements of formalism. Not limiting themselves to protesting in class, the students, among whom was Oborin, wrote a letter of complaint that included an analysis of the method. After Konyus found out about the letter, there was a falling out. Oborin then transferred to the studio of the theorist and composer G. Catoire. But here, too, the inquisitive young man did not find satisfaction. For Catoire, modern music ended with early Scriabin and late Wagner. He did not understand the compositions of Stravinsky and Hindemith. Bold harmonies and unexpected modulations made him angry: “How disgusting! Are you really not capable of producing anything better?”—he would say.

¹¹ V. Shebalin, “The life journey,” *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 2 (1959): 75.

After studying with Catoire for about two years, Oborin transferred to the studio of Nikolay Yakovlevich Miaskovsky, whose students already included V. Shebalin, D. Kabalevsky, and M. Starokadomsky.

“Interest in Miaskovsky’s compositions at that time,” recounted Shebalin, “was very widespread. Now it is impossible to even imagine that.”¹² There was no composer in Moscow who was close to Miaskovsky in terms of talent and intelligence. (Prokofiev lived abroad at that time). Miaskovsky’s symphonies were being studied as models; they were imitated. Miaskovsky’s influence on the moral values of young people was also profound. This was a man of purity and high ethics. Encyclopedic knowledge, psychological sensitivity, a bright mind that had an aptitude for analysis and generalization, straight-forwardness and sincerity made him an authoritative teacher of young composers. Miaskovsky’s studio at the Conservatory achieved the best results: Shebalin, Kabalevsky, Starokadomsky, Fere, and later Khachaturian all began their composition careers here.

Lessons took place in Miaskovsky’s cramped apartment, located on Denezhnyi alley. “A big room was blocked off with large bookcases everywhere containing books and scores, and in the center there was the grand piano. Nikolay Yakovlevich talked without stopping, accompanying his speech with gestures of his hands that were looking for something on the shelves. Any argument was supported by a reference from musical literature. His knowledge of it was deep and exhaustive.”¹³ This fascinating intelligence inspired the students to eagerly expand their knowledge as well. Upon receiving a new composition or a letter from Prokofiev with the themes of yet another one of his pieces, Miaskovsky immediately called his students. They had discussions. When there was no such material available, they studied Scarlatti Sonatas or some other older compositions. Students competed with each other in the knowledge of the smallest details of form, harmony, polyphony, and instrumentation. The atmosphere did not allow for superficiality and dilettantism. This was a school of comprehensive compositional professionalism. The severe and strict ways of teaching that had begun in the Gnesin School continued.

This marked the most productive time for Oborin’s apprenticeship at the Conservatory. He composed a great deal and in different genres: children’s pieces, sonatinas, songs, trios, symphonic overtures, romances on poems of Anna Akhmatova, a scherzo for orchestra. Some of his pieces, for instance, the Scherzo, were performed by orchestras. Others like Four Pieces, Sonata, Prelude, Intermezzo, and Dance for piano, came to light and were met with approval from the critics. They noticed and appreciated Oborin the composer much earlier than Oborin the pianist. “A number of small pieces for piano, written between 1922 and 1924, are proof of the exceptional talent of this young composer,” wrote V. Shebalin. “Sounding great (Oborin is a good pianist), these pieces win over with their sincerity and fresh inspiration... Oborin’s Symphonic Scherzo, written in the spring of 1925, was his first attempt in the field of large forms. It succeeds with its natural expressivity and mastery in managing compositional techniques, which is surprising for such a young and inexperienced composer.”¹⁴

Welcoming the appearance of Oborin’s piano pieces, the critic of that same journal characterized them as “pleasant and colorful-sounding music, indicative of a fresh and strong talent. What grabs attention are the softness and expression of the melodic line, which sometimes

¹² V. Shebalin, “The life journey,” *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 2 (1959): 78.

¹³ V. Shebalin, “The life journey,” *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 2 (1959): 78.

¹⁴ V. Shebalin, “L. N. Oborin,” *Sovremennaya Muzyka* 13/14 (1926): 89.

completely strays away from the mandatory chromaticism of our days, and which is always saturated with bright and spontaneous lyricism.”¹⁵

After the International Competition in Warsaw, when Oborin began to successfully perform as a pianist and to spend much less time composing, the critics were insisting that “his still famous Symphonic Scherzo and four piano pieces give all the right to assume that his name will also appear in the list of Russian composition masters.”¹⁶

So what exactly attracted listeners to the pieces of the young composer? Did they really possess a meaning of their own, and what was their role in the formation of the artistic character of Oborin the pianist?

Even now, when Soviet music has reached such a high level, Oborin’s modest early efforts are interesting, and not just from a historic point of view: they are dynamic and inventive; in them one can sense an eager and inquisitive musician who aspires to take on serious artistic tasks.

The style of early works shows an influence of Miaskovsky. Through him, Oborin felt a living connection between Soviet musical culture and the previous generation. Accepting the October Revolution without hesitation, Miaskovsky tried to portray reality in his symphonies. This was a reclusive man, with a tendency for reflection and psychological complexity. He was very inquisitive artistically, but essentially not very emotional. At that time he was striving to make his musical language more accessible. Miaskovsky’s Sixth Symphony, in which these tendencies were more pronounced than ever, was being completed the year Oborin joined Miaskovsky’s studio

Imitating Miaskovsky, Oborin gladly tried his hand at the symphonic genre. He was overpowered by grandiose ideas, which in the end did not amount to a completed work.

Small piano pieces were more successful. Oborin felt confident in the piano field, and as a pianist was able to easily find new, original techniques, colors, and sounds. It was specifically in the piano pieces that one could see the traditional thinking of a composer and the influences of Rachmaninoff and early Scriabin. In the years when short, fragmented melodies with unexpected leaps were in style and the grotesque took up a large amount of space in music, Oborin was attracted to melodies that breathed and developed naturally. Even though there are traces of influences of both Hindemith and Bartók in his piano pieces, Oborin’s inner impulse made him stay away from innovations. It appeared as though there were two tendencies fighting in the young musician, something that is extremely interesting from a psychological point of view: In one tendency, the pianist’s ear was developed through classical repertoire and his hands, familiar with the keyboard and the rules of fingering, led to a traditional and natural way of composing. In the other tendency, the hearing and memory of the composer, very much attuned to innovation, made him pay tribute to the contemporary trends fashions. From this stems the ambiguity, instability, and showiness of the composer’s quests. This contradiction can be felt in the following somewhat interesting excerpts from Oborin’s early works: **(p. 38-41)**.

Only a strong, original artistic personality could overcome temptation and establish an individual style. Time was needed to develop and prove oneself. But soon Oborin’s life took a sudden turn. Miaskovsky, who was sympathetic toward Oborin and had high hopes for him, asked him to compose a symphony on the poem ‘Scythians’ by A. Blok, which would also contain vocal parts. In Miaskovsky’s apartment, Oborin heard for the first time Blok’s poem that

¹⁵ Arion, “L. Oborin. Four pieces for piano, op. 2,” *Sovremennaya Muzyka* 22 (1927): 288.

¹⁶ Evg. Braudo, “Soviet Pianists,” *Krasnaya niva* 10 (1927): 22.

astonished him: “Yes, we are Scythians! Yes, we are Asiatics—with slanting and greedy eyes!..” The power and depth of Blok’s poem captivated him. The idea of how to incorporate this poem was forming just as Igumnov showed Oborin a brochure of the first Chopin International Competition in Warsaw.

The competition was to start in a few weeks. Oborin had to start practicing—something that seemed only temporary at the time. **(PIC 43)**

After Oborin’s victory, he suddenly became famous. Concert tours had begun. The score for ‘Scythians’ lay on the desk, opened on the first page. His mother carefully wiped dust from the score. Miaskovsky was waiting. Oborin was going through the most difficult trial as a composer—a test of resilience and strength of his artistic talent. A period of a long spiritual fight and ambiguity had begun.

Oborin was then having a triumphant concert tour. At this time, from 1930 to 1933, some of his pieces began to be published. They included his Piano Sonata (1930) and Three Pieces for Piano (1933), and it seemed that the path to a compositional career had opened. Oborin wanted to be alone and focus so that he could compose. He had to write systematically, every day, but the concerts made him tired and he kept hearing somebody else’s music in his head.

Oborin tried to get away from performing. In the letters to his Leningrad friend, V. M. Bogdanov-Berezovsky, which reveal in detail the private life of the young Oborin, he keeps returning to an agonizing problem. In December of 1927, leaving for Poland, he wrote: “I am going without much enthusiasm. This is a beginning of the time, when a pianist, or to be exact, a musician, loses the better part of his personal life and becomes a semi-pianola, that is to say, becomes famous.”¹⁷

A year later, Oborin described his compositional work: “I was going to graduate from the Conservatory in a few days, but I did not finish writing a quartet and had to postpone until spring.”

By 1935 Oborin was already a recognized master of the piano. But even at this time, he still seriously discussed his plans to be a composer and weighed his options. “I want to come back to composition this year or forget altogether that I ever had any abilities to compose. The issue with my composition career has really started to put pressure on me this year.” Oborin emphasized his dissatisfaction with the performing career: “I frequently get a feeling of emptiness at the end of a year of concerts and studies.” He writes: “I decided that I will spend wisely those one-and-a-half free months that I have during the summer and will accomplish something. If my music turns out to be just as bad as that of 9 or 10 members of the Composers’ Union, I will stop the experiments forever.”

One gets the impression that Oborin understood that the choice has already been made, and yet was embarrassed by his “betrayal” of art for the sake of a less important, as he thought, task of performing. Performing came easy, but it was not enticing. The process of composing, on the other hand, flowed slowly and agonizingly, but was captivating and intriguing. Oborin needed more time to determine what he wanted to do and to find courage to make a choice.

‘Scythians’ was never composed. Oborin understood that seemingly he did not possess a genuine desire to compose and that the urge to compose was just one of the manifestations of his wide-ranging talent. Thus it had not been the outside factors, such as his pianistic success and the beginning of a concert career that caused a change of direction in Oborin’s life. Rather it was the essence of his artistic nature. Shostakovich, succumbing to an insurmountable artistic desire to

¹⁷ Excerpts from these letters are cited with the permission of L. N. Oborin and the addressee – composer and musicologist V. M. Bogdanov-Berezovsky.

compose, moved away from performance in favor of composition. Oborin, on the contrary, came to limit himself to pianistic career. It was his world and soul.

Although Oborin's experiences as a composer were not of great significance on their own, he would have never found himself without them. Nothing went to waste. Studying composition served as a professional basis for his pianism. He heard music as a composer and a creator, understanding the essence of the creative process, the innermost meaning of the composition, the logic, order, and correlation of all the elements of musical language. The "laboratory" of a composer—those psychological subtleties and way of thinking that were so difficult to understand for those who were "just performers," Oborin grasped naturally and automatically. When he was studying a piece, he would first approach it with the eyes of a composer rather than as a pianist. In 1927, Bogdanov-Berezovsky wrote: "A talented composer-pianist with absolutely amazing natural ability, Oborin is first of all a musician, and his musicianship dominates everything."¹⁸ This is why Oborin always feels as though he is the author of the performed music. And this feeling was in turn very important in having an effect on the listeners. When playing a piece, Oborin understood its meaning and essence so well, that at times he felt as if he had written it himself. That is why he performed so easily and freely. Not being paralyzed by fear and insecurity, he confidently realized the lifeless figures in the score, giving them a breath of life. Essentially, he understood the piece much earlier than he "had it in his fingers." Composition had a substantial influence on his life as a pianist and, in particular, on his attitude toward piano technique and issues pertaining to it. Where there was a tendency for the young artists to be fascinated with virtuosity, for Oborin it took on a secondary role.¹⁹

It is noteworthy that these traits not only appeared while Oborin was learning the pieces, but also showed up in his performances. They were noted by the sensitive listeners, who were capable of distinguishing his playing from that of other pianists.

In 1931, Oborin was visiting Alexei Maksimovich Gorky in his residency in Gorki. The young pianist and the great writer were taking a long walk in the garden. Afterward, Oborin played for Gorky, who loved music and had a fine understanding of it. Impressed by Oborin's artistry, Gorky noted:

"You compose music, do you not?"

"How did you guess?" asked surprised Oborin.

"I heard it in your playing. You should compose." replied Gorky.

2

When sending her students off to the Conservatory, Gnesina usually determined which teacher suited a particular student best. She viewed this selection as an important step, one upon which the young musician's future artistic life frequently depended.

¹⁸ B. Valerianov [V. Bogdanov-Berezovsky], "Lev Oborin's concert," *Rabochii i tiatr* 20 (1927): 14.

¹⁹ By the way, let's note that the great contemporary conductor Bruno Walter composed music with the same kind of purpose of discovering the essence of the creative artistic process, without publishing his compositional efforts. Others who experienced a constant desire to compose included J. Hofmann, E. D'Albert, L. Godowsky. In fact, is it possible to name one great performer who did not pay tribute to the art of composition? And should not this fact catch the attention of the young generation of pianists who tend to focus solely on persistent pianistic training and performance?

At the school's final exam, Oborin attracted the interest of A. B. Goldenweiser. But Gnesina, in spite of a long friendship with Goldenweiser, still recommended that Oborin audition for the piano studio of Nikolay Karlovich Medtner. When making this choice, Gnesina took into account Oborin's talent in composition and Medtner's teaching style. Medtner demanded from his students logic and discipline in their thinking process; understanding in solving performance issues; studying a wide range of repertoire. He taught on the basis of summarizing the characteristics of different styles of piano music.

Soon Medtner moved abroad, and Gnesina, with the consent of the boy, sent him to the studio of Konstantin Nikolayevich Igumnov.

This was a musician of a different kind from Medtner. He was successful as a concert pianist but considered his main task in life to be teaching. Igumnov's pedagogical talent was rather unusual; he produced noticeable results relatively late, when he was around fifty years old.

Igumnov brought his students into the world of music through a challenging path. He disregarded their success on stage and demanded from them self-sacrifice and unselfishness. There was nothing stereotypical or fixed in his approach to music. He essentially rejected the set systems, preferring instead an artistic element and improvisation, based on a deep emotional connection to music. The student never considered him a mentor who utters complete truth and possesses tried recipes that will help achieve success. It was necessary to search, to be in doubt together with the teacher, as equals, as musicians. One of Igumnov's students, K. Adjemov, remembers how sometimes Igumnov would "start conducting a thorough 'cleaning' not far from a concert date. This would involve changing the fingering and rethinking the meaning of the form. Things found previously did not satisfy Igumnov. He engaged a student into the new process of searching. One had to possess will and presence of mind in order not to lose the poetical feeling acquired previously, and to complete in a short time the extra demands from Igumnov."²⁰

Unlike Neuhaus (whose pedagogical career during those years had just begun at the Moscow Conservatory), Igumnov was very much opposed to picturesque phrases and generalizations. He stood out for being reserved, even reclusive and secretive. But behind everything, just as with Rachmaninoff, one could feel an intense emotional life and a concentration of spiritual strength. His poetical associations were accurate but modest; his speech sparse, thus making his every word substantial and significant. He feared words which were not able to replace music, and which at times oversimplified it. Much to the same degree he also feared theorizing, logical calculations, and attempts to set the music into strict musicological schemes.

A man of high intellect, an expert on poetry, art, and a friend of great artists, writers, scientists, he nevertheless drew a line between the symbolic essence of music and all the other arts. For him, music opened up a completely distinct and deeply mysterious world. Igumnov always marveled with awe at the effect of music and he kept this spontaneous perception of music and the freshness of emotions throughout his life. He was always afraid of scaring off inspiration with a careless word, an unrefined analogy, or an abstract scheme.

Igumnov usually played at the lessons. The sound never ceased coming from the piano. Everything was "felt" and verified at the instrument during the process of the never-ending careful listening. The truth was born right there at the lesson, under the teacher's fingers. But it was not done so that the student would imitate or copy it, but rather to awaken the listening imagination, to expose the beauty of the phrases, and to lead the student to independent

²⁰ K. Adjemov, "K. Igumnov's Artistic interests," *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 10 (1957): 116.

searching. The details formed the whole. Igumnov was unusually inventive in sensing details and had an amazingly refined taste in selecting and arranging them. He knew how to get rid of the unnecessary. “The strictest self-control... the ability to limit yourself in choosing the means for expression,” wrote Oborin about Igumnov, “give Igumnov’s interpretation elements of succinctness and even a degree of asceticism. This clever terseness provides the best results in the field of art.”²¹ Often, a single melodic “seed,” discovered in the sound, contained more meaning than scores of beautiful and correct phrases.

Many years later, in a brief conversation entitled “My performing and pedagogical principles,” Igumnov defined the meaning of such aural “treasures.” “It is necessary to emphasize the significance of the performing art. Music is a language. Performance of music is a coherent, live narrative—an interesting, developing story in which sections are connected to each other, and the contrasts are legitimate... It is necessary to not only, as one would say, ‘listen to yourself,’ but to also hear every detail and its meaning, in connection with what preceded it and what is to follow.”²² What made the detail-oriented style of Igumnov powerfully convincing was ‘intonation’ and the view of a composition as a live story that unwinds through the natural poetic laws of musical action.

From a psychological point of view, the phenomenon was just as impressive. Igumnov always taught without simplifying the piece to fit the level of a particular student. He always carefully assigned repertoire, giving the student only those pieces which they were capable of playing, not from a technical but rather from the musical point of view. In the detailed work that sometimes continued until almost the day of the concert, Igumnov did not direct the student’s attention toward the performance on stage; he did not “play” with the artistic ambition. The ability to perform well, which was called artistry, formed unnoticeably in the process of careful listening and of making music. And pedagogy, which seemingly disregarded focusing on performing career, impressiveness, and virtuosity, and which was directed ‘inward’ into the very essence of creative art of performance, was indeed the one that produced the most brilliant, true artists, capable of conveying to the listener the deepest meaning of musical compositions. Charm and the conquering strength of true poetry were an intrinsic part of this teaching, which at that time earned acknowledgment from young pianists with very different tastes and personalities.

The last thing on Igumnov’s mind was the desire to acquire fame through his teaching, and that is probably the reason he did become famous. This tall, thin man was kind and tactful; he never got angry, did not scream and, it seemed, was devoid of stormy displays of temperament. But surprisingly, this kind of Igumnov manner of teaching was more effective than any pedagogical clamps, and only because it was based exclusively on the artistic authority of the teacher, on everything beautiful that he let his students discover, while nurturing in them an unselfish love for art.

Igumnov’s pedagogical path was difficult and took many turns. On many occasions he rejected that which he had previously believed. During the pre-revolutionary years, Igumnov was captivated by the artistry of Briusov, and by the paintings of Serov and Somov. He stayed away from an academic manner of playing, something that was common in the studio of his teacher, P. Pabst. After 1917, when Oborin became Igumnov’s student, there came, as Igumnov put it, “a period of reevaluating all that is valuable.”²³ The reevaluation manifested itself in the playing

²¹ Lev Oborin, “A Wonderful Russian Pianist,” *Literature and Art* 8 May 1943.

²² K. Igumnov, “My performing and pedagogical principles,” quotation taken from the version published in the Leningrad Conservatory newspaper *Muzykal’nie kadri* 19 April 1948.

²³ *Ibid.*

becoming more colorful, at times even to the point of being detrimental to the rhythmic contour; also in the development of the art of legato playing and in Igumnov being drawn to music that is lyrical and reflective.

After the clear and elementary pedagogy of Gnesina, Oborin now found himself in a different world. Being firm in his views and having no inclination toward flexibility, he was not prepared to comprehend all of Igumnov's subtleties, the direction of his thoughts and taste. Mutual understanding between teacher and student did not come immediately. For a long time, Igumnov did not think that Oborin stood out from the rest of his students. At times, he would even express his concern with Oborin's scattered attitude, which he noticed in his playing as well.

Summarizing his first year at the Conservatory, the sixteen-year-old Oborin wrote in his diary: "Composition: hopes and compliments. Piano: not much hope, even fewer compliments."

In the first year, Igumnov was studying Oborin's personality. In the second year, he decided to give the student difficult tasks, chiefly in the field of sound production. He began to persistently fight against banality in Oborin's sound production and his tendency to play harshly. He destroyed the standard techniques and started to teach Oborin a simple skill—listening to oneself. At the same time, it seemed like Igumnov disregarded the purely technical approach. Such issues were addressed in passing and in succinct aphorisms: "It's bad to prepare the position of your hands in advance. Standardization of this position will lead the sound to be monotonous... Variety in hand positions ensures rich colors."²⁴ "To us, his students," Oborin recounted later, "it always seemed that our teacher's comments on technical aspects always directly corresponded to the piece being performed." Everything stemmed from listening, sensing and feeling the sound. The need to produce the desired sound reached such intensity that the hands would find a comfortable and natural position on their own. That is the reason it was impossible to imitate Igumnov's particular manner of physical movements. Oborin once wrote that one could "distinguish all of Igumnov's students because of their highly developed means of sound production."²⁵ But each one had his own specific technique, stemming from pianistic peculiarities and personality types.

Oborin did not lose such elements as accuracy, clarity, brilliance, and technical fluency, which he acquired in Gnesina's studio. But under the influence of Igumnov, these qualities were refined and became more subtle, noble, and diverse. By grasping the beauty of the piano sound, the young man discovered the 'soul' of the piano.

For Oborin, this was the most important result that he achieved from his initial studies with an outstanding piano pedagogue.

3

During the Conservatory years, the productive influence of Igumnov, who advocated poetic and beautiful piano sound, was being supplemented by many other effects. Oborin never overlooked any of the outstanding events that had to do with either composition or piano performance. Being highly talented, Oborin instinctively came into contact with bright, outstanding musicians, from whom he could learn a great deal. Igumnov did not belong to the

²⁴ Quotation from "My performing and pedagogical principles," *Muzykal'nie kadri* 29 February 1940.

²⁵ Lev Oborin, "Anniversary of K. N. Igumnov," *Sovetskoye iskusstvo* 29 February 1940.

category of teachers who had the tendency to keep students within the bounds of their studio. Since he was himself at times in doubt and changed his opinion, he believed in the benefit that can come from the students' questioning. He supported everything that stimulated artistic curiosity.

Oborin convinced himself that he had inferior technique as far back as his studies with Gnesina. Igumnov did not dissuade his opinion. Oborin did not play virtuoso pieces in the initial years at the Conservatory. Still, he was naturally interested in and fascinated by pianists with phenomenal technique.

Such masters came to Moscow from abroad. One of them was Egon Petri, a famous pupil and follower of Ferruccio Busoni. He impressed the young Oborin with an extensive repertoire and polished, precise technique. It was evident that Petri's playing was carefully thought through and was the result of a system based on the knowledge of complex psycho-physiological laws. Oborin observed that Igumnov's playing was more poetic, but there was much in it that remained shaky and imprecise. However, in Petri's approach there was foundation, which provided exceptional confidence, tirelessness, and accuracy. Oborin pondered about physical movements, coordination, the position of the wrist and fingers; he started to check many things and ... almost forgot how to play. His playing now became more inhibited, angular; technical deficiencies worsened, and the act of playing demanded more and more physical effort.

Oborin was suffering. It seemed that his pianism was at a dead end. He was even afraid of being unable to complete his piano degree at the Conservatory.

Support came unexpectedly from a person who was not teaching at the Conservatory during those years and whose accomplishments were not being acknowledged for a long time.

This was Boleslav Leopoldovich Yavorsky, a student of Taneyev, musicologist-researcher, theorist, lecturer—a musician of encyclopedic knowledge and of tragic fate. Unusually talented by nature, he did not express himself in any one field as well as he could have. He was a sensitive and a precise analyst, who possessed an amazing ability to penetrate into the depth of phenomena and to organize them. As such, Yavorsky was constantly interested in something new, running from one thing to another; he was full of plans, which he was by no means always able to realize.

To Oborin, who once happened to be at his lecture, he seemed like a distracted man. He talked about very diverse things, jumping from one subject to another, and liked to compare and bring up as examples things that were far removed from musical art.

The listener was perplexed, but gradually this brilliant intelligence—the strength of the thought which intertwined, brought together, and juxtaposed different phenomena began to intrigue and captivate. Oborin soon felt a need to communicate with this person.

Out of all Yavorsky's talents there was one which was important to the young generation: he was capable of awakening the thinking process, proposing intriguing ideas, and making people believe in themselves.

Yavorsky had already noticed Oborin in Gnesina's school and appreciated his wide-ranging talent and bright mind.

On one occasion, Oborin heard Yavorsky's explanation of the psycho-physiological side of piano playing. Yavorsky had a skeleton at home, with the help of which he scientifically explained the interaction of muscles and joints, finger movement patterns, and gave reasons for tiredness and muscle tension. Moreover, he did not base his explanations solely on the already known facts worked out by scientists. Rather, he set for himself the task of determining the nature of piano virtuosity, the psychological and physical essence of a state which allowed one to

be in perfect command of the playing apparatus. Yavorsky himself maintained that his conclusions were based for the most part on studying the performance character of Liszt. But in reality, much was added from his own ideas and, most importantly, the impact of Yavorsky's conclusions was produced by his conviction and passion.

The fact that during those years Yavorsky was not teaching at the Conservatory and was not involved directly in Oborin's piano studies helped him to understand even more clearly and to appreciate not the details, but the main aspect—an aesthetic and emotional effect that Oborin had on his listeners.

But the most important thing for Oborin was Yavorsky's complete recognition of his virtuosic talent, as well as of his aptitude for boundless technical improvement and for high technical achievements.

An acquired belief in oneself was the first and the most important step on the path to improving technique. Following that, Oborin began to look closely at what Yavorsky had been showing on the notorious skeleton. It goes without saying that an abstract showing on the skeleton could not have fascinated the young man, but he took into account what Yavorsky talked about and applied it to his own pianism.

Of these changes, Oborin said: "It turned out that my fingers could soon play quickly. A physical liberation led to a psychological change, and that, in turn promoted physical freedom." This indeed was the main task of Yavorsky. Until then, Oborin was developing faster as a musician rather than as a pianist, and there was a period of time when there could have been a tragic artistic contradiction: being very musically sensitive and intelligent, he could have stopped at a dead-end due to his problems with technique.

The psychological turning point which 'liberated' Oborin opened up some kind of spiritual and physical lock. As a result, his technique was improving rapidly, so successfully, in fact, that those listeners and musicians who were unfamiliar with Oborin's pianistic history did not have any doubts or questions concerning his virtuosity.

Having been influenced by Petri to some degree, he moved away from some of Igumnov's methods. Oborin started paying attention to specific training, solid playing, which was at times even primitive. Oborin returned again and again to etudes, studied Busoni's exercises, and Godowsky's transcriptions of the Chopin Etudes.

Oborin's improvement in technique became noticeable in the 1930s.

A young Emil Gilels appeared on the concert stage. He overcame the complexities of virtuoso literature half-jokingly, and it seemed there was no limit to his possibilities.

Yakov Flier, a young student of Igumnov, made his debut with Rachmaninoff's Third Concerto and Liszt's B Minor Sonata. In Leningrad, the virtuoso school was being taught by L. V. Nikolayev. With an exceptional conscientiousness, Nikolayev scrupulously taught his numerous students technical aspects that he based on a deep understanding of scientific and artistic practices.

In Soviet pianism during these years, as in any other young artistic culture, it was important to search for solutions to problems having to do with technique, mastery, and means of expression. Young people persistently perfected technique and found this work to be enjoyable.

The first National Competition, which was held in May of 1933, revealed how far ahead the mastery of the young Soviet pianists had gone. The competition turned out to be a fireworks display of virtuoso talents. Sitting in the audience, Oborin listened with amazement to the Mozart-Liszt Marriage of Figaro Fantasy in a brilliant performance by Gilels; and along with the entire audience he could not refrain from giving a standing ovation.

Shortly afterwards, Oborin heard the playing of Carlo Zecchi. This Italian pianist, who had worked with Busoni, played passages and trills in head-spinning tempos and with pearl-like clarity. This again opened up many possibilities to observe the secrets of mastery, technical approaches and ways of playing.

No significant event went by without Oborin's notice. In the process of observing them, he changed his habits and searched for something new.

His virtuoso repertoire broadened. His interest toward works with extreme technical difficulties was becoming more apparent. In concerts, one would constantly hear Liszt's transcriptions, rhapsodies, Don Juan, Marriage of Figaro, Erlkönig, Second Rhapsody, Mephisto Waltz.

The schooling that he received from Igumnov prevented him from taking things to the extreme. Oborin knew not to go beyond the limits. The critics only infrequently took note of his tendency to rush and to force the sound.

Oborin was now gradually developing an individual style of piano technique, based on his thinking, taste, and personality. This technique was not characterized by forcefulness, tension, or outward flair. Staying away from big motions, Oborin simply used the weight of his hands. The main attention went to the development of the wrist and to the sensitivity of finger tips. The pianist easily achieved extreme technical fluency and precision, but at the same time, gave each passage a singing and melodic quality.

Having learned the secrets of mastery in a short period of time, Oborin gradually began to lose interest in virtuosic literature. In Liszt's Second and Spanish Rhapsodies, he focused his attention on the national motives and the color of the sound. The pianist began working on Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage* with enthusiasm. The interpretation of such Liszt works as *Au lac de Wallenstadt*, *Au bord d'une source*, *Vallée d'Obermann*, *Venezia e Napoli*, and the *Sonetto del Petrarca* (A-flat major), showed the best qualities of Oborin's pianism: sincerity, warmth, and clarity.

At the end of the 1930s, Oborin stopped the special technical training for some time, and focused his attention on the new task of expanding his repertoire.

IV The First Performances

1

Prior to the Warsaw Competition, Oborin's interest in different areas of music prevented him from concentrating on a career in performance, not that he was striving for it. Oborin appeared on stage quite infrequently, only slightly more than he was required to as a piano student at the Conservatory. Nevertheless, due to the insistence of Igumnov and his classmates, Oborin gave several solo recitals before the competition.

The first one, which shall represent the beginning of the pianist's performance career, was proposed by Dmitri Shostakovich.

In December of 1924 Oborin came to Leningrad. He stayed with Shostakovich's family.

Dmitri Shostakovich, who was already a part of the Chamber Music Circle of Friends, asked Oborin to perform for the Circle. However, in the hall where the musical gatherings were held,²⁶ all of the evenings had been reserved; the only evening still available was on December 31, 1924. Oborin was about to decline, but Shostakovich insisted, telling him that he would be selling the tickets himself.

The concert did take place.

The hall, as one would expect, was half empty, but among the listeners, Oborin noticed the most popular—at that time—music critics V. Karatigin and B. Asafiev. The head of the Leningrad Piano School, L. Nikolayev, was also present, which meant a lot. Oborin had made an impression. Shostakovich's enthusiastic praise, and rumors about the talent of a young Igumnov student who made it to the capital, had played their role.

Oborin, who underestimated his pianism and accepted praise with distrust, chose a program that not so much showed his mastery as introduced the listeners to a few significant works from the Moscow school. He played the Scriabin's Second Sonata and Etudes, Op. 8, Shebalin's Quasi-Sonata, Miaskovsky's "Whims," and fragments from Medtner's "Forgotten Motives." Oborin also decided to perform his own Scherzo for piano for the first time outside of Moscow.

The concert was successful. A brief review was written by a then-emerging musicologist and composer, V. M. Bogdanov-Berezovsky. In it, Oborin was singled out from a line of pianists who performed in the Chamber Music Circle. The content and seriousness of the program were noted, along with the expressivity of Miaskovsky's "Whims" and Medtner's "Forgotten Motives." Also mentioned was the live artistic thinking of Oborin the composer.²⁷

This was the first published review that was specifically devoted to the young pianist. Along with the review, Oborin left Leningrad with 2 rubles and 60 kopeikas. This was the recital fee—his first-ever earnings as an artist.

Upon returning to Moscow, Oborin learned a required program for one half of a concert, as part of his studies at the Conservatory. The student who was also supposed to perform fell ill unexpectedly and Oborin had to fill the rest of the concert by himself. He performed many pieces without preparation. The incident had been beneficial: it tested his will. Oborin started to get used to unexpectedness and changeability, always a part of the artist's profession.

²⁶ Now the Leningrad Puppet Theater, directed by the renowned artist of RSFSR Evg. Demmeni.

²⁷ "Lev Oborin's Concert," *Zhizn iskusstva* 13 January 1925.

Soon Oborin gave another concert, this time together with Grigory Ginsburg, at the Maly Hall of the Moscow Conservatory. Oborin played works by Chopin and Scriabin; Ginsburg played Liszt.

These kinds of student performances during those years were attended enthusiastically by music admirers and were much publicized. New names sparked interest. In the Moscow artistic circles, the talented Igumnov student was being hailed as a rising star. And Igumnov himself, who until that point did not truly appreciate Oborin's artistic talent, started to pay more attention to it. He offered to extend Oborin's studies for an extra year at the Conservatory. But Oborin felt he now had the ability to learn independently. He did not feel free within the bounds of student responsibilities. He declined his teacher's proposal.

On the day of the final exam, Oborin could barely get to the Maly Hall because it was so crowded: there were almost two people for every chair. The ticket taker did not believe that the person responsible for this commotion was this slim young man standing before the entrance and begging to be let in to take his exam.

Oborin's exam program included the following works: Beethoven Sonata, Op. 106; Chopin Ballade No. 4; Mozart-Liszt-Busoni Marriage of Figaro; Scriabin Sonata No. 5; Prokofiev Concerto No. 3.

As is evident, by that time Oborin's virtuosic abilities had been clearly revealed. An extensive program, lasting about two hours, showed the graduate's many strengths. There was an incredibly difficult and infrequently-performed Beethoven Sonata; a not-so-popular (during that time) Prokofiev Third Concerto; and of course, Oborin's favorite composers—Chopin and Scriabin, with whom he felt most confident.

After graduating from the Conservatory with much success, Lev Oborin was accepted into postgraduate studies. The plan was to be Igumnov's teaching assistant, to improve as a pianist, and to graduate in the near future as a composer.

During the summer, with the help of his mother's savings, the young man was able to allow himself to take an entertaining trip, full of unusual and poetic impressions. He went to Tbilisi, and from there he took the Georgian-Military road by foot.

At home in Moscow great news awaited him. The First Symphonic Ensemble, or "Persimfans," invited the Conservatory graduate to perform Prokofiev's Third Concerto at the season's opening in the fall.

This was a great honor. "Persimfans," an unconventional symphony orchestra without a conductor, was based on the principle of a collected leadership and stood out for its sharp ensemble mastery. It was popular in Moscow. Many famous composers and pianists played with this orchestra: Sergei Prokofiev, Egon Petri, Carlo Zecchi, Heinrich Neuhaus. The invitation to perform certified the orchestra's trust in Oborin and their recognition of his musical abilities. Performing with "Persimfans" demanded one to have sharp ensemble intuition; be able to listen and comprehend the whole; to be composed, self-confident and flexible. All this was necessary because there was no conductor standing on the podium who would take into account all the surprises and coordinate the orchestra and pianist. In essence, when performing a concerto with the orchestra, the role of the conductor transferred to the soloist, who was expected to inspire the orchestra with his enthusiasm and become its leader. Thus, when performing with "Persimfans," the 'magnetism' of the soloist became more important.

Oborin successfully completed this task as well.

The "Persimfans" initiative was noted and approved by the public. A review in *Pravda* said: "The success of the concert was possible because of a fresh selection of pieces, a well

thought-through program, a well-played performance, and finally because of the exceptionally talented virtuoso soloist.”²⁸ Aside from the virtuoso talent, the newspaper noted “...a rare... knowledge of pianistic sound and an ability to combine it with the orchestra.” Concerning the interpretation of the Concerto, it was being compared to that of Prokofiev himself: “a nineteen-year-old pianist, L. Oborin, played Prokofiev’s Third Concerto with such an inimitable mastery and an ability to understand the composer’s ideas that at times it seemed as though one was hearing Prokofiev himself.”

It is difficult to judge now if the last statement is correct. A comparison of the famous recording of Prokofiev playing the Concerto himself with a somewhat later performance by Oborin leads one to assume that the approaches were different. Oborin did not have and, due to his personality and pianism, could not have had a Prokofiev-like power, hammering, harsh strength and deliberate bluntness.

In another review of the performance there was a brief but notable remark about the lack of strength in Oborin’s playing.²⁹

It should also be mentioned that at that time Oborin had not yet heard Prokofiev’s playing. The composer gave concerts in Moscow and Leningrad somewhat later, in 1927.

What is important to see now when looking back on what the young pianist was accomplishing, is not the similarities or differences in interpretation but another substantial feature, which had an effect on Oborin’s entire career that was to follow. It was the fact that he was achieving the first big success as a performer of the Soviet music—music which had not yet had a stable tradition of interpretation. Prokofiev’s Concerto, written in 1921, had only been played in Moscow by S. Feinberg before composer’s arrival from abroad. The young pianists did not yet feel confident to perform the new piece in the presence of a large audience. In such circumstances, an attempt of the nineteen-year-old Oborin appeared brave, and served as proof of his striving to learn and promote new works rather than to follow in everybody’s footsteps.

Through the performance with the “Persimfans” in October of 1926, Oborin became noticed by concert organizations. This was impressive since they were not usually kind in their assessment of the young performers’ talents. Upon conquering the approval of the public and the press, Oborin was gradually becoming a noticeable figure in the concert life. The benefits of the performance career came much later. The pianist turned out to be prepared for such a career due to years of diligent practicing, an accumulated wide-ranging knowledge, skills, and culture. In addition, his character had already formed, with its best traits being diligence and self-discipline.

But his success was not only the result of the ‘inner’ qualities and personal circumstances. The nature of the times facilitated the debut.

The fast pace of life had an effect on the life of a performer. The country started a cultural revolution where all the cultural spheres were being decisively revised. The task of enlightening the masses was put before the musical art, as well as that of making millions of workers embrace the summits of world’s classical music. Amateur music-making had begun to develop. The musical establishments had been growing in number; a system of degrees was being put together. Music was being systematically promoted and the audiences’ tastes were being formed by listening to outstanding representatives of the art.

Foreign masters, who frequently and enthusiastically concertized in the Soviet Union, were not able at times to understand the new ideas. They were just kind guests on our land. The

²⁸ Evg. Braudo, “The opening concert of ‘Persimfans’” Pravda 13 October 1926.

²⁹ M. Greenberg, “The first concert of ‘Persimfans,’” Vecherniya Moskva 7 October 1926.

country was in need of performing artists who had a close connection with the public, who thoroughly understood the Party's ideas, and who felt the pulse of the new life.

The young talents were being provided comprehensive support.

Long before the Chopin Competition, Lev Oborin received a stipend, on the instruction of the People's Commissar of Education, A. B. Lunacharsky, to complete his studies. In an article about perspectives of Soviet art, published in *Pravda* on May 1, 1926, Lunacharsky specifically noted the pianist's talent. He predicted a brilliant future for Oborin, saying: "Oborin, a very young pianist and composer rises gradually among his peers as a major talent."³⁰

Bravery and inspiration were becoming distinguishing characteristics of the young generation's concert life. In this atmosphere, artists matured quickly, and got used to independence, friendly competition, and artistic communication early on.

Oborin did not go through a difficult time in order to achieve success. He did not know what such things as talent resistance, jealousy, greed, and malice were. The roads were open for him and his youth as an artist turned out to be truly happy.

The beginning of the journey always remains in the artist's memory and leaves a lasting impression on the artistic character. For a long time, Oborin kept a bright, youthful outlook on life. He was confident in his abilities and was spiritually balanced.

As late as 1937, when the pianist was thirty years old, people would write of him: "In all of Oborin's appearance there is something that one wants to explain with the words 'a spoilt child of fortune.' The public in their turn spoils such people further and gets drawn to them, just as everything living is drawn to warmth and light."³¹

2

Before his trip abroad, Nikolay Orlov, who liked Oborin and believed in his talent, made a list of repertoire for him which consisted of the following works: Bach Preludes and Fugues E-flat minor and B-flat minor from WTC I; Bach-Liszt Fantasy in G minor; Beethoven Sonatas Nos. 7, 17, 27, 28, 30, 31, 32; Schumann Kreisleriana, Fantasy; Chopin Sonata in B minor, Ballade No. 4, Fantasy; Liszt Sonata in B minor; Rachmaninoff Concerto No. 2; Scriabin Second Sonata, Preludes from various opus numbers; Tchaikovsky Concerto No. 1.

The list included those pieces from Igumnov's repertoire which the teacher thoroughly knew, loved, and taught with enthusiasm to his students. Orlov advised Oborin to learn the listed pieces with the help of Igumnov in order to have a firm basis for his concert programs.

From time to time Oborin came to his lessons with a request to study one of these pieces. The innocent trick worked: Igumnov was amazed at how similar his student's desires were to his own.

As is evident from the list, at the core of the repertoire was Romantic music. A few fugues had been learned from Bach's works. Oborin was not much interested in the Sonatas of Haydn and Mozart. Aside from the Chopin works, a considerable place in the repertoire was taken by Scriabin. The works of Scriabin were included in almost all of the pianist's early concert performances, and judging from what the press had to say, these were performed with much success. In later conversations with the author of this book Oborin maintained that his infatuation with Scriabin's music had been temporary. Interest toward Scriabin's creative work was for the most part the result of Igumnov's influence. Igumnov was a friend of Scriabin and

³⁰ A. Lunacharsky, "Accomplishments of our art," *Pravda* 1 May 1926.

³¹ "Musician, Lev Oborin," *Sovetskoye iskusstvo* 5 October 1937.

promoted his music tirelessly. He knew perfectly all of Scriabin's works, remembered well the composer's own playing, and was capable of resurrecting and relating many of its peculiarities.³²

Scriabin's group, formed in the beginning of the century, was still strong, especially at the Moscow Conservatory. Heinrich Neuhaus performed the cycle of 10 Scriabin Sonatas; Alexander Borovsky and A. B. Goldenweiser considered themselves to be 'Scriabinists.' The young star of Vladimir Sofronitsky was rising and Scriabin's works took up a major part of his repertoire.

In the 1920s, Scriabin's music was being perceived as the major new element of Russian piano art. Naturally, it was impossible for these factors not to have an influence on a forming artist. The young Oborin performed Scriabin's pieces up to Opus 50. His favorite works to program were the Second Sonata, the Etudes, Op. 8, and the Preludes, Op. 11.

Playing a lot of Chopin, Oborin was not much concerned at that time about finding his own approach to the composer. Being first a musician and then a pianist, Oborin did not want to focus on any one area of the repertoire, no matter how extensive it was. He was afraid of artistic narrowness, and was against confining a pianist to one 'role,' believing that theatric analogies were out of place in the art of piano. Oborin would say frequently that "an actor is only a character in the play; the pianist *is* the play."

At the beginning stages of his studies, Oborin was curious about composition and playing music. Now, when striving for a career in performance, he felt it was necessary to limit himself to a wide-ranging repertoire, covering many styles of piano music.

The biggest problem was Beethoven.

The critics did not think that Oborin had a deep understanding of Beethoven. The reviews concerning his first experiences in interpreting Beethoven's music were condescending. Against the background of such Beethoven interpreters as Artur Schnabel (who toured the USSR a number of times) or the young Maria Yudina, for whom Beethoven was the central composer, his experiences seemed modest. However, these failures did not discourage the pianist. In spite of experts' skepticism, he did not lose faith and kept persistently including Beethoven works on his concert programs. The public demanded: "Chopin, play Chopin," but Oborin played Beethoven, knowing that it was very likely he would read critical remarks about himself in the newspapers the next day.

During his last year at the Conservatory, Oborin learned Sonata No. 29. He worked on it the entire year before deciding to include it in his final examination. The student performance of one of the most difficult works in piano literature was graded positively. By itself, the decision of the eighteen-year-old pianist to play this Sonata won over, showing the seriousness of his artistic intentions. Thus many of the student's faults were forgiven. But when Oborin played it after the Chopin Competition, in 1927 and later, the public already viewed him as a concert artist. Critical marks became more strict.

The criticism of the Sonata's performance stated only the results; it was at times superficial and did not account for artistic maturing. Nevertheless, it made Oborin search for reasons for this failure.

It seemed that he did everything that was written in the score. He was sure that he played correctly, clearly, and logically. He accurately felt and performed everything that Igumnov showed him at the lessons. He could explain every one of his intentions; he spent a great deal of time thoroughly analyzing the Sonata.

³² Later they were recorded in Igumnov's edition of Scriabin's piano pieces, which was created in collaboration with Ya. Milstein. Following Igumnov's death, Oborin also became involved in the making of this edition.

This means that the reasons for the failure lay deeper. It was something that Oborin did not yet understand.

For the first time the pianist began to think about the question of “subtext” of playing, that is the leading psychological direction of music, which is responsible for all the details, characteristics, and peculiarities. He was trying without result to catch something that was deeply hidden behind the signs in the score and contained the emotional meaning of Beethoven’s creation.

Several late Beethoven sonatas which he learned under Igumnov’s instruction opened very important artistic moments for him. However, even when combined together, they were insufficient to make him understand such an exceptional phenomenon as the Sonata No. 29. The spiritual viewpoint of the young Oborin was not compatible with the task. He did not have enough life experience or the inner preparation for such critical work. Everything was in essence foreign to his strong but soft nature. That is why the usual approach to the form betrayed him. In this Sonata, one could not depend solely on the instinctive feeling of the relationship between movements. The form was ‘created’ by emotional tension and by comprehension of the innermost philosophical meaning of the work.

Oborin backed down.

Sonata No. 29 disappeared from his recital programs. He returned to the sonatas that he learned previously, during his first years at the Conservatory and even to the ones he had studied while in Gnesina’s studio. Oborin began to work on a series of sonatas without performing them on stage. He simply wanted to get them under his fingers and to listen carefully to Beethoven’s music. He acted cautiously and as a result gradually found a part of the Beethoven repertoire which seemed close to his heart at that time. These pieces included the Third and Fifth Concertos, the Waldstein Sonata, and especially Sonata No. 26.

Oborin began his studies with Igumnov with Sonata No. 26, which he had already learned in Gnesina’s studio. With this work he made many discoveries.

“I brought Beethoven’s Sonata ‘Lebewohl,’ which I had conscientiously learned before, to a lesson,” recounted Oborin. “Konstantin Nikolayevich listened to it and suggested that I play it again. He stopped me right away and in the course of fifteen minutes worked on the opening phrase, trying to achieve the necessary singing sound. And suddenly, just from this single phrase, I began to view the entire Sonata as having some kind of new and completely unexpected expressive colors.”³³

From that moment, Oborin searched independently for a more expressive means of playing, paying attention to details and to the general form of the piece.

He regarded the Sonata as one of the most lyrical creations of the great composer. There were no stormy conflicts as in the ‘Appassionata’ that was composed at about the same time. While performing the Sonata, Oborin acted as a story teller, revealing his mastery of articulation and the heartfelt melodic expressivity that he learned from Igumnov. The texture and variety of the speech intonations contributed to the programmatic aspect of the performance. The multitude of coloristic features was delightful because it showed sensitivity toward Beethoven’s timbral discoveries—something that was not as noticeable in other pianists’ playing.

Just as with Chopin’s B minor Sonata, Beethoven’s Sonata No. 26 took an important place in Oborin’s artistic life. At the most difficult moments of his life, the pianist searched for and found consolation in this piece.

³³ Lev Oborin, “Anniversary of K. N. Igumnov,” *Sovetskoye iskusstvo* 29 February 1940.

The Sonata became one of the signature pieces of Lev Oborin's performing career. Thus, in Beethoven he learned self-restriction; he came to pieces that were philosophical, lyrical, and pastoral. Harmony and balance, qualities that were characteristic of the pianist, predominated in his interpretations of this part of Beethoven's creative work.

Working to improve these qualities, Oborin along with his teacher Igumnov ended up having an entirely different conception of Beethoven's works from other Soviet pianists. Maria Yudina's approach was one that emphasized the tension of dramatic conflicts. Her playing of Beethoven was sharp-edged, severe, strict, restless, passionate, and always controversial.

Two pianists who had great respect for each other were basically involved in a hidden controversy: Oborin did not agree with Yudina's abruptness and exaggeration while Yudina in turn did not understand Oborin's warm approach.

There was no winner. The searches of two wonderful artists—interesting and different, enriched the interpretive traditions of the genius of piano music.

V Chopin's Poetry

1. Before the Competition

In December of 1926, the rules of the International Chopin Competition became known in Moscow. "Three weeks before the competition," says Oborin, "Igumnov showed me the repertoire list for the competition." The list consisted of the following: Polonaise in F-sharp minor, Op. 44; Preludes in B-flat minor, Op. 28 No. 16 and F-sharp minor, Op. 28 No. 8; two Nocturnes; two Etudes; two Mazurkas chosen from the jury's list; one of the Ballades of the competitor's choice, and a Concerto. "In my repertoire there was only a third of the required pieces. Preparing under such circumstance seemed pointless."³⁴

But Yavorsky, who intervened in making the decision, insisted. He believed that the lack of time was not an issue because Oborin possessed experience, knowledge, and drive, which would help him in learning new repertoire. He believed that the mobilization of strength would be beneficial to Oborin's artistic growth.

Yavorsky and Oborin had the following phone conversation:

"Are you going?"

"No, I don't have enough time."

"You don't want it badly enough. The Conservatory did not teach you to want or to strive for things."

Yavorsky then came to Oborin's house to talk to his mother.

The young man's self-respect was hurt. However, he soon acquired confidence through Yavorsky's words and Igumnov's advices. The preparation had begun.

Forgetting about other studies, Oborin was spending eight hours a day in front of the piano. All of his spiritual and physical strength—everything he had learned, was coming together to accomplish one task: learn the program. In three weeks Oborin learned two Nocturnes which he never played, C minor and G Major; two Mazurkas, B minor and A minor; two Preludes, F-sharp minor and B-flat minor; and the Polonaise in F-sharp minor. In addition, he practiced the previously-learned Ballade No. 4 and two Etudes. Oborin did not find time to learn the entire F

³⁴ "Soviet pianists regarding Chopin," *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 2 (1960): 45.

minor Concerto; he had no hope of making it into the finals, where the Concerto was to be performed with the orchestra.

Igumnov carefully guided his student, understanding that this time it was not possible to work on details. He also felt that the previous instruction that Oborin received and his accumulated experience would help him in preparing the program. As a result, there was no nervousness or hurry, which is usually present in pre-competition lessons. Igumnov would choose some kind of central episode in a piece, then explain it in detail to the student. Emphasis was put on the sense of balance, taste, naturalness of musical speech and beauty of sound. For the most part Igumnov let Oborin solve technical problems on his own.

The first departure abroad of the young ambassadors of Soviet piano school caused much interest among the public. The press followed the process of preparation for the competition. Oborin's name started to frequently appear in the newspapers.

As a result of the preliminary audition, four pianists were selected to go to Warsaw: three from Moscow—L. Oborin, G. Ginsburg, Yu. Briushkov; and one from Leningrad—D. Shostakovich. The participants represented all the leading piano schools of that time—those of Igumnov, Goldenweiser, and Nikolayev. Briushkov was a pupil of Kipp and the oldest of the four pianists (born in 1903). He had established himself as a steady performer of Chopin's works in Moscow long before the competition.

Seven days before the departure, on Friday, January 14th, 1927, a final audition was held at the Bolshoi Hall of the Moscow Conservatory. All four pianists played along with a pianist from Leningrad, I. Schwarz. The concert was accompanied by a detailed program and photographs of the participants. The entire musical community of Moscow gathered at the Bolshoi Hall for this performance by the young men.

The press also responded. The newspaper *Izvestia* wrote the following about Oborin: "The youngest of the performers, L. Oborin, is equally strong in understanding the logical as well as the emotional aspects of Chopin's work. His performances are already filled with intellect, feeling, a will to perform, and an ability to be the master of the instrument." The reviewer also noted the quality of the pianist's technique, indicating in passing that "it is due to Oborin's outstanding technique and his fascination with it as a young performer that he took excessively fast tempos." In closing, the newspaper expressed confidence in successful outcome of the competition: "The grandiose evening of the pianists' performances left a reassuring feeling: Soviet piano culture will be represented well in Warsaw; the performances of Chopin by our young artists will serve as strong indication of the general state of our artistic and cultural work."³⁵

On January 29, 1927, four pianists left for Warsaw in order to represent Soviet performance artistry abroad for the first time.

2. In Warsaw

In comparison to many music competitions that were to follow, the scale of the 1927 Chopin Competition now appears modest. Only thirty-two pianists from nine countries took part in the competition. It was scheduled in time for the dedication of Chopin's monument in Warsaw and consisted of two rounds—preliminary and final. Those pianists who were let through to the

³⁵ Sergei Bugoslavsky, "The concert of five pianists," *Izvestia* 16 January 1927.

final round performed a concerto with the orchestra. They did so without having any rehearsals because the organizers had limited budget; the government did not subsidize the competition.³⁶

Whereas the contestants had come from several different countries, the jury consisted of Polish musicians and was headed by the director of the Warsaw Music School, Witold Maliszewski.³⁷

Only three prizes were to be awarded. The first prize winner was to receive 5,000 zloty and a present given personally by the Polish president. The second and third prizes were 3,000 and 2,000 zloty, respectively.³⁸

Despite its modest scale and mission, the First Chopin Competition nevertheless became a notable event in the history of performance artistry in the 20th century.

Its closest preceding competition had been the Anton Rubinstein Competition of 1910. The seventeen years that separated these competitions had been full of critical historical events. The world had divided into two social systems. Art was becoming a more and more active part of the ideological struggle.

Close to a then-bourgeois Poland there was a young Soviet Country, which was loved passionately by some, hated by others, and was of interest to everyone abroad without exception. The political atmosphere was tense. In bourgeois Poland, where Chopin's memory was being celebrated as an important occasion, a cunning murder of a Soviet ambassador was being planned at that time. Some also planned to invade Soviet Russia to restore empiricism. There was little belief in the Soviet culture. The immigrant White Guardists, who were influential in prominent Polish circles of that time, hysterically screamed about "the hand of Kremlin" encroaching on sovereign Poland. Nationalistic tendencies intensified and expanded. Long before the competition commenced, the local press praised the Polish pianists, considering them to be the only true interpreters of the great composer's works and the sole contenders for the prizes.

The four young Russian pianists crossed the border not without fear. They were met in Warsaw with restrained curiosity. The average residents were not so much interested in their playing as they were in their appearance. They were surprised by the well-tailored suits, good behavior, manners, and affability.

In spite of their youth, timidity and inexperience, the Soviet participants soon realized that they were not just musicians here, but music ambassadors of their country.

In the Polish capital, the nineteen-year-old Oborin for the first time felt something which since then always accompanied him on his trips abroad. It was the feeling of the great importance of his work, going well beyond the limits of art.

In the drawing, Oborin got eleventh number. He was the first of the Soviet pianists to play and thus his performance was being eagerly anticipated.

"I felt this mutual state of vigilance," the pianist recounted many years later. "While playing the first piece—the G Major Nocturne, I felt from the public's reaction that I was forming contact with them, and I thought: 'I will be okay.'"³⁹

³⁶ The proposition for its organization came from a pianist and pedagogue Ezhi Zhuravlev. The Warsaw Chopin Music School and the Warsaw Musical Society committee were directly involved in organizing the competition. The performance committee developed the rules, program, and appointed the competition's jury members.

³⁷ The jury also included E. Zhuravlev, I. Turchinsky (the future editor of the complete Polish edition of Chopin's works), Z. Drzewiecki (director of Krakow Music School), Sofia Rabtsevich-Poznanskaya (a former student of Anton Rubinstein), Yuzef Smidovich, Felitsian Shopski and others; altogether twelve pianist-pedagogues. For the final round a famous German pianist, Alfred Hoehn, joined the jury.

³⁸ At the competition the jury added a fourth prize and several diplomas to the planned original prizes.

The power of art overcame prejudice. The sympathy of listeners was won instantly, without reserve. And rumors spread throughout Warsaw about a striking pianist from Moscow, who can play Chopin in such a way no pianist in Poland could.

For Oborin himself, this was first of all a test of his artistry: an ability to captivate and conquer by his playing an unfamiliar, even hostile audience. It was also a test of his will, self-control, and inner concentration.

Exhausted from his intense preparation and an unaccustomed nervous tension, he did not clearly realize the scale of his success. Nevertheless, he acquired confidence after the preliminary round.

Oborin was not ready for the final round. He did not learn the Concerto in its entirety and had never played it with the orchestra. His only experience playing with an orchestra was the time he played Prokofiev's Third Concerto with "Persimfans." And even then, with the Prokofiev Concerto, firstly, he knew the work thoroughly, and secondly, playing with an orchestra without a conductor, as was the case with "Persimfans," could not possibly compare to the circumstances of the Warsaw performance.

Oborin had no hope for a successful outcome of performing riskily an unprepared concerto. He also could not get any help in terms of artistry because Igumnov stayed in Moscow.

For three days Oborin worked on the F minor Concerto without getting away from the piano. He was hearing the piece in his brain, in his sleep, and whenever he got a chance to rest. He worked as if he were possessed, forgetting about everything except the music. The fatigue was so extreme that he did not feel it.

Oborin appeared on stage of the magnificent hall of the Warsaw Philharmonic Society, vaguely distinguishing what was happening around him. He did not remember how he played, did not hear the enthusiastic applause of the audience. After he finished playing, he automatically bowed, made it to the green room and . . . lost consciousness.

Oborin's performance in the final round became a sensation. Polish newspapers with different political views were forced to recognize Moscow as the winner. As Ilya Erenburg put it at that time, "Diplomacy had to be put aside and Poles had to admit that the best performer of Chopin was a 'Moscal.' And what about Warsaw? Warsaw was delighted. Oborin almost died because he was being smothered by the crowd of mad female fans."⁴⁰ **(PIC 74)**

Even such an ardent enemy of the Soviet Union as Pilsudsky praised Oborin's playing and gave him as a gift a gold-embroidered cover for his piano.

The success of the Soviet pianist was noted not only in Poland. An American newspaper, *The New York Times*, printed a photograph of Oborin. Extensive reports about the sensational result of the competition became known in Austria, Germany, and Czechoslovakia.

The Polish piano school suffered defeat in the competition even though the winners of second and third prizes were representatives from Poland. The second prize winner, Stanislaw Szpinalsky, had been a student at the Moscow Conservatory who returned to Warsaw not long before the competition. Third prize winner Rosa Etkina was a student of Artur Schnabel. Regarding Etkina, even the Warsaw press considered it a misjudgment to award a prize to such an uninteresting pianist. To explain the jury's bias, the press referred to the speech given by Maliszewski at the conclusion of the competition. In it he said: "the jury, with pain in their hearts, gave the first prize to someone other than a Pole." Others who also suffered defeat were

³⁹ "Soviet pianists regarding Chopin," *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 2 (1960): 46.

⁴⁰ Ilya Erenburg, "In Poland," *Krasnaya nov'* March 1928.

pianists from seven other countries, including France, which had a rich tradition of performing Chopin's works.

Among the Soviet participants, aside from Oborin, the title of laureate went to Grigori Ginsburg, a student of Goldenweiser. Honorable mentions went to Yuri Briushkov and Dmitri Shostakovich.⁴¹

The victory was impressive. Karol Szymanowski, a major Polish composer, had good reason to say: "Regarding the Russian pianists who recently performed in Warsaw, Lodz, Krakow, Lvov, Poznani, and Vilno ...they simply won over our musical world. They came, they played, and they won... This can not be called success, or even a furor. This was an utter victorious procession, a triumph! This is especially true of the young Oborin, a twenty-two year old musician, who received the first prize at the Chopin International Competition...⁴² This recent Conservatory graduate from Moscow astonished me more than such mature masters as Orlov and Borovsky... Phenomenal! One may bow in front of him for he creates beauty..."⁴³

Following the competition, Soviet pianists were invited to tour several countries. Oborin signed a contract to give twelve concerts in Poland. Together with Shostakovich he went on a two-week trip to Germany.

The result of the 1927 Chopin Competition in Warsaw attracted everyone's attention. It now became important to look closely at the issues that have to do with performing Chopin's works, for the sake of furthering pianistic art.

3. Traditions

What took place was something that occurred quite frequently in the history of performance art: a young artist, without knowing it himself—with bravery, instinct, strength and a youthful directness—revealed a turning point in the interpretation and understanding of a specific musical style, in this case the style of Chopin.

Arguments about the interpretation of Chopin's works originated as far back as the time of Liszt and Rubinstein. The music of Chopin, clear and refined—always close to one's heart and an inspiration to many generations—at times appeared as an unsolvable mystery. It evoked poetic images, both picturesque and contradictory. Many pianists played his music, loved it, and were captivated by it. But how many of them could consider themselves to be true 'Chopinists?'

It was simplicity, sometimes true and at other times illusory, that produced countless complexities. "This seemingly 'outdated' composer was one of the bravest innovators: he came up with new genres or gave unprecedented meaning to the old ones. He enriched the expressivity of music and the means to achieve this expression."⁴⁴ Chopin's phraseology demanded unusual delicacy and flawless taste. His pedaling did not follow elementary patterns. The color of sound had to be achieved by a particular touch, one devoid of Liszt's passionate expressivity or Schumann's density and thickness. With this special touch, it was as if each sound vibrated under the fingers. The biggest problem, however, was the content of Chopin's wonderful works. Many researchers and writers had been unsuccessful in understanding their meaning. It was impossible to make generalizations; it seemed impossible to describe Chopin's musical world in

⁴¹ Yu. Briushkov accidentally injured his finger and did not take part in the final round.

⁴² The age of nineteen-year old Oborin is noted incorrectly.

⁴³ Aleksander Misulovin, "Polish composer on Russian pianism," *Slovo* 20 February 1927.

⁴⁴ V. Zukerman, "Notes on Chopin's musical language," *Frederick Chopin* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1960): 45.

words. Boundlessly deep, it enveloped all emotional subtleties and nuances of moods, which only music could express. Just as in Chekhov's plays, the spiritual 'subtext' in this unique art was incredibly difficult to understand.

Franz Liszt, a great contemporary and friend of Chopin, who was the first one to try to understand his works, was forced to note the confusion that had to do with the appreciation and understanding of this music. "Since the many forms of art are only varied incantations destined to arouse sentiments and passions and make them, as it were, perceptible and tangible, since they communicate the quickenings of emotion, genius appears through the design of new shapes now and again adapted to feelings not yet embraced within the magic circle. Can it be hoped that, in those arts combining sensation with emotion unaided by thought and reflection, the very introduction of uncommon forms and styles is not already an obstacle to the immediate grasp of the work?"⁴⁵

The difficulty of performing Chopin's music was exacerbated by the character of Chopin's pianism itself. He knew 'secrets' that no one else did. "In his performance Chopin delightfully imparted that sense of restlessness that gave the melody a surging effect, like a skiff on the crest of a mighty wave. Early in his writings he described this style, which lent such an individual stamp to his playing, by the phrase *Tempo rubato*: time stolen or broken, a flexible measure, both lingering and abrupt, quivering like a breath-shaken flame."⁴⁶

Liszt defined Chopin's innovation as the "rule of irregularity," due to which the unaccustomed became the norm and because of which many performances that had been endorsed for decades had been overturned. Chopin was able to give a new original meaning to accentuation, rhythm, and *rubato*.

His relationship with the public was unusual as well. During the era when pianists were beginning to conquer wide circles of listeners, Chopin limited the numbers of his audience. He did not play in large halls. His subtle, refined playing was addressed to a relatively small circle of those who appreciated music. Chopin's long and severe illness also played a role. It did not let him, especially during the final years of his life, perform frequently or play with a lot of sound and in fast tempos. He was forced to limit himself.

A question was raised: should one imitate Chopin the pianist in playing his works? Was the composer's interpretation the sole correct one—the best, and one that fits the spirit of the work?

The difference of opinions began during Chopin's life, when Liszt had been interpreting his works.

The tension between Chopin and Liszt did not stem solely from personal conflicts but from Chopin's disagreement with Liszt's interpretation as well, which was stormy, passionate, full of drama, and intended for performance in big halls.

As time passed, each country put forth "their own" Chopin.

France, where the composer spent half of his life and composed most of his creations—where he performed as a pianist and had been a teacher—emphasized brilliance, lightness, and a casual elegance through the teachings of such pedagogues at the Paris Conservatoire as Zimmerman, Marmontel, and Herz. The atmosphere of the brilliant salons of the 1840s was evident in, for instance, the interpretation of Chopin's Waltzes by Antoine Marmontel, a

⁴⁵ Franz Liszt, *Frederic Chopin* (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963) 29-30.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

contemporary of Chopin who heard him play on many occasions, and by many of Marmontel's students.⁴⁷

Poland was striving to revive the national themes in Chopin's works, especially in the dance forms—mazurkas, polonaises, and waltzes. People searched for the key to understanding the spirit and meaning of Chopin's poetry in Polish every-day life, in nationalistic traits, and in Polish literature.

The German school did not pay much attention to Chopin. Here there were elements of rationalization; a leaning toward clear, but at times unrefined contours. The poetry, elegance, and subtlety of expressive means were lost.

Different eras gave birth to particular trends and at times even changed views on Chopin's art in order to make it fit the spiritual needs of the listeners. There were times when only one of Chopin's characteristics or peculiarities was being put forward, thus hiding the richness and diversity of his music. As a consequence, in the 1860s Chopin was considered a composer of exclusively miniature pieces, which were elegant, salon-like, sentimental, and emotional. The artistic merit of larger forms, such as the sonatas and scherzos, was not appreciated.

The peak of Chopin interpretation came during the 1870s, when Anton Rubinstein appeared with his performance of the B-flat minor Sonata. This Russian pianistic genius overturned the accustomed concept, which was put forth by Schumann, of the Sonata being an awkward compilation of four unrelated parts.⁴⁸ Rubinstein proved the organic unity of form; he understood and showed the inner logic which guided the composer. The pianist had opened up the philosophical and the dramatically paradoxical Chopin—a composer who raises profound and complicated life issues.

In the 1880s, Anton Rubinstein dedicated to Chopin all six and part of the seventh concerts of his cycle of Historical Survey Concerts of Piano Music. Aside from the Sonata in B-flat minor, which was played repeatedly, many other works of different forms were added: the Fantasy, six Preludes, eleven Etudes, all four Ballades, four Mazurkas, three Nocturnes, two Impromptus, Barcarolle, two Waltzes, three Polonaises, B minor Scherzo, Berceuse, etc.

This was truly a historic and an unprecedented presentation of Chopin's music. Rubinstein's performances caused a revolution in regard to Chopin's style. They revealed with unparalleled power the true foundation of the Polish musical genius's creativity.

Rubinstein's performances (the pianist returned to the B-flat minor Sonata on many occasions in the 1890s) determined the direction in which the leading figures of pianistic art were heading at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. "[Rubinstein's] interpretation of Chopin's works," recounted Goldenweiser, "remained for me as one of the deepest and most meaningful artistic experiences of my life. Especially memorable was Rubinstein's performance of the famous B-flat minor Sonata, which was astounding, in terms of its tragedy."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ The resemblance of these tendencies may be noticed even now in the playing of French pianists, particularly in one of the pianists who concertizes in the Soviet Union – Samson François, a student of Marguerite Long, who is in turn an outstanding carrier of Marmontel's school.

⁴⁸ Schumann had said that in this Sonata Chopin "simply bound together four of his most unruly children."

⁴⁹ Quotation taken from D. Rabinovich's article "Chopin and Chopinists," *Frederic Chopin* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1960), 375.

Igumnov emphasized simplicity and the emotional aspect of Rubinstein's interpretation: "His performance of Chopin... was full of unrivaled and convincing simplicity and of an unsurpassed emotionality."⁵⁰

In the course of their entire artistic lives, Igumnov and Goldenweiser tried to realize what they learned and remembered so well from Rubinstein. Thus, after so many decades the tradition continued into the Soviet era, when Igumnov, Goldenweiser, and Nikolayev had the opportunity to be in charge of the Soviet piano school.

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, aside from the Russian pianists the leading place in the world of Chopin playing was taken by Chopin's compatriots, the Polish performers. They brought a lot of originality during this period of blossoming of the Polish pianistic art.

Ignacy Jan Paderewski was one of the most original individuals of that epoch. This diplomat, musician, and prominent Polish official worked persistently to realize the national uniqueness of Chopin style.

Paderewski rejected what was familiar and established. 'Intonation', colors, dynamics, and particularly rhythmic aspects were changing and becoming richer. In *tempo rubato*, which was pushed to the limit, Paderewski saw the most characteristic and nationalistically original side of Chopin. "Only in this music... turbulent, quiet and soulful, determined and strong..." said Paderewski, "only in this music which is free of metric discipline and which stays away from the compulsion of rhythm... in this music one can hear, feel, and recognize the fact that our people—our entire Poland—lives, feels, and acts in *tempo rubato*..."⁵¹

The fantastically original, refined, and aristocratically sophisticated playing of Paderewski was astonishing and delightful. But in Russia it was critiqued on more than one occasion. Russian pianists who were brought up by Rubinstein's art did not always like the extremities and exaggerations—this is not where they believed lay the originality of the national source. Later, when Goldenweiser was describing Chopin players, he wrote that "in Paderewski's performances, the national foundation of Chopin's Mazurkas and Polonaises was often eclipsed by either outward brilliance or sentimentality."⁵²

Closer to the Russian tradition was the artistry of another Polish pianist of the same epoch—that of Josef Hofmann. Hofmann, who studied with Anton Rubinstein and whose repertoire consisted predominately of Chopin, was, unlike Paderewski, drawn to simplicity and naturalness in his interpretation. Without making anything stand out, and without striving for originality, Hofmann's playing was unusually polished, poetic, honest, noble, and refined. Technique and mastery of sound production was of an extremely high level.

This was an art of classical perfection, one that reached the highest balance and proportion of all elements of pianism.

Hofmann was considered in Russia to be an unparalleled interpreter of Chopin.⁵³ One could learn a lot from him. Many Russian pianists, including Rachmaninoff and Scriabin, who attended the numerous concerts of Hofmann, borrowed valuable aspects from his interpretation of Chopin.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ K. N. Igumnov, "About Chopin," *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 10 (1949): 53.

⁵¹ Henryk Opienski, *Paderewski* (Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne) 101.

⁵² "Soviet pianists regarding Chopin," *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 2 (1960): 40.

⁵³ "It's almost not possible for any other pianist to argue with Hofmann's performance of Chopin." – noted the Russian press, *Golos Moskvy* 269 (1912).

⁵⁴ Hofmann loved Russia and performed there right up to 1914.

“Even if his realism was on a decline and was devoid of that fighting, enlightening sense -- a deep meaning that Hofmann’s teacher, Anton Rubinstein, put into it -- still Hofmann remained throughout his entire life on firm basis of the artistic realism in his choice of repertoire and in the principles of interpretation; together with his friend Rachmaninoff, Hofmann stood against formalistic quirks and the orgy of modernism.”⁵⁵

Following World War I, a long-lasting crisis had begun in ‘Chopiniana.’

Hofmann and Paderewski no longer played the same kind of role in the art of performance. Besides, the artistic level of their interpretation declined due to many reasons, and was devoid of a live artistic spirit. “It is impossible to recognize Hofmann anymore,” wrote Rachmaninoff in 1936.⁵⁶

However, at this time Rachmaninoff was systematically performing works other than his own. In his programs there was now Chopin’s B-flat minor Sonata which he learned for his Conservatory graduation, while very young.

There was a rebirth of the Rubinstein tradition of performing the B-flat minor Sonata and of a sonority that was much thicker and more tragic.

But Rachmaninoff was almost the only one left of the recent past’s great giants.

Numerous modern trends were becoming popular. It was the time of excitement, instability, and at times even some interesting but vague searches.

Regarding the interpretation of Chopin’s music abroad, it was impossible for it not to have been influenced by the mindset of the youth—the cynicism and skepticism of that generation. Now the conditions were favorable for a subjective attitude toward Chopin’s legacy and for distorting his works.

In the 1930s Igumnov wrote an article about Chopin where he classified different types of distorters in an accurate albeit oversimplified manner. Omitting a number of outstanding masters, he divided Chopin performers into two categories: “young girls,” who played emotionally, in an affected salon manner; and “bravura virtuosos.” The latter would either interpret the score “correctly” in a formal way or would emphasize passion and emotionality; or else they would altogether disregard the meaning of Chopin’s works, shifting the emphasis toward a technically brilliant performance.

These distortions noted by Igumnov applied to both foreign and Soviet piano schools; however, the ways of getting away from them differed. Abroad, particularly in France where a Chopin tradition was especially strong, there was a battle, for the most part, against ‘prosaic’ interpretations of Chopin. A return to an improvised and intuitive manner of playing was encouraged. Chopin’s classicism became of secondary importance.

For instance, the French writer and music expert André Gide, who specifically studied the issue of Chopin interpretation, maintained that “one has to play Chopin in such a way as to give an impression of improvisation... without the intolerable definiteness... I almost always like it when Chopin’s music is related in a barely perceptible, almost inaudible manner devoid of the unbearable virtuoso self-confidence... Chopin...always remained, it seems, beyond the reality of sound ... the more the thought fluctuates, the faster we follow it.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ G. Kogan, “Josef Hofmann and his book,” introduction to Hofmann’s book Piano Playing: answers to questions on piano playing (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1961) 23.

⁵⁶ Z. Apetian, ed, S. V. Rachmaninoff. Letters (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1955) 535.

⁵⁷ A. Gide, “Chopin the way I hear him’ Sovetskoye iskusstvo 8 March 1933.

In the Soviet Union such style could never have originated. The atmosphere of the Soviet life was different. Such Chopin interpretations as those of “young girls” and “bravura virtuosos” could not have been close to a generation that was confidently building a new community. Although recurrences of distortion did appear on the Soviet concert stage, in the long run they were favored by only a small number of listeners with limited reasoning and primitive taste. Chopin figured in the Soviet reality as a national composer who realized the best and typical traits of Polish culture and drew from the richest sources of Polish national music. Chopin’s realism and his connection to classical traditions were emphasized. The poetry in his music and at the same time its strength were being brought forward. Soviet pianists were drawn to Chopin’s monumental compositions—sonatas, ballades, concertos. In the miniatures, they were striving to achieve naturalness, simplicity, and elegance.

It was Oborin’s teacher Igumnov who, on the basis of practice, formulated the Soviet school specifications several years after the First Chopin Competition. Igumnov encouraged clarity and definiteness in performance. He thought it was “wonderful that Liszt had said that Chopin’s luxurious and rich details do not obscure the clarity of the whole; the originality does not turn into an unrefined peculiarity; the decoration stands out for its exceptional correctness; the richness of ornamentation does not get in the way of the elegance of the main contours and the beauty of the whole.”

In explaining the meaning of the specific Chopin *rubato* which is so important in re-creating his works, Igumnov wrote: “Usually, performers in this respect fall into two extremes. Some, out of their own initiative, perform with an unexplained rhythmic anarchy and confusion. Others sin by metric monotony... The performer should not be confused by this seeming contradiction—on the one hand a demand to keep strict rhythm and on the other, a demand for *tempo rubato*. That is just the point—in Chopin, one is inconceivable without the other, and it is impossible to understand Chopin’s *rubato* without feeling a general rhythmic line of the piece as a whole.”⁵⁸ Igumnov also wrote about Chopin’s polyphony—the polyphony of his entire musical texture; he wrote about colors serving as means to express the imagery of the music.

Igumnov’s stand was shared by Neuhaus, Goldenweiser, Nikolayev, and Feinberg. This was the uniform position of the Soviet school. Many pianist-pedagogues, when generalizing their experience, took more or less the same position at different times and for different occasions. Each one was with an ‘accent’ which corresponded to one’s individuality.

Neuhaus, for instance, at a mature age, focused on Chopin’s classicism. He wrote that “the classical beginnings of Chopin’s music should serve as foundation for performer. It is necessary to achieve in performance a transparent simplicity, harmony and completeness.”

Neuhaus stressed that “romantic exaggerations lead to grandiosity that is so alien to Chopin. The strictness of his art, the innovation and an unsurpassed beauty of piano style—all of this comes to life provided that the expression is natural and simple.”⁵⁹

For Feinberg, it was especially important to discover national and patriotic motives. “Chopin’s attraction to the native folklore and to Polish folk songs and dances was not just a sign of his passive admiration: these intonations deeply permeated his art; by their means he expressed his inner world.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ K. N. Igumnov, “About Chopin” *Sovetskoye iskusstvo* 11 November 1935.

⁵⁹ “Soviet pianists regarding Chopin” *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 2 (1960): 44.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

The statements above help us to understand how Oborin's attitude toward Chopin was formed; what he absorbed at the Conservatory from those who taught him directly and indirectly, or what Oborin keenly sensed from everyone around him.

The older generation stood in defense of the traditions, distinguishing true innovation from imaginary originality.

The endurance of the teachers' artistic opinions and their high aesthetic authority protected the youth from extremes. Many turbulent decades of change had passed since the great artistry of Anton Rubinstein, a person who set the direction of the Russian interpretation of Chopin. Nevertheless, the spirit and the meaning of Rubinstein's art did not disappear completely.

Thus Oborin's accomplishments, which seemed unexpected abroad, had in fact been prepared by the views and work of the older generation of Soviet pianists. Most importantly, they were brought about by the development of the Soviet musical life as a whole and that of the general cultural revolution which was taking place in the country during these years.

4. Interpretation

The same factors that play an important role in the maturing of Oborin as a performer of Chopin works also naturally affected the development of many other Soviet pianists. At the time of the First Chopin Competition, Soviet piano art was already full of major talents.

So why was it specifically that the young Oborin was able to have the most success? Was it by accident—a result of a coincidence, or could it be explained by other, more substantial reasons?

Personal success, without a doubt, also came as the result of many individual traits that Oborin possessed. These included the fundamental nature of his feelings and spiritual life; the traits of his personality; peculiarities of his musical talent—both general and purely pianistic; and finally the circumstances of the young pianist's upbringing.

Liszt, whose insightful assessments and opinions have been quoted in this chapter on a number of occasions, had already noticed the correlation between Chopin's music and his personality. "With all the contradictory complexity of Chopin's character, it was impossible to find one act or one motive which was not dictated by the most refined feeling of honor and the noblest beliefs..." Liszt spoke of Chopin's kindness and self-restraint, his courtesy, modesty, and delicacy, his meekness, tenderness, inner strength and resilience. "He took part in no activity, no drama, no alliance, and no issue. He wielded a decisive influence over no person. His will never encroached upon any desire. He neither fettered nor controlled any mind through the domination of his own. He tyrannized over no heart, he laid no conquering hand on any fate—he sought nothing, and would have scorned to ask for aught... He unburdened his soul in composition..."⁶¹

It is naïve to draw parallels between Chopin and the numerous performers of his music, no matter how wonderful they are.

Liszt's characterization only confirms the deep connection that exists between the personality of the artist and his artistic output. Zbigniew Drzewiecki, a contemporary Polish pedagogue and Chopin scholar, describes very well the importance concerning this connection: "What about [Chopin's] simplicity and naturalness of emotional expression toward family and close ones; the repulsion toward unnatural spiritual impulses; humor and wit; grace in interacting with people, which so impressed them; and finally passionate love toward the native country

⁶¹ Franz Liszt, *Frederic Chopin* (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963) 108.

from which the composer brought the most treasured traditions and atmosphere of true national folklore, scenery and people—shouldn't every pianist who attempts to interpret Chopin's music with due faithfulness take into account all of this?"⁶²

Each epoch of art is unique, but people's characters are repeated from generation to generation. Even though Oborin was a person of a different world and a different fate, he nevertheless had a natural gift of possessing a true harmony with the mentality and emotionality of Chopin.

A sincere friendliness and natural simplicity attracted him to everyone with whom he came in contact. Oborin did not know what evil was and did not believe that it is possible for unfairness to exist. Being completely immersed in music, he was far from being curious about other people's fates. His view of the world was clear, straightforward, and kind. He did not possess a will which could control people; however, he did possess a different and no less treasured feature—charm. This was precisely what lay at the foundation of the magnetic effect that the young Oborin had on listeners.

The childhood which Oborin spent in the provincial backwater and villages of Belorussia, located not far from Poland, introduced him in a certain way to the characteristic sound of Chopin's music. The people who lived in those places sang both Belorussian and Polish songs, and danced the Mazurka and Krakowiak.

Childhood impressions are lasting. Those that remained in Oborin's memory unquestionably helped him in understanding the spirit of Chopin's artistry.

Oborin had benefited from Igumnov's teaching because the latter possessed qualities that best matched the peculiarities of Chopin's artistry. Those qualities, which included sensitivity, taste, logic, sound of exceptional beauty and diversity, and most importantly poeticism, were inherent in Igumnov's artistry and teaching style.

Oborin's innate understanding of the beauty of piano sound, so important in interpreting Chopin, was developed in Igumnov's studio. A sound that was crystal, sonorous, tender, bright, and poignant made Oborin's playing uniquely charming. There were pianists at the Conservatory who played the same amount of repertoire as Oborin and were equally brilliant in the technical aspects of playing, but when Oborin played Chopin, no one could be compared to him in the beauty of sound.

Igumnov disclosed to the young man the rules of good taste and the feeling of proportion and balance that are characteristic of Chopin's artistry. **(PIC 89)**

Oborin's compositional training and practice allowed him to understand the wide scope of the art, its objective law; it taught him self-discipline and provided him with analytical abilities.⁶³ As a composer who in his youth considered composition of greatest importance in life, Oborin strove to understand the laws of beauty and the basis of Chopin's harmonic and melodic language. Oborin kept this approach even when he was playing the piano: he heard music with more insight, more fully and sensitively than other performers.

Oborin began to build his Chopin repertoire and to acquire a basic understanding of its interpretation as early as in childhood, and as so often happens, not without the influence of experiences he received by attending concerts.

⁶² Zbigniew Drzewiecki, "A few words about the interpretation of Chopin works" (Warsaw: Sztuka, 1954) 14.

⁶³ Although Miaskovsky did not like Chopin's works, he nevertheless gave them their due and referred to them when teaching.

Following the tradition of all concert pianists who graduated from the Gnesin School, Nikolai Orlov performed in the school's concert hall each year. Oborin heard his concert of Chopin works. Orlov's playing impressed the boy's imagination. Even forty-five years later, in celebration of Chopin's anniversary, Oborin wrote an article dedicated to Chopin which he began with a description of Orlov's playing: "N. Orlov's performance had a strong influence on the formation of my affection (especially memorable were Etudes, Preludes and F minor Concerto)."

Orlov played Chopin in a peculiar way for those times and often in opposition to the established traditions of salon virtuosity. Oborin recollected that "Orlov's interpretation possessed something correct, something which completely matched my inner ideas about Chopin's music."

So what did this "correctness" entail?

"Most likely it [was a result] of the harmonious connection between lyrical charm, without which Chopin is unimaginable, and the alluring artistry, clarity and absolute grasp of form."

In 1919, soon after Orlov's memorable concert, Oborin's family moved to Bakovka village in the Moscow suburbs to escape famine.

During the cold winter the boy almost never came out of the hut. He had with him the Peters edition of Chopin works. He never parted with the score and looked through it many times.

He lived the entire winter in the world of Chopin and upon returning to Moscow began to learn Etudes. Oborin reached perfection in the ones such as C Major, A minor, and G-flat Major from Op. 10, as is well known. The first Impromptu and the Fantaisie-Impromptu also became part of his repertoire. All these works helped develop the important elements of his early mastery. They included clarity and naturalness of the melodic line; singing quality and expressivity of passages; variety in 'intonation'; the artistry of hand coordination. Studying Chopin was an important beginning step of piano study which the musically talented boy needed; without this, Oborin's artistic growth could have slowed down. Chopin prevented Oborin from being infatuated with bravura virtuosity, emotional exaggeration and false grandiosity, all of which were typical of the young.

Oborin was impressed by the amazing self-discipline which forced Chopin to find a way of expressing feelings in a concentrated way and in the most concise form. In addition, Oborin was amazed by Chopin's ability to achieve "dissolution" of technique in poetic impression without digressing from the classical type of etude.

Already at that time, the Etudes, (especially the one in E Major), revealed a wonderful trait of Oborin's artistic thinking. He had an ability to feel the subtlest movement of feelings in small compositions that were written "in the same key" so to speak and without significant contrast or range of dynamics. It is precisely this kind of refinement that later made Oborin a master of Chopin's miniatures.

An entire world of exceptional beauty opened up for the young man; and ever since then "the feeling of happiness due to pianists having Chopin never left me." (PIC 92)

Further expansion of Chopin repertoire went chronologically in the following way. During the first two years in Igumnov's studio, Oborin learned some Etudes from Opp. 10 and 25; the Polish Fantasy; some Preludes; Polonaise in B-flat Major; Sonata in B minor. During the 3rd, 4th, and 5th years (1924-1926) and in preparation for the competition he learned Nocturnes in F-sharp minor, G Major, and C minor; Polonaise in F-sharp minor; Polonaise-Fantaisie;

Berceuse; Fantasy in F minor; Sonata in B-flat minor; Barcarolle; Ballade in F minor; Concerto in F minor (the latter 'in the rough').

This chronology is revealing. Igumnov was proceeding both carefully and boldly. First he expanded an already tested circle of pieces, concentrating for the most part on miniatures, and then, when he got to know Oborin's capabilities as a pianist and artist, there followed a powerful group of the most significant and predominantly late Chopin works in different forms.

The groundwork was set. Judging from the repertoire, it was evident that the nineteen-year-old Oborin was among those performers who gravitated predominantly towards the works of Chopin.

During the time following the competition Oborin had to constantly give concerts devoted to Chopin's works, thus satisfying the listeners' interest in the first success abroad of the young Soviet pianists. Oborin's repertoire was growing so quickly that he was not always able to ask Igumnov's advice; as a matter of fact, he did not feel much need for it. He already understood what he wanted to do well enough; and his imagination, which received a powerful impetus from constantly performing, was working intensely.

Oborin was confidently striving towards "his own Chopin," different from Igumnov's Chopin and that of other interpreters.

So what was different in Oborin's interpretation?

Let's begin with brief comparisons.

In Ignacy Jan Paderewski's recording of Nocturne in F-sharp Major there is great beauty in the sound, even on this old and imperfect gramophone record. There is original tone color. Melismas and coloratura intricately intertwine the chief melodic line. A noticeable fluctuation in rhythm and accentuation creates an illusion of improvisation. This lyricism is refined, elegant, and aristocratic.

Vladimir Horowitz's interpretation of the F minor Mazurka is astoundingly complete, played in one breath. The sound is intense; culmination points are emphasized. Keeping the dancing character of the piece, the pianist allows ritardandos and accelerandos of the broadest range. By accentuating and isolating individual intonations, Horowitz boldly gives them a Romantic expressivity. He paints a modest lyric composition in bright Romantic colors.

Oborin's lyricism is of a different kind. It is simpler, more modest, and does not have the grand aristocracy of Paderewski, the romantic exaltation of Horowitz or the passive contemplation of Igumnov. Intimacy does not cross over into caution. The source of Oborin's lyricism stems from everyday life, his country, and most importantly, from a favorable, healthy perception of the world.

Where Horowitz and Paderewski are Romantics each in their own way, Oborin is a strict classicist in regard to Chopinesque lyricism.

Classicism in Chopin's lyricism reveals itself by the fact that the composer restrains the extreme expression of feelings. He usually "puts his lyrical theme through stages of the most refined finishing and polishing." As a result, "the feeling does not lose sincerity, but its presentation becomes complex and refined."

To distinguish the proper degree of differentiation is the task for the performer. This is where Oborin's intuition as a performer and his composer's hearing, which is susceptible to analyzing musical elements, come as help. Oborin's self-control is always 'on guard.' The pianist is capable at any moment to restrain the expression of feelings.

Oborin's tendency toward classicism is also expressed in his adherence to strict proportions, and to orderliness and proportionality of form.

The means of expression are used with careful discrimination. What becomes most important is not the technical means by itself, but the location where it is placed and the whole collection of nuances and its surrounding.

Thus in the short A Major Prelude, the climactic harmony in the twelfth measure sounds unexpectedly fresh and poetic due to the dynamic shading of *diminuendo* and to a slight slowing down that comes after a measured and even somewhat emphasized dance motion (with noticeable accents on each strong bass). Here, also, Oborin brings out a second voice between the two harmonies of the twelfth and fourteenth measures. This small stroke provides fresh interest to this calm novella.⁶⁴ (PIC 95)

It is impossible not to connect the classicism of Oborin's lyricism to peculiarities of melodic intonation.

Whereas Horowitz divides it into separate expressive elements, Oborin gravitates toward a broad melodic breath, in which the details and the expressivity of separate elements that hold the listeners' attention are not as important as the general, natural line. He presents Chopin's melody as a chain of intonation, where the previous phrase often contains intonational preconditions of the following phrase. It is in this way, it seems, that one should search for the secret of interpretation of Chopin mazurkas: the pianist is able to combine their dance-like quality with singing dynamic emphasis.

The flowing melody gives the intonation a vocal character: a declamatory pronunciation would be out of character for Oborin. Only in the very last years a slight tendency toward declamation has become noticeable in Oborin's playing. And polyphony, which is exploited most thoroughly, gives the lyrical aspect a more delicate and refined character.

A type of Chopin that is dramatic, conflicting, and heroic still serves a secondary role in the repertoire.

With time, Oborin's Chopin repertoire split into two categories. Some compositions, such as the B-flat minor Sonata, Scherzo, and Fantasia appeared in programs only periodically and had to do with new and not always lasting elements of the pianist's development. Other compositions remained in his repertoire for the rest of his life. They included Etudes, Preludes, and Mazurkas.

There also originated a small third group of his favorite compositions, touching the innermost strings of the pianist's artistic essence. In Oborin's life these works were analogous to the role of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata for Liszt, Chopin's Second Sonata for Anton Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky's "Troika" for Rachmaninoff. Oborin feels a constant need to return to such compositions and he works on them with satisfaction and joy. They may be considered the pianist's chronicle and confession.

The B Minor Sonata takes the first place among such companions on Oborin's artistic path. He has played it more than four hundred times in all the cities he goes to, and in many countries abroad. The Sonata has been recorded on an LP which became popular; it has also been broadcast on the radio on many occasions.

It is noteworthy that in his youth Oborin preferred the B-flat minor Sonata. The B minor Sonata did not seem to him to possess enough brilliance. There were many aspects in it which were initially frightening. These included the episodic quality of the first movement; the elaborateness, even overabundance of the accompanimental textures; the complexity of the

⁶⁴ In interpreting the Prelude, the pianist uses an edition by Ian Kleczinski, which is for the most part similar to the complete works of Chopin edited by Paderewski, Bronarski, and Turchinski.

Largo movement; and the lack of programmatic associations. It did not have “even a trace of Romantic naivety and youthful enthusiasm.” Everything was logical.

Igumnov loved the B minor Sonata. Performing it with rare perfection, he tried to pass on his ideas to Oborin. At the same time Igumnov understood that due to Oborin’s tendency to be independent, he would not want to confine himself to imitation. Thus Igumnov constantly encouraged the young pianist’s initiative. Consequently, where the main theme is interpreted by many pianists with great amount of emotion, Oborin played it, and continues to play it, with precision, restraint, and in a march-like manner. The force of sound never exceeded forte—it were not the dynamics that produced the effect, but rather the precision and compactness of the chords. It was as if the pianist were saving his emotions. The entire first theme was being interpreted as the introduction to a dramatic act. **(PIC 97)**

The texture gradually became smoother in the transitional part. There was the sonority of the bass and the ascending chromatic scale. And the plan of the performance became completely clear with the entrance of the captivating second theme. In it the pianist saw the central idea, the expressive and emotional basis of the Sonata. All that was played up to that point was, in essence, submissive to the second theme: the laconic, somewhat dry march-like character of the first theme, as well as the neutrality of the transitional theme (let’s note the skillful use of half-pedal, which gives the music a transparent character, and finger substitution, which makes *legato* possible).

In the second theme, Oborin’s strongest features of pianism come forth, such as simple, clear lyricism, the singing tone, the flow of the melody, self-control and feeling of proportion, an ability to bring out small agogic inflections (which do not change the general tempo or break up the unity of the texture, but instead make the vocal line more beautiful and meaningful). This is a true Chopin *rubato*, which Liszt defined as an evasive, broken tempo, a flexible and at the same time precise rhythm, which fluctuates as a flame in the wind or as the tree tops that sway in the breeze. In such *rubato*, the accompaniment, being just as clear, distinct, and sounding in the same dynamic ‘plane’ as the leading melody, creates a unified whole instead of merely a neutral rhythmic background.

Rubato is naturally connected to the slightly noticeable accentuation and minuscule deviations. Altogether, these elements allow for the music to ‘sing’ in such a way that the meaning of each ‘word’ is clear and gets to one’s heart.

In the coda of the exposition and further in the entire development section, one more important quality of Oborin the interpreter had come forth as early as at the Warsaw Competition: his attention to polyphony, his delicate awareness of all textural elements, their relationship and interdependence. The texture, which seems at times in other pianists’ performances as being mosaic-like, in Oborin’s interpretation sounds integrated, not solely because of the melodic intensity of secondary voices. Oborin’s strength lies in understanding the logic of interrelation of elements, which produces an uninterrupted melodic line. This logic determines the tempo. A melodic expressiveness could unintentionally cause delays or accelerations: separate elements seemingly benefited from the apparent richness of rhythmic nuances. But Oborin understood that too many nuances could break the unity of the line and at times could give the performance an overly sensitive and sentimental character. That is why Oborin purposely kept a strict tempo in the development section. Tempo ‘cemented’ the form. As a result, the development was perceived as a unified, interesting, logically justified section of Chopin’s Allegro.

What about Oborin's interpretation of other movements of the Sonata? The second movement had not been difficult for him: a light pearly sound had been a strong part of Oborin's technique for a long time. Artfully combining flexible movements of the wrist with the distinct and precise action of fingers, the pianist created an illusion of sound waves, as if they appeared from the air.

In the Largo movement, Oborin used Igumnov's instructions more than anywhere else. "Only Igumnov," believed Oborin, "was capable of hearing this dreamy poetry in such a way. It was from Igumnov that I grasped the idea of paying attention to the contrast in colors and learned to bring out the contours of the harmonic structure, dissonance, and sophistication of modulations." Later, Oborin's tempo in this movement became different from that of Igumnov; it became faster and the melody more expressive. But the general character of the performance remained the same.

The tempo also helped Oborin find the right emotional state in the Finale. At the beginning stages of his work, in order to follow the expressivity of separate elements of the Finale, the pianist involuntarily slowed down and disregarded Chopin's indication of *Presto non tanto*. The emphatic expressivity had an effect on the relationship between dynamics. The return of the theme after the introduction sounded *mf*, *espressivo*; thus, further dynamic development was becoming problematic: it was necessary to even force the sound.

In the widely known recording of the Sonata from the 1950s, the dynamic 'terraces' are clearly separated: first appearance of the theme is played *piano*, and the octave version *forte*.

The character of the performance is markedly objective; the tempo is preserved strictly throughout. There is precise calculation and balance of all elements in the Sonata. Out of the two possibilities of interpreting the Finale—an extremely elated one and another marked by reserved content—Oborin prefers the latter. It is only in the Coda that he gives freedom to emotions, concluding the Sonata with an exciting climax while using the greatest amount of sound.

Oborin himself believes that his interpretation of the B minor Sonata went through three stages over a period of thirty years. In his youth, the basic contours took shape but there was not yet stability in the details that had to do with intonation and especially with tempo. The next stage began after Oborin played the B-flat minor Sonata in the mid-1930s. "The comparison helped realize the significance of the B minor Sonata." The latter began to sound more precise, and had more contrast. The texture became more detailed.

In 1961, Oborin reassessed his interpretation. The technical aspect reached the brink of perfection. Contrasts became somewhat more distinct. Wise tranquility infused lyricism.

There came a time of deep mature emotions, which were expressed with utmost simplicity and terseness...

5. After the Competition

At the beginning of his concert career Oborin had already written the following concerning Chopin: "Our critics and musicologists view this wonderful genius of the piano almost with contempt... Our Moscovite composers, thanks to Miaskovsky, are not far behind the critics and consider Chopin's music an impotent salon burbling... Personally, I love Chopin very much, with a 'faithful, enduring' kind of love. This is not at all because the public has labeled me a "perpetual Chopinist," something which I have always denied. Rather, it is as a pianist that I maintain that no one other than Chopin sensed the piano better or accomplished a higher level of

pianism and musical expression, completely devoid of theatrical effects or embellishments for their own sake. But here no one cares about that.”⁶⁵

The thought is expressed with utmost clarity. Oborin notes both the underestimation of Chopin and the tendencies to interpret his music in a flawed way. He has formed his own position and the purpose of his searching (against “salon burbling,” theatrical effects, self-contained embellishments). However, it would be wrong to think that even in the 1920s and ‘30s, during the period of establishment of Soviet pianism and during the fight ‘around Chopin,’—that the interpretation of the young Oborin was the sole generalization of advanced tendencies.

The path of the young generation toward Chopin was more difficult. Chopin’s music itself, as any large creative art, presumed a possibility of numerous and equally justifiable approaches.

By sending four young pianists to Warsaw, the Soviet piano school showed different ‘shades’ of such interpretation.

The fourth-prize winner in Warsaw, Grigory Ginzburg, was a virtuoso who was well-disposed towards detailed polishing of every piece he performed. Having learned from his teacher, Goldenweiser, the skill of logically flawless, thought-through structure of performance, Ginzburg at times pushed this tendency to the extreme. At such times his playing seemed brilliant and polished but lacking in warmth and spontaneity. During the competition and later on, Ginzburg’s playing was impressive in those Chopin works where his affinity with the genre was clearly felt: in waltzes, in celebratory and revolutionary polonaises, which re-created, as Liszt put it, bravery, valor, strength and a firm resolve of Poland’s olden days. The pianist’s virtuoso brilliance revealed itself in etudes, the G-sharp minor one in particular, the performance of which was especially noted during the competition by the Polish press. As the Warsaw newspapers pointed out, in the etudes and waltzes, “refinement was cultivated almost to the brink of perfection.” (PIC 101)

Another participant of the Chopin competition, Yuri Briushkov, who was inclined to play with dream-like lyricism, did not put forth original conceptions. He preferred miniatures such as waltzes, nocturnes, and impromptus rather than Chopin’s works in large forms. Playing them with a winning spontaneity, Briushkov had success in Warsaw: here elegance was valued.

A surprising phenomenon was the twenty-year-old Dmitri Shostakovich, who at that time was working on performing very diligently. He played wholesomely and simply, with numerous interesting, newly-discovered details. He always felt the polyphonic contours of the texture. The form of the composition was reminiscent of classical works of architecture due to its ideal proportions. He was a lyricist, but of a different kind—one that was almost embarrassed by outspoken emotions. A chaste reservation in his playing opened up a rare purity of artistic intentions.⁶⁶

Like Oborin, Shostakovich preferred the C-sharp minor mazurka and the F-sharp major Nocturne. Shostakovich played this Nocturne in ‘undertones,’ warmly and sincerely. Also notable was his interpretation of the C-sharp minor Etude, Op. 10, played in head-spinning tempo, with accents, due to which this Etude sounded fresh and interesting. Shostakovich played the E minor Concerto with enthusiasm, having learned it thoroughly during his Conservatory years under the guidance of L. V. Nikolayev.

⁶⁵ From letters to V. M. Bogdanov-Berezovsky.

⁶⁶ Warsaw Press wrote the following about Shostakovich’s playing: “What is striking is the abundance of unusually interesting details, an ability to bring out obscure contrapuntal shapes, and a clear understanding of the composition’s form.” Grigory Orlov, “The results of the Chopin Competition,” *Slovo*, 15 February 1927.

The artistic destiny of each of the ‘pioneer Chopinists’ turned out differently; this destiny unquestionably reflected the survival and historical significance of their approach to Chopin’s works.

After the competition, Grigory Ginzburg turned his attention to a different kind of repertoire, one which was closer to his personality. He kept only a few Chopin works on his programs. Having been successful at the competition, Ginzburg did not play a significant role in the development of the Soviet ‘Chopiniana’ during his subsequent concert career.

Dmitri Shostakovich soon moved away from an active performing career, limiting himself to playing his own compositions.

Yuri Briushkov kept performing Chopin programs almost exclusively, cultivating familiar elements of soft, natural, sensitive lyricism. But he, too, had to abruptly reduce the number of concert performances in the 1940s and ‘50s because of administrative work having to do with music.

Oborin was the only one from ‘the four’ who kept working systematically on polishing the interpretation of Chopin works. No matter what new tasks interested the pianists or how much repertoire accumulated, Chopin was always put in first place. The emotional need for communication with this music never went away, and neither did the impact of its interpretation on listeners. Oborin’s artistic destiny is closely connected with all subsequent developments of ‘Chopiniana’ in the world. The role that the Warsaw competitions played in it was not slight.

The year 1927 marked the beginning of the Soviet pianists’ participation in the Warsaw music competition. This event became traditional and it was decided to hold the competition every five years. The repertoire was expanded (to include Sonatas and Scherzos).

Competitions attracted more and more interest, won over international authority and became a presentation of evolution, accomplishments, and shortcomings in the world-wide playing of Chopin. The subsequent second competition, held in March of 1932, was especially difficult and at the same time important for the Soviet Chopinists. This time there were not four but ten Soviet pianists who took part. Many strove “to try [themselves] in Chopin:” Oborin’s success was reassuring. In no future competition, including the Tchaikovsky, did the USSR have such a large delegation. There were pianists representing Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, and Har’kov.⁶⁷

The age of the participants varied from twenty-two to twenty-nine. Unlike Oborin, a number of members from the Soviet delegation already had a considerable life- and concert experience. No one had doubts in talent and professionalism of those whom the country sent to the Second Chopin Competition.

Meanwhile, the atmosphere in Warsaw was even more unfavorable than it had been five years before. Anti-Soviet circles, especially White Guard Émigrés who lost their homeland, did everything possible to ruin the performances of the Soviet musicians.⁶⁸

The nerves of the competition’s participants were strained to the limit. The Soviet ambassador, an old Bolshevik and a legendary participant in the October Revolution, Vladimir

⁶⁷ Igumnov sent two of his students to the competition, both Oborin’s peers. They were Abram Diakov and Alexander Iokheles. Neuhaus sent Theodor Gutman and Emmanuel Grossman. S. Feinberg sent Igor Aptekarev. Nikolayev prepared three pianists: Pavel Serebriakov, Vera Razumovskaya, and Nathan Perlman. Ukraine was represented by Leonid Sagalov (Har’kov) and Abram Lufer (Kiev).

⁶⁸ The White Guardist Newspaper slandered the young Leningrad pianist Vera Razumovskaya. During the playing of Pavel Serebriakov, a handful of hooligan White Guards sitting in the audience ‘played’ on hair brushes.

Antonov-Ovseyenko, did not abandon the young musicians; observing the competition's progress, he encouraged and supported his compatriots.

The jury noticeably wavered in their marks and preferences.⁶⁹ One of the best Polish performers of Chopin, Alexander Michalowski, disagreeing with jury's objective, refused to participate.

The jury had special expectations from the Soviet musicians. In each of them they were expecting to hear the 'new Oborin.' Some spoke of revenge for what happened in 1927.

Oborin did not go to Warsaw, but he spent evenings listening to the first and second rounds, which were broadcast on many radio stations throughout the world. As the first Chopin laureate he was greatly interested in the competition's progress.

The results of the competition were unexpected. The first prize was awarded to the 'White Guard' Émigré Alexander Uninsky.⁷⁰ The Soviet pianists took fourth (A. Lufer), sixth (L. Sagalov), eighth (T. Gutman) and eleventh (E. Grossman) places. A. Diakov and A. Iokheles received honorable mentions.⁷¹

There were no doubts regarding the jury's prejudice. But it was not only the biased attitude toward the Soviet musicians that determined the outcome of the competition. The judgment of the pianists' artistry was influenced by the changes in piano performance that took place abroad after 1927. And these were major changes, considering the short five-year period!

Evolution was explicitly directed toward preferences for virtuosic and technical aspects. Precision, vitality, clarity, common sense, and strong hands were impressive. The realism in performance was understood simplistically, as proficiency and basic clarity. Chopin's national traits were viewed bluntly, even by the Polish piano school, as a strong display of national inflections and of the atmosphere of everyday life. The dance character that is dominant in the compositions was emphasized. Polish pianists played many of the Chopin pieces in a swift, lively, somewhat harsh manner, with overemphasized accentuation.

The prize selections themselves of the Soviet pianists were indicative of this evolution.

The absence of Igumnov's students among the leading laureates was explainable: Diakov and Iokheles were not among those performers who leaned predominately toward Chopin's music. Being outstanding musicians and pianists, they were interested in many areas of performance and styles of piano literature.⁷² But two young students of Neuhaus, T. Gutman and E. Grossman, stood out for their deep and poetic interpretations of Chopin. These were musicians with a sensitive, noble manner of expression, which in Gutman's case was more precise and in Grossman's more fragile, gentle, and pure.

Regardless, the jury preferred A. Lufer and L. Sagalov, whose playing was polished, energetic, and technically brilliant.

Consequently, from the point of view of Chopin interpretation which was forming in the Soviet school, and judging by what Oborin loved, appreciated, and was striving for, much of what happened at the 1932 competition was resolved in an unusual, biased manner.

An alarming feeling had formed, that again, as it has already happened in the history of music, the interpretation of Chopin was deteriorating.

⁶⁹ The head of the jury was A. Wieniawski. The members included 10 Polish and 7 international pianists. K. Igumnov was invited into the jury but could not come to Warsaw due to illness.

⁷⁰ Settling in France, this pianist was not able in the future to take a significant place in the concert life.

⁷¹ After the competition it turned out that the jury awarded honorable mentions to P. Serebriakov and V. Razumovskaya as well.

⁷² A. Diakov was an outstanding collaborative pianist. A. Iokheles presented himself as an interpreter of new and little known contemporary compositions.

How should one have protested against the particular interpretations of Chopin that had formed at the competition? Were they completely false or did the Soviet pianists also miss something important in Chopin? Were the efforts, experiences, and awards all futile?

The year 1932 brought considerable turmoil.

Even Oborin was beginning to be criticized for excessive softness in his playing. And it was in 1933 that the already-mentioned article by Andre Gide was published in the Soviet press, in which he spoke against “overconfidence of virtuosos” and encouraged intuitiveness and improvisation in interpretation of Chopin. Two years later, in 1935, Igumnov, without mentioning the name of the author, in a sense engaged in an argument with him because he was afraid of the recurrence of salon playing and sentimentality. The argument stimulated exploration.

In analyzing the results of the second competition, the Soviet piano pedagogues and pianists were not searching for excuses for the situation that formed in Warsaw.

The call was heard. Painstaking work had begun in the piano studios, which incorporated a considerable amount of accumulated experience as well as the rich traditions of Russian Chopiniana.

It was not the laureates’ awards that were at the center of attention. Rather they were striving to present the principles in a more intense and composed form. There was an intense search going on for ways to teach young Chopinists to be able to combine virtuoso brilliance with the poetical depth of Chopin’s music.

Aside from Igumnov, Feinberg, Nikolayev, and Goldenweiser, G. Neuhaus also took on an active role. During these years, he frequently performed Chopin works and especially stood out for his interpretation of large scale works – Concertos, Fantasies, and Ballades. Connected by blood with the famous Polish musical surname of Szymanowski, Neuhaus understood and deeply felt the national origins of Chopin’s poeticism.⁷³ Whereas Igumnov, at times unintentionally, gave Chopin’s intonations a feeling that was reminiscent of Tchaikovsky’s lyricism and whereas the warmth of his playing seemed intimate, devoid of sharp dramatic clashes, Neuhaus put forth many other psychological aspects: the depth of the wounded pride of a sick but courageous person, a feeling of hope, and a call for justice.

Neuhaus’ incredibly rich artistic imagination, his ability to explain his ideas to the students in a picturesque and vibrant way, his natural pedagogical intuition that helped him to unmistakably figure out and correct pianistic weaknesses—all of this promoted an assured development of the young generation of Chopinists, whose playing stood out for its drama, integrity, and depth.

During these years of general rise of Soviet pianism, the results of the search showed quickly, and not only in the playing of young pianists, but in that of Oborin, Sofronitsky, Yudina, and the participants in the 1932 competition.

Oborin’s performances became bold. Chopin’s B-flat minor Sonata took a prominent place in his programs. The following was written concerning its performance in 1933: “... the famous B-flat minor Sonata (with the funeral march), this time appeared before the listeners in completely uncharacteristic for Oborin tone. Any traces of softness and lyricism were gone and were replaced by the harsh, often emphatic and rough audacity of the performance.”⁷⁴

Sofronitsky had tried to “find himself in Chopin” for a long time, since the time of his youth. “...Performing Chopin,” he would recount later, “did not come easily to me.” A

⁷³ Famous Polish composer and pianist Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937) was Heinrich Neuhaus’s cousin.

⁷⁴ S. Gres, “Musical Diary,” Krasnaya gazeta 23 June 1933.

reasonable progress came in the 1930s. “It was only in the 1930s, that I thought I had found myself in this style.” Sofronitsky then explained the meaning of this discovery in the following way: “I came to be very self-disciplined and strove to expose in Chopin first and foremost its rare harmoniousness and clarity.”⁷⁵

The participants of the 1932 competition from Leningrad continued to perfect their artistry. After looking at the results of his competition performances with self-criticism, Pavel Serebriakov rejected lyrical exaggerations. Vera Razumovskaya’s Chopin began to sound more daring and contrasting. Even Yudina ‘tried herself’ at this unusual (for her) style by emphasizing bold, strong-willed elements in Chopin’s works (for instance, her performance of the Fantasy).

The pinnacle of the Soviet ‘Chopiniana’ became Emil Gilels’ performance of the B-flat minor Sonata in 1937; until then the young pianist had not found the ‘key’ to this style.

Oborin was one of the first to appreciate the value of the dramatic, heroic performance of the Sonata. When Gilels returned in 1938 from Brussels where he performed the Sonata in the Ysaye Competition, Oborin perceptively noted: “Those apprehensions which [Gilels] generated in the past by being excessively infatuated with the technical aspect of his artistry are now brilliantly dispelled when one reads ecstatic reviews about his performance of the Chopin b-moll Sonata – a masterpiece of piano literature that demands great emotional depth from the performer.”⁷⁶

Thus it was precisely after 1932 that a Chopin of heroic, tragic, restless power and stirring energy became a part of the Soviet performing artistry. This was the Chopin about whom Liszt had written: “...it would be wrong to assume that all Chopin works are devoid of...strong emotions...Muffled anger and stifled rage are met in many passages of his works...” Liszt believed that the “...dark apostrophes of his muse have passed less noticed and less understood than his poems of a softer hue, and Chopin’s character has contributed thereto. Kindly, gracious, easygoing, even-tempered, and animated, he gave slight cause to suspect the secret convulsions that shook him.”⁷⁷

The Third International Chopin Competition took place in Warsaw in February and March 1937. The required repertoire was much more open in comparison with the previous two competitions. The participants were able to choose any Nocturne, any two Etudes, any Mazurka, Ballade, and Scherzo (or either Fantasy and Scherzo or one Sonata). Only the Polonaises were limited to either A-flat Major, Op. 53, F-sharp minor, Op. 44, or the Polonaise-Fantasy, Op. 61.

The correlation between the number of international and Polish judges had shifted dramatically (18 and 12, respectively). Moreover, there were many outstanding pianists who agreed to be on the jury of this highly regarded competition. They included Emil Sauer (Austria), Wilhelm Backhaus, Alfred Hoehn, Richard Ressler (Germany), Carlo Zecchi (Italy), Lazare Levy and Isidore Philipp (France), Emil Frey (Switzerland), Andrei Stoyanov (Bulgaria). A representative from the Soviet Union, Heinrich Neuhaus, served on the jury for the first time.

In regard to the participants, especially noticeable was a large delegation from France, which represented the piano teaching of those pedagogues who were famous for their original approach to Chopin’s artistry (Lazare Levy, Marguerite Long, Alfred Cortot).

The impressive competition lasted three weeks.

The first place was awarded unanimously by the jury to Neuhaus’s student Yakov Zak, who also received a special award for his performance of Mazurkas; second place went to

⁷⁵ “Soviet pianists regarding Chopin,” *Sovetskaya muzyka* 2 (1960): 47.

⁷⁶ Lev Oborin, “We are proud of our comrades,” *Vecherniya Moskva* 1 June 1938.

⁷⁷ Franz Liszt, *Frederic Chopin* (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963) 39.

Goldenweiser's student, the young Rosa Tamarkina; Neuhaus's student Tatiana Goldfarb ended up in ninth place; Feinberg's student Nina Emelianova received honorable mention. Furthermore, Soviet pianists Zak and Tamarkina confidently surpassed such talented young Chopinists as Poland's Witold Malcuzyński (3rd place), France's Monique de la Bruchollerie (7th place), and Lelia Gousseau (12th place).

The triumph of the Soviet school was complete, unconditional, and especially joyous because Soviet pianists presented a different kind of Chopin interpretations that formed within the limits of the single Soviet music school. At the same time it became clear that the school had a truly unlimited potential. It was putting forth not just individual talent, as was the case in 1927, but demonstrated a culture of style interpretation that received recognition and approval from a wide circle of listeners. "As a member of the jury of the competition that has recently concluded," wrote Neuhaus in 1937, "I have all grounds to maintain that if we had sent abroad eight or ten pianists selected by us in advance, all of them would have received awards at the competition."⁷⁸

Different types of personalities were revealed at the competition. At the same time, the most complete, utterly polished and convincing playing of the first prize winner Yakov Zak, confirmed the ceaseless value of principles which were demonstrated by the young Oborin ten years earlier and remained in his artistry through all years to follow.

Like Oborin, Zak advocated clarity and emotional control. He regarded Chopin more as a classical rather than as a Romantic composer. The pianist did not strive for dramatic tension or rhythmical hammering. Zak's playing was inspirational because it possessed purity, modesty, and deep intellect. At the same time, he understood the composer's ideas, grasped the rules of the style, and as with Oborin, thoroughly prepared his performance conceptions. Although Zak's playing lacked the charm and warmth that were characteristic of Oborin's performances, his more rational playing proved the endurance of the realistic basis of interpretation. None of the exaggerations or Romantic extremes was able to withstand the trial of time.

Amid all of the laureates of the Third Competition, only Zak, just like Oborin, continued to persistently perfect the Chopin repertoire and later turned out to be a skilful instructor of many young performers of Chopin's works.

The competition of 1937 was the last pre-war contest for pianists in Warsaw and was the high point of accomplishments for Soviet 'Chopiniana'.

The Soviet piano school had been established during the 1920s. Now there was also a Soviet school of Chopinists, headed by Oborin.

Stagnation and narrow-mindedness were foreign for Oborin, who was developing as a pianist together with those continuing to perfect the interpretation of Chopin.

The admirers of Chopin's music kept their sympathy toward Oborin not because of the fame that he won in the past but rather because of his striving for perfection. For them Oborin remained an artist-pioneer, who opened up a bright page in the history of Soviet performance culture.

Relatively recently, in summing up the principles of the Soviet school, Oborin wrote: "Our Russian tradition of Chopin performance stems from classical clarity and simplicity. *One wants to search all of his life for the true expression of this complicated, extensive artistry, whose secret lies in simplicity and clarity.*

... Those who are jealous of pianists having Chopin are correct in being so."⁷⁹

⁷⁸ H. Neuhaus, "Soviet violin school," *Pravda* 2 April 1937.

⁷⁹ "Soviet pianists regarding Chopin," *Sovetskaya muzyka* 2 (1960): 46-7 (Italics by author).

VI

The origins of the Soviet Piano Concerto

During the 1930s Oborin's career was blossoming. He is not yet thirty years old, but his playing leaves an impression of classical perfection. What stability of artistic views, precision of thought, seriousness in approach to life and art!

Artistic development has an influence on one's character and way of life. Oborin does not limit himself to practicing and performing concerts. He is not a passive observer of the development which is happening in the Soviet art.

One's artistic life is linked to an active social life. Oborin gains various life experiences that are connected to the different perspectives of the Soviet culture. With a feeling of great responsibility, he takes part in perfecting the musical world, which was being rebuilt and established precisely in the 1930s.

Oborin's faith in the importance of his participation provides the young pianist's statements a sense of boldness and cleverness.

Oborin, by no means a brilliant orator, prefers to give speeches almost exclusively through printed media—articles, short pieces, criticisms. But they are numerous, detailed and encompass such a significant circle of events that they alone could be regarded as an important trait of the artist's character as well as an interesting account of the recent past.

Oborin was one of the first to pay attention to the Soviet Union's lack of education in conducting when, after the departure of several prominent foreign conductors working through temporary agreements, there appeared a difficult matter of training the young conducting personnel.

After having attended the auditions for the National Competition of Conductors, Oborin wrote the following: "...Students who are studying this art receive only theoretical knowledge and do not acquire any practical experience. Students in conducting classes will be able to acquire the necessary skills only when there will be orchestral groups working for Conservatories." Oborin meant both the student orchestras (which soon appeared) and the participation of professional orchestral collectives in the Conservatory concerts. Oborin also raised the subject of the young conductors' limited repertoire and also a disregard for the technical side of performance.⁸⁰

Having a high opinion of the young Mravinsky, whose conducting career was just beginning at that time, Oborin performed with orchestra under his direction in the third round of the Conducting Competition. He played the first movement from Khachaturian's Concerto.

Long tours of Siberia, Central Asia, and the Far East allowed Oborin to express his reasoning concerning the planning of concert life.

Unsatisfied with the work of the National Concert Association, Oborin demanded to be a participant not only in the general planning but also in compiling the programs for solo recitals: it was important to perform diverse repertoire and not to limit oneself to popular compositions that grant success. "How does the repertoire form?" asked Oborin, "The National Concert Association receives requests. Most of the time these requests specify performers, but give no indication of the desirable program. As a result, the same compositions are being performed in concerts again and again."⁸¹

⁸⁰ Lev Oborin, "Several Remarks" Sovetskoye iskusstvo 18 October 1938.

⁸¹ Lev Oborin, "The way the tours go" Sovetskoye iskusstvo 9 July 1940.

In the articles written after the tours, Oborin paid attention to the quality of instruments and the level of preparation of local symphonic orchestras.

Oborin vigorously objected to the decision to disband the Baku Philharmonic Orchestra. He insisted on the necessity for all possible support and for the strengthening of symphonic culture in different cities of the country.

Oborin analyzed the peculiarities of the young performers' artistic character with intensity and thoughtfulness, and in the process detected such qualities as tact, observance, and psychological sensitivity.

There is only a six- to ten-year difference in age between him and Gilels, Zak, and Flier, but for this younger generation that was starting to appear on the concert stage at that time, Oborin was a recognized authority.

Some of the remarks made in his articles are generalizations that are significant for the performance art theory. Thus, an analysis of the pianistic character of the young Flier led Oborin to conclude that there are two stages in the artistic life of a performer: student and independent. "The moment of transition from the first period, when, -- as late as during the final exams the musician is still being evaluated through comparison to his schoolmates, to the second period -- when the performer is already compared against great masters -- for some performers can be extremely difficult, and for some even becomes fatal. An artistic individuality in most cases does not form immediately. It develops in the process of concertizing, when upon learning the basic points of the school program one starts his independent artistic search. Such searches last for years and at times can be very difficult. Sometimes they come with not only great achievements but with the equally massive kind of breakdowns. Only at the end do they create the sort of performer's experience which determines his individuality as an artist."⁸²

Through the experience of Yakov Flier, Oborin was examining the main value of a positive musician-performer. "This artist is not only of high intellect and wide-ranging culture. This is a musician who loves and knows how to work; he is able to take what is most valued from what he sees, hears, studies, and is able to comprehend the best of the musical culture."

Clearly distinguishing the performer's individualities, Oborin emphasized in the emerging style of Flier his deep understanding of the composer's intentions, emotionality, bold purposefulness, and bright, energetic rhythm. "Flier's playing is free from that ailment and demagnetization that are so characteristic of European pianists, who bring out their "I" at times against the composer's intentions. Flier's positive qualities show up especially clearly in his performances of Chopin, which may be at times arguable but are always warm and emotional."⁸³ Oborin was the first one to notice Gilels' gravitation towards lyricism and his persistent striving to expand virtuosity. In 1940 Oborin wrote: "In Gilels' playing there appeared new means of expressiveness; the lyrical side expanded and virtuoso freedom has improved even further."⁸⁴

Oborin's articles helped the artistic growth of young pianists. These articles—their style, language, general nature, evaluation—characterized Oborin himself equally brilliantly. The traits included his humanity, benevolence, and an ability to be impressed by colleague's skills without losing objectivity. It is impossible to find another contemporary pianist who has made as many public appearances in the press dedicated to his young colleagues. Moreover, one would not be able to find many examples in the history of performance art of such kindhearted support.

⁸² Lev Oborin, "Yakov Flier" *Sovetskoye isskustvo* 4 June 1938.

⁸³ Lev Oborin, "Yakov Flier" *Sovetskoye isskustvo* 4 June 1938.

⁸⁴ Lev Oborin, "Emil Gilels' Recital" *Vecherniyaya Moskva* 10 March 1940.

By listening to the pianists' playing and observing the evolution of interesting individualities, it was certainly impossible for Oborin to avoid making personal, practical conclusions. He carefully studied the achievements of Neuhaus's students. He was interested in the Leningrad piano school. Shostakovich frequently and with admiration told Oborin about his piano teacher L. Nikolayev, whose method advanced not only performance but also the compositional abilities of students.

In essence, during these years Oborin went increasingly outside the boundaries of Igumnov's school. This is evident in his attempt to form a piano duet with a Leningrad pianist and a student from Nikolayev's school, Vladimir Sofronitsky. Two performances of the Sofronitsky-Oborin duo took place in 1933. The repertoire included Mozart's Sonata in D Major, Busoni's Duetto, and Rachmaninoff's First and Second Suites.

The critics viewed the duet performance positively. But collaborative work soon stopped. It was very difficult for the nervous and unbalanced Sofronitsky to get used to the collaborative systematic practices and to ensemble discipline. There was no natural unification of individualities within the duo.

While Oborin had observed the playing of different pianists, he did not imitate anyone. On the contrary, "everyone was original and, I must confess, I felt at times that one's own ego stood in the way of the objective meaning of the music. And that's when I felt an unrelenting striving to find academic truth. I was searching for precise logical rules of performance."

Under Sollertinsky's influence the pianist began to study famous conductors. In particular, Sollertinsky introduced Oborin to Gustav Mahler's markings in scores. Examination of instructions of the famous symphonist and conductor, which expressed his personal manner, drove Oborin to make interesting generalizations.

Mahler's thoughts caused Oborin to turn from Romantic to Classical repertoire. He began to work systematically on Mozart's Concertos and Sonatas.

Oborin's exploration caused him, first of all, to follow the composer's remarks with the utmost precision and secondly, to simplify the form.

Oborin's playing was becoming easier to understand, but at the same time these searches to a large degree led to restricting ingenuity in performance. In them hid the danger of objectivism. "Later," wrote Oborin, "the youth stretched the tendencies to the limit. Even for me the self-limiting had a negative side."

There were those who listed Oborin among pianists with a "non-academic" tendency.

2

After Oborin had parted with his plans to compose, he was trying not to lose friendly connections with composers. He moved chiefly in composers' circles.

Miaskovsky believed in "the return of the prodigal son."

Oborin liked to participate in the listening and discussion of new compositions. Not one of them escaped his attention.

An already quoted correspondence between Bogdanov-Berezovsky and Oborin contains many notable discussions about compositions of Soviet and contemporary foreign authors. Not limiting himself to having a general opinion, Oborin tries to understand the essence of the compositions. He now approaches the new works rationally, as a performer; from the textural point of view and from that of performance, expressive means, and the precision of the

composer's indications. When Bogdanov-Berezovsky sends him his piano etudes, Oborin intentionally pays special attention to the composer's fingering indications. He is interested in the question of the relationship between composer and performer.

Oborin's criticisms and judgments are always honest: they are without reserve, diplomatic dodging, or friendly leniency. He does not compromise on issues having to do with art. Knowing this trait, and most importantly the subtlety, precision, and depth of his hearing, Oborin is often approached for advice by even those who are older and more experienced than he, such as Miaskovsky and Shebalin.

He is still friends with Dmitri Shostakovich as he was in his youth. He comes to Leningrad frequently, together with Shostakovich and Sollertinsky, in order to make it to Detskoye Selo, where at this time there were many authors and composers residing. They included Aleksei Tolstoy, Konstantin Fedin, Boris Asafiev, Gavriil Popov, Valerian Bogdanov-Berezovsky. In the right wing of the Detskoselskii Palace, in Bogdanov-Berezovsky's apartment there were heated discussions taking place about the future of music and about performance. A lively determination to figure out the essence of contemporary art was what stood behind the drive of the young musicians. They would make mistakes at times, they would experiment, but they would never lie about anything, nor would they be seduced by cheap success.

Under the influence of Sollertinsky Oborin studies piano compositions of Hindemith as well as of Poulenc. He performs the popular Hindemith "Suite 1922." In Moscow he promotes Shostakovich's compositions and participates in organizing a concert of Shostakovich's and Shebalin's works in Maly Hall of the Moscow Conservatory. In the first half, the Beethoven Quartet performed a Quartet written by Shebalin, and Oborin played Shebalin's Quasi-Sonata. In the second half Shostakovich introduced the listeners to his early works: his first preludes, Fantastic Dances, and Piano Trio. Oborin performed Shostakovich's Suite for two pianos together with the composer.

The general response to the concerts was unexpected. The critics praised Shebalin for his compositions and condemned Shostakovich for immaturity and pretension.

Shostakovich did not take this failure lightly. Oborin tried to console him as best he could. They continued to promote the Suite and did so quite successfully.

Upon finishing his First Piano Concerto, Shostakovich brought it to Moscow and played it for his friends who gathered in Oborin's flat. Impressed by the new composition, Oborin learned it hastily but did not perform it in public until later, after the first performance by the composer. Soon an opportunity arose to perform the Concerto abroad. A group of young musicians which contained Shostakovich and Oborin went on a tour to Turkey. Here the composer and Oborin played the composition at a gathering intended for members of the Turkish government and Ankara Intelligence Agency (Oborin played the second piano part).

After testing it twice at home and once abroad, Oborin began to constantly perform the Concerto in different cities in the Soviet Union. Although Shostakovich was still interested in a performance career at that time, he frequently gave Oborin the opportunity to perform in public because he recognized the excellence of Oborin's playing. This is how Oborin began promoting the First Concerto of the outstanding Soviet composer, and it was the beginning of a long artistic collaboration with Shostakovich, which played a rather important role in the development of Soviet piano music.

During the 1930s, Soviet piano artistry had begun to develop rapidly. The growth of the Soviet culture showed up in this branch of art as well. The growing concert life along with a favorable attitude of the listeners, who were expecting from composers to comment on the reality

of Soviet life, influenced the intensity of art. The direction in which the music was going was being determined to a large degree by the demands of performers, who acted as a connecting link between the creators of music and the listeners. It is difficult to overrate the benefit of the close communication between composers and performers. It prevents composers from making speculative experiments, from fruitless innovations, and helps find ways for historically mature innovations. Many outstanding composers were also performers and some of them, such as Prokofiev and Shostakovich, proved to be wonderful pianists as well.

The composers as well as performers understood that the changes had to be made not only in such aspects as fingering, dynamics, articulation, and other performance means but also in the essence of the musical language itself. Questions arose concerning 'intonation' in piano music and about the character of the melodic writing, which always determined other elements of music.

One of the sources for changes became the musical culture of Transcaucasian republics.

Having acquired favorable chances for development due to the party's national politics, this culture was striving to combine national distinctiveness with high, multifaceted professionalism.

Many young talented musicians from Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan came to Moscow in order to study and improve.

Oborin had visited the Gnesin School and was introduced there to Aram Khachaturian, the brother of a theater producer Suren Khachaturov, who was famous in Moscow and whose theater work thrilled Oborin.

Khachaturian was learning to play the cello, and under the guidance of Mikhail Fabianovich Gnesin was becoming acquainted with the basis of composition. The inexperienced composer played several of his pieces for Oborin.

In 1935, while still a graduate student at the Conservatory in the studio of Miaskovsky, Aram Khachaturian decided to compose a piano concerto. His intention was supported by a student of Neuhaus, Aleksei Klumov, an exceptional musician belonging to that rare type of kind and sensitive people who care more about others and frequently become selfless 'companions' of talented people.⁸⁵

Believing in Khachaturian's talent, Klumov tried to help him with the pianistic aspects of the Concerto. Klumov immediately played what was composed to check pianistic fluency and convenience.

Khachaturian did not realize the importance of his work and was not setting out to discover something new. He was a happy person and composed music with freedom and courage, following his imagination.

The sense of Armenian folk melodies formed the essence of his musical character. Khachaturian used Armenian as well as Azerbaijani intonations and turns of phrases as the basis for the Concerto.

The problems of writing folk melodies for piano made Khachaturian study the piano output of the classicists of Armenian and Georgian music, especially that of Komitas.

The enhancement of the piano part in Komitas's pieces was modest. Nothing blocked out the beauty of the national melodies.

⁸⁵ A. Klumov promoted the artistic development of composer M. Weinberg, who, under Klumov's influence, produced a number of interesting works for piano.

The composer avoided excess; this was a terse and concise piano writing. It did not satisfy Khachaturian. He was fascinated by decorative virtuosity, flashiness, festivity, and the bright colors so characteristic of the artistic world of the sunny East.

(PIC 123)

Khachaturian did not acknowledge the established models and chose to follow his own way by frequently using chordal textures, melismas, different combinations of passages, and by juxtaposing different registers.

Such an approach suited the melodic material used in the Concerto. Embellishment, ornamentation, and textural richness emphasized the beauty of these melodies; virtuosity presented great possibilities for an impressive performance.

The premiere of the new piece took place at the artistic meeting of the Society of Soviet Composers in the fall of 1936. The performers were Aleksei Klumov and Goldenweiser's student Eleonora Greenberg. The following people took part in the first discussion of the piece: K. Igumnov, H. Neuhaus; composers V. Bely, B. Shehter, N. Chemberdji, and Ya. Eshpai.

The same performers appeared again at a concert in the Maly Hall of the Moscow Conservatory.

A question emerged about the future of the piece, which had caused widespread interest. Klumov did not possess the kind of experience, scale and artistic courage that were necessary in order to introduce a significant new piece to a wide audience. Thus, upon refining some features following the concert discussion, Khachaturian turned to Oborin.

The composer and the pianist began to work together.

A complete artistic connection formed right from the first meetings. A mutual understanding created an atmosphere of productive effort from the two musicians, equally responsible for this work's fate.

Oborin was learning the Concerto measure by measure. Khachaturian knew clearly what he wanted and expected from the pianist; he pointed out with confidence the elements of form, the relationship of tempos, and intonation. Oborin, being a composer himself, appreciated the precision and sharpness of such hearing characteristic of conductors.

It was not easy to perform the Concerto. The main difficulty lay in the character of the melodic material. Oborin never before had to realize the Armenian melody with its peculiarities. It was important to understand the rules of shaping the Armenian and Azerbaijani melodies.

Pencil markings in Oborin's score of the Concerto along with the analysis of a recording, (made much later but still having a number of unchanged and well-established interpretive idiosyncrasies), make it possible to determine the path which the pianist was taking. His typical way of phrasing was to displace the accents and to emphasizing interval resolutions. An unusual placing of accents gives a certain character to the theme and a subtle shade of national color. Nuances of accentuation enrich the singing themes. By somewhat emphasizing the intervallic resolutions, the pianist brought to life the uniqueness of Armenian melody with its wide singing intervals and emphasis on folkloric elements.

When working on the Concerto, Oborin gave much thought to the culmination points in the piece. He was afraid of playing with too much force and of exaggerating the coloristic aspects. The performer carefully calculated the approach to dynamic peaks, how long they should last, and the exact strength of the sound. Each time, he played in a compact and precise way, trying to bring out the melodic basis of the music.

In essence, there were two different personalities that came together in this collaboration. There was Oborin, who had grown up playing the refined texture of Chopin and who always

stayed away from flashiness, and then there was Khachaturian, who had a tendency toward sound exaggeration, grandiosity, and virtuoso brilliance. But it was precisely the merging of and agreement between opposite tastes that led to variety and a unity of performance.

Although both musicians were full of enthusiasm and had faith in success, they approached cautiously the first performance of the piece with the orchestra. The modest premiere was scheduled to take place during the summer in concerts of the Capital Park of Culture and Recreation in Sokolniki.

The pianist spoke with humor about the first performances of the Concerto. “The orchestra consisted of various musicians with different skill levels. In order to get through the score there had to be more than one rehearsal. It was very windy during the performance. The conductor Lev Steinberg lost his eyeglasses and thus could not see the score. The composer hid in the depth of the park. Everything seemed to have been lost.”

However, the reaction of the press did not coincide with the conclusions of the pianist and composer. The debut was deemed for the most part successful. The concert had attracted attention.

The performance was repeated in the fall, on November 14th, 1937, in the Bolshoi Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, with orchestra conducted by Aleksander Gauk. This time the orchestra consisted of highly qualified musicians who had experience in working with new repertoire. Among the concertmasters of the orchestra there were peers and friends of the pianist. The orchestra was conducted by one of the leading symphonic conductors in the prime of his years. Oborin frequently performed with Gauk and their approach to music had a lot in common.

That same fall, the Khachaturian Concerto was heard at the opening of the symphonic season at the Leningrad Philharmonic. The conductor was Evgeni Mravinsky. As a result of meticulous rehearsals, the duet of the pianist and conductor was “flawless in regard to the subtle ensemble coordination and to the similarity in the way they interpreted the general expressive character. This is especially true of the middle Andante movement—the best movement of the composition, musically speaking.”⁸⁶

The success of the Moscow and Leningrad premieres was extensive and indubitable and the critics were ecstatic.

However, in order for the original meaning of the composition to be accepted, there had to be other works worthy of acknowledgement—works which would confirm the vitality and contemporaneousness of Khachaturian’s artistic ideas.

Oborin found these compositions in Tbilisi, Georgia.

He loved the picturesque city. His first post-competition concerts were held here. The listeners in Tbilisi felt an unwavering sympathy towards the artistry of the young pianist. Oborin would remain in the Georgian capital for long stretches of time following his concerts. As a result, he got acquainted with interesting aspects of Georgian culture and became friends with local composers.

At about the same time as Khachaturian, or even somewhat earlier, in 1934, the son of a famous Georgian composer Meliton Balanchivadze, Andrei Balanchivadze, came up with the idea of composing a piano concerto based on national folk melodies.

In order to test his ideas, Andrei Balanchivadze played the draft of his Concerto for Oborin. It turned out that regardless of each other, both Khachaturian and Balanchivadze were going in the same direction; however, Khachaturian relied on Armenian and Azerbaijani motives

⁸⁶ V. Bogdanov-Berezovsky, Soviet conductor. Essay on the career of E. A. Mravinsky (Leningrad: Muzgiz, 1956) 81.

that were close to him, whereas Balanchivadze used his native Georgian folk melodies: Gurisky, Kahetinsky, and Adjarski. Like Khachaturian, Balanchivadze tried to capture the virtuoso ways of handling the material; to make the Concerto appealing for the pianist and the listener. As a result of hard work Khachaturian was able to balance out the orchestra and piano parts, improve the piano part, and avoid heaviness. Balanchivadze, on the other hand, stopped at half way: his Concerto lacked completeness. Possessing a rich and original imagination, it nevertheless seemed scattered, fragmentary, and lacked self-discipline. The pianist was overpowered by having to ‘fight’ with the dense and monotonous sound of the orchestra. One had to possess a great amount of self-control to be able to play everything with brilliance without sacrificing the logic of the composition. It was a difficult task for the performer. While Oborin understood the shortcomings of Balanchivadze’s pianistic background, he nevertheless learned the Concerto and performed it successfully on November 30th, 1937 (two weeks after performing Khachaturian’s Concerto). The performance took place on the concluding evening of Decade of Soviet music in Moscow, at the Kolonnyi zal of Dom Soyuzov (Pillar Hall at the House of Unions). The orchestra was conducted by G. Stoliarov.

The concert was repeated shortly afterwards in Tbilisi; what is more, here Oborin performed not one but two new contemporary piano concertos, the other being by Khachaturian.

All of the music critics, having immediately noticed the talented Georgian Piano Concerto, also took notice of the pianist’s role in propagating the new composition. “Brilliance and originality of the content, the sharpness of harmonic thought, rhythmic richness and variety were the cause of success with the audience. The success was also due in large part to the wonderful temperament and great mastery of the soloist Lev Oborin.”⁸⁷

Taking into account this experience, Balanchivadze was preparing a new version of the Concerto but later changed his mind and instead started writing his Second Concerto. Pianist and composer continued their artistic collaboration, discussing the contours of the composition. They came to the conclusion that Georgian melodies demanded a different type of textural writing than Armenian. In Oborin’s opinion, textural density was not compatible with the character of Georgian piano music. Balanchivadze worked on the form of the Concerto, on polyphony and long melodic line. During their trips together to Kahetiya and Mingreliya, Balanchivadze would point out to Oborin those intonational articulations so typical of Georgian music. These peculiarities showed up in the character of themes in Balanchivadze’s Second Concerto. For example, the declamatory theme of Adagio sounds like a typical ornamented Eastern melody against the background of held voices. The freedom that the pianist exercised in performing the piece noticeably improved the main weakness—that of slight emotional monotony: **(PIC 128)**

Balanchivadze used a great deal of rhythmic variation in the Concerto. Having learned from his first experience, the composer now chose to group together those orchestral sectionals that accompanied the pianist concisely and with precision. The timbres typical of national instruments were not imitated: there was only the general, distinct emotional color of orchestration.

Thus, in the Second Concerto Balanchivadze found his own personal way of composing and established a pianistic writing that derived, in his opinion, from the specific nature of Georgian music. The composer’s clarity of determination, his experience, and a noticeably increased knowledge helped in the fruitful realization of this artistic task.

⁸⁷ A. Gosberg, ‘Piano Concerto of A. Balanchivadze’ *Sovetskaya muzyka* 1 (1938): 35.

The Concerto was first performed by Lev Oborin in 1946. Just as with the performance of Khachaturian's Concerto, the conductor in this case was the eminent Aleksander Gauk. In the following year, Andrei Balanchivadze received a State Award of the first degree for his Second Concerto. There were not many piano compositions that received such high honor. A year later, when a number of outstanding compositions were being criticized, Balanchivadze's Concerto was among those that were deemed formalistic.

At a difficult time for composer, Oborin's affection toward him did not change. He used any opportunity to promote the Concerto. In order to show his support for the composer, Oborin learned his other works; such pieces as the Nocturne "Samaya" from the ballet "Serdtsse Gor" frequently appeared on the program.

In 1952 Balanchivadze finished his Third or "youth" concerto. It was composed with a special pedagogical purpose and was intended to be performed by students. Upon becoming familiar with the new work, Oborin rated it highly and thought that in this composition Balanchivadze reached clarity of style and perfect command of form.

The pianist not only successfully performed the Concerto with orchestra under the direction of B. Khaikin, but had also made a recording of it. Moreover, he included the piece in his teaching repertoire and gladly recommended it to the undergraduate students at the Conservatory.

One person stood out among these young performers of the Concerto. It was Djardji Balanchivadze, the son of the composer who later came to Moscow to study piano with Oborin.

Aram Khachaturian's Concerto marked a brilliant beginning in the important field of Soviet instrumental artistry. Oborin's interpretation became a part of the history of Soviet performance art. Certainly, pianists were promoting Soviet piano music even before the appearance of this Concerto, but Oborin's performances marked the beginning of an extensive introduction of the best, most talented performers to the Soviet piano art. It was also the beginning of interest in spreading not only compositions of well-known masters, but also works of young composers that had not yet had a chance to be explored.⁸⁸

Oborin was a part of the prolific avant-garde collaboration of composers and performers that took place in the 1930s. This was a time of blossoming of the Soviet piano art and without a doubt, this collaboration had an influence on the level of compositions that were produced during this period.

It was not by chance that Aram Khachaturian dedicated his Piano Concerto to Lev Oborin.

The folkloric subject, both Armenian and Georgian, expanded the 'borders' of Oborin's pianism and enriched his playing with new inflections and color.

VII

Part of Ensemble

⁸⁸ Oborin played not only concertos of Shostakovich, Khachaturian, and Balanchivadze, but also new piano concertos of such composers as Fabio Vitasek and Aleksander Abramsky. However, these compositions did not remain in his repertoire.

In 1935, the Turkish Prime Minister Ismet Inenu, a great admirer of music, suggested that the Soviet artists who were then touring in Ankara present a concert consisting of chamber music. Oistrakh and Oborin were not prepared for such a performance and started to frantically search for scores, which they were unable to find in Ankara.

They decided to play Grieg's C minor Sonata by memory. It was a risk, but the experiment was successful. This established a mutual musical trust—the foundation of their ensemble playing.

However, it would be a long time before a stable ensemble collaboration would form. In Moscow, the musicians were busy with other tasks. Nevertheless, Oborin once received a phone call from Oistrakh who invited the pianist to a party. The reason was clear: "We negotiated better than diplomats," recounted Oborin, "We worked out all the details of how we should start, discussed questions having to do with art—the same way Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko did when founding the Actor's Theater. Then we started to work and...forgot everything we had discussed."

The pianist and violinist were working at first without the thought of concertizing. Their first undertaking was to become familiar with the literature. However, Oistrakh and Oborin were not new to chamber music. As far back as when Oistrakh was a student of a wonderful violin teacher, P. S. Stoliarsky in Odessa, he used to constantly play in trio and quartet groups. Without the hope of becoming a soloist, he was even preparing for a career as a chamber and orchestral musician. Later, recounting the Odessa period of his life, Oistrakh wrote: "Participating in ensembles made me very happy and was apparently beneficial. This love for chamber music remained with me for the rest of my life."⁸⁹

Oborin had been just as skillful as Oistrakh in ensemble playing. He participated in many piano ensembles while in Gnesina's studio, played Sonatas with the violinist D. Tsiganov during the Conservatory years, and taught in the chamber music department of A. F. Goedike.

Having set a serious goal of collaborative performances, Oborin and Oistrakh decided to systematize their knowledge and explore their possibilities. They played every day, without telling anyone of their plans, and quietly enjoyed music. They did not talk much and almost never corrected each other. They allowed themselves to do whatever their musical feeling told them to, without wondering if it is stylistically correct or if the listeners will like it. They instinctively noted mutual discoveries and tried to reproduce them with more brilliance and appeal. This was an unforgettable time of peaceful work on refinement, a pure artistic joy!

In the first year of their reclusive collaboration, Oborin and Oistrakh had played through all the Mozart and Beethoven Sonatas several times in chronological order, Schubert's Duo and Fantasy, the three Brahms Sonatas, the three Grieg Sonatas, and Sonatas by Franck and Debussy.

Soon, the first concert had been scheduled. The repertoire included Beethoven's Sonata No. 7, the Brahms Sonata No. 1, and Schubert's Duo – three classical works, the height of chamber music literature.

The concert took place in Leningrad. It provoked interest. Everyone understood that something significant was taking place in the musical world: after all, these were two outstanding performers coming together.

Nevertheless, there was an ambiguous feeling toward the Oborin-Oistrakh partnership. Many musicians, while they acknowledged the mastery of the artists, considered the prospect of the collaboration with skepticism. The artists were told openly that their ensemble would not be able to stand the trial of time; they would be 'ripped apart' by their interest in solo careers and

⁸⁹ David Oistrakh, "My Path" *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 9 (1958): 100.

would not be able to find something they could give up for the sake of their collaborative work. Many believed the joint concert would be just a single occasion.

Doubt created resistance. The two musicians decided to enliven their concert activity, having made a plan to combine solo and ensemble performances. According to this plan, Oborin would come to a specific city to give a solo recital, after which Oistrakh would join Oborin to perform duets; the peculiar type of cycle would end with Oistrakh's solo recital, with Oborin having already departed for his next destination.

This kind of life 'rhythm' trained Oborin and Oistrakh to alternate different types of concerts. The public was given an opportunity to appreciate the artistry of two outstanding masters, while the joint trips helped their artistic development: Oborin and Oistrakh played for each other their solo programs and discussed the details of performance.

In the course of four years, the ensemble players performed in concert all the works from the list they made in 1937. The works included 10 Beethoven Sonatas, 4 Mozart Sonatas, all Sonatas by Brahms and Grieg. This list became the center of their repertoire, which was at times supplemented by a number of new Sonatas by mainly romantic or contemporary Soviet and foreign composers.

When the beginning stages had passed and the duet established itself in the concert life, Oistrakh and Oborin made a decision to start a trio.

They asked Sviatoslav Knushevitsky, the principal cellist of the Bolshoi Theater Orchestra, to join them. A favorite student of a well-known cello teacher S. M. Kozolupov, Knushevitsky had a wonderful singing tone on the cello, loved ensemble playing, and knew the repertoire. Being kind and modest, he was well-respected among the Moscow musicians. **(PIC 133)**

Knushevitsky gladly accepted Oborin's and Oistrakh's proposal. He began to work intensely, listening to every advice and adapting to the already formed ensemble style of the violinist and pianist. Therefore, the stage of the trio rehearsals passed quickly. There was not much effort needed to make the transition to the new ensemble.

The time when the trio was established coincided with the difficult period of the World War. The enemy wanted to invade Moscow. On the nearby borders of the capital there were constant battles. It was a time of unrest in Moscow.

At this time, there came a letter from Rachmaninoff, who was far away and was upset about what was happening in his homeland. In the letter, he was asking the Soviet Army to accept his help: Rachmaninoff was giving a concert for the benefit of the Foundation of Homeland Defense.

Meanwhile, the three artists began their joint performances in Moscow with a program consisting of Rachmaninoff's works. In the Tchaikovsky Hall, Oistrakh, Oborin, and Knushevitsky played the Elegiac Trio.

There were not many people in the audience. In the middle of the performance, there was an air raid. Fascist planes were flying above Moscow. The concert concluded in the bomb shelter.

During the following winter, the musicians rehearsed regularly and learned repertoire for new trio performances. The work had captivated them to such a degree that it became almost the center of their artistic interests in the years that followed.

From then on the trio began to appear regularly. It played a major role in the development of contemporary chamber performances and especially in the advancement of ensemble culture in Soviet music schools.

For Oborin, the ensemble work became a very important part of his artistic life for many years. The ensemble influenced not only the psychological aspect of performance, but also the professional and technical. It had an influence on the expressivity of his playing: dynamics, pedaling, articulation, and on the whole esthetic nature of the artist.

One may encounter different types of chamber groups: some that come together sporadically, to perform a particular piece; others that play chamber music as an adjunct to their solo careers. In the latter instance, there is frequently a kind of competition among the brilliant performers, who maintain in ensemble all the characteristics and particularities of their individual approaches to music.

The groups that last have a different approach. They join as a result of the musicians' growing need to play chamber music; at the root is their interest in ensemble sonority and literature. The participants are self-disciplined and are capable of controlling their temper; they strive for understanding and reproducing the objective meaning of compositions. A wide outlook, curiosity, flexibility, inner sensitivity, patience, mutual respect and a feeling of mutual assistance – these are a number of the qualities that are necessary for an ensemble, or for any other group work, for that matter.

Such qualities defined the long-lasting existence of the outstanding Russian duet A. Essipova -L. Auer, and trio A. Essipova - L. Auer - A. Verjhbilovich.

At the dawn of the century, Jacques Thibaud, Pablo Casals, and Alfred Cortot began to sight-read trios while on vacation in Versailles. This was the beginning of an almost half-a-century-long tale of the outstanding European trio Thibaud-Casals-Cortot.

The ensemble Oborin-Oistrakh-Knushevitsky was often, and not without reason, compared to this trio in the manner of playing, its significance, and artistic personalities. The Soviet musicians did continue the same line of classical chamber performance, but they did so under different circumstances: they belonged to the post-revolutionary generation, which rose on the general ascent of Soviet culture during the 1930s.

All three ensemble players had similar artistic tastes and methods. The character of their artistry was also alike, brilliant, natural, and full of life.

Similarity of playing style, life experiences, their positions in the musical world and their personalities determined the working atmosphere of the ensemble. It is a rare occurrence in ensemble practice not to get into any conflicts or have any serious disagreements in the course of a quarter of a century. There were times when one performer had more recognition than another. Each one had periods of crisis. Serious illnesses would force Oborin and Knushevitsky to stop working for long periods of time. Oistrakh, constantly touring abroad, at times withdrew from ensemble concerts. A great deal happened during the tense post-war life, but time passed by and once again there would be a telephone call: "Do you want to play?"

Without the ensemble, the artistic life seemed unfulfilled. By getting into the details of chamber literature with its intellectuality and subtleties, the performers were in a way resting from the tension and grandeur of solo performances. Many aspects that went unnoticed while working alone, such as exaggerations, imprecision of intonation, breaking of the phrase logic, all became evident in ensemble playing.

The performers constantly learned from each other in rehearsals and concerts. They did so with care, sensitivity, discretion, the way only true masters are capable of doing. Oborin

brings into the ensemble his characteristic velocity and exactness in encompassing the whole, as well as his understanding of form and flawless taste. Oistrakh's playing is impressive due to its beautiful sound, diversity of timbres, flexibility, and depth.

The ensemble participants emphasized the benefits of the mutual influences on a number of occasions. Oistrakh wrote the following: "My close friendship and collaboration with the wonderful pianist Lev Nikolayevich Oborin began in 1935. My relationship with this great musician and a man of high culture has been very valuable to me. We spent a lot of great time together playing chamber music pieces of great masters of past and present."⁹⁰

Playing together was accompanied by the exchange of ideas about ensemble styles, ways of interpreting the material, and the role and significance of polyphony in chamber pieces of different composers.

The search for ensemble perfection and a responsibility which Oborin felt to his wonderful partners made him change some aspects and perfect his approach to the expressive possibilities of the instrument.

Oborin always listened thoroughly to the elements of texture. He could not stand a lack of clarity, incompleteness of phrases, brittleness, and inattention to secondary voices. In any style, he essentially discovered a hidden or an obvious polyphonic meaning of texture. In ensemble playing, the demands still remained, but it was now necessary to determine the meaning of the piano part in connection with string parts. In some cases, the pianist had made sacrifices, for instance, when the composer gave the strings the lead, or if there were problems with specific sound effects, as in the case of the Ravel Trio.

Consequently, the pianist's leadership could not cross certain boundaries. Only a careful consideration of objective factors helped achieve unity of interpretation. Otherwise, the playing would turn into a colorful but more or less orderly music making of soloists. Being used to solo concert performances with their particular, celebratory atmosphere and the possibility to change many things in moments of inspiration, Oborin was involuntarily afraid of two extremes in ensemble playing: an exaggeration of leadership and an accompanimental subordination. He did not realize the simple truth for some time: no matter how important the string parts were in a piano trio, the role of the conductor belonged to the pianist; he was the one who had the entire score in front of him, and his part usually had the leading role.

As an experienced conductor, the pianist first had to coordinate the sound. From the point of view of the sound, the biggest problem became pedaling. The strength of a single sound on the strings was capable of increasing; however, on the piano the played sound would inevitably die down. To overcome the conflict with dynamics, one could use half-pedal which increased the length of sounds and even created an illusion of vibrato; this, in turn, helped combine clarity of articulation with rich timbre.

It was specifically in ensemble playing that Oborin developed an especially refined skill of half-pedaling and quarter-pedaling. In terms of its flexibility, let's note a wonderful half-pedal in the last variation of the Tchaikovsky Trio. Here, it is due to the half-pedal technique that the sonority of the piano combines naturally with the sound of strings.

The trio taught Oborin about registers. He began to hear the subtle sounds of different registers of the strings. He then 'orchestrated' the piano part accordingly. The color palette was becoming more diverse and original. This had a direct influence on the way Oborin approached some solo piano pieces; for instance, his interpretation of Liszt's pieces with their abundance of orchestral effects.

⁹⁰ David Oistrakh, "My Path" *Sovetskaya muzyka* 9 (1958): 104.

In compositions of the 18th century, such as those of Mozart and Haydn, the articulation markings in the string parts greatly differed from those in the piano part. By studying the manuscripts of Mozart's Sonatas and Trios, Oborin came to the conclusion that in many instances it was necessary to follow the articulation of the strings, which was more distinct and varied.

Oborin's acquired knowledge of the specifics and peculiarities of string articulations was reflected in his interpretation of Mozart Piano Concertos, notably the one in D minor. The theme's 'fractured' motivic development, with its abundance of small expressive turns and somewhat emphasized endings of phrases, is influenced by the string instrument articulations: **(PIC 139, 140)**

The most active time of the duet and trio was in the 1940s. Not constricting themselves to the larger venues, Oistrakh, Oborin and Knushevitsky had also performed periodically in cultural homes and clubs.

The vigor of the performers inspired composers' interest in ensemble literature. Oborin, Oistrakh, and Knushevitsky already had experience working with composers; they understood its importance and tried to fill the repertoire with new compositions. They became the first to perform the Trio of V. Shebalin.

In 1944, Shostakovich wrote a trio, dedicating it to the memory of I. Sollertinsky. For Oborin this trio had a special meaning: he always felt an influence of Sollertinsky's exceptional personality on his spiritual life.

In the same year, Oistrakh became interested in Prokofiev's Flute Sonata and decided that it would sound good on the violin as well. He then shared this idea with the composer. Following Prokofiev's suggestion, Oistrakh prepared the arrangement, to which the composer made some corrections.

The violin arrangement was completed quickly. Oistrakh and Oborin performed it for the first time on June 17th, 1944.

In the summer of 1946, Prokofiev invited Oistrakh to hear the new, just completed Sonata for Violin and Piano. "... I came to Sergei Sergeevich's dacha at the appointed time," recounted Oistrakh, "... we sat down to listen to the Sonata... Before beginning to play, Prokofiev listed all the movements, after which he played the entire Sonata without stopping... The impression from the music itself was astonishing: it was a feeling of being present at something very significant and important. Indeed, it can be said without any exaggeration that a piece of such beauty and depth had not appeared in the chamber music literature for violin for many decades."⁹¹

Having received the manuscript, Oistrakh and Oborin began to work. They began to pay visits to Prokofiev; they practiced separate sections and the entire piece. The composer carefully explained the piece to the performers.

"Sometimes," writes Oistrakh, "these were remarks concerning the pacing; other times – the inner content of the music itself. For example, concerning one place in the first movement, where the violin has running scale-like passages, he said that this has to sound as a 'wind at a cemetery.' After such a remark, the lyricism and the whole idea of the Sonata acquired some kind of deeper and more significant meaning."⁹²

⁹¹ D. Oistrakh, About cherished and beloved (From reminiscences about S. Prokofiev) Materials, documents, reminiscences, ed. 2 (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1961) 452.

⁹² Ibid., p. 453

The premiere of the Prokofiev Sonata took place in Moscow on October 23, 1946 and was successful.

Approximately at the same time, Miaskovsky also wrote a two-movement violin sonata that expanded the repertoire of Oistrakh and Oborin. The performers learned this composition in accordance with the advice and instructions of the composer. The Sonata was first performed on April 29, 1947.

Later, Oborin and Knushevitsky included in their repertoire Miaskovsky's A minor Cello Sonata. The form of the composition made the performers express a few criticisms to the composer. "We were playing the Sonata," recounted Knushevitsky, "the way it was published; however, one time we expressed to Nikolai Yakovlevich our disappointment that the Sonata, in our view, lacked one movement. We felt that between first and second movements there must be a fast movement, because there was not much contrast in terms of direction between Allegro and Andante. It turned out that he had already taken that weakness into consideration. Miaskovsky said that he had material for a fast movement, and immediately played a small part of a menuet which he came up with for the second movement of the Sonata."⁹³

Thus, the Trio not only performed new chamber music pieces, but also worked constantly with the composers. Many composers, who had shown their chamber compositions to the Trio members, followed their advice, thus perfecting the art of chamber music composition.

During the second half of the 1940s, the ensemble's repertoire had become influenced by its interest in the Russian chamber music and in the works of composers from Eastern European countries. For the first time there was a performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's Trio from manuscript; the music critics noted a number of times the excellent performances of Trios composed by Taneyev, Smetana, and Dvorak.

The trip of Oborin and Oistrakh to France helped add to their repertoire chamber compositions of French composers. One of the most beloved trios of the ensemble players became Ravel's Trio. Oborin and Oistrakh also successfully performed the Concerto for violin, piano and string quartet by Chausson.

With each year, the Trio members went on more and more concert trips. They concertized in the German Democratic Republic and twice in England. In April and May of 1962, the French recording label Le Chant du Monde invited Oborin and Oistrakh to Paris for a month in order to record all of Beethoven's violin sonatas. The artists also gave three concerts, concerning which the French press wrote: "The Parisian music lovers applauded the brilliant well-coordinated performance of the Soviet musicians, who have been playing together for almost twenty years. The Parisians were delighted by the inspirational, humane music and perfect technique. These two musicians easily overcame all technical difficulties and showed that they have perfect command of all secrets of their instruments."⁹⁴

A year earlier, Oistrakh, Oborin, and Knushevitsky received the Grand Prix given by the French Recording Academy for their recording of Schubert's Trio. In the 1950s and '60s, the ensemble received recognition from Europe.

The principles of the Trio and the character of its playing had an influence on many ensemble groups that were forming in the Soviet Union and the Democratic countries.

⁹³ S. Knushevitsky, Meetings with N. Ya. Miaskovsky – Miaskovsky Collection, articles, letters, reminiscences, *Sovetsky Kompozitor* 1 (1959): 249-250.

⁹⁴ Quotation from the article "Our art abroad" *Sovetskaya kultura* 5 June 1962. The length of the duet's existence is indicated incorrectly by the critic. By 1962, Oborin and Oistrakh had been performing together for 25 years.

February of 1963 became a sad time for the collaborative work of the three musicians: Knushevitsky had passed away.

In March, Oborin and Oistrakh appeared on the concert stage of the Bolshoi Hall of Moscow Conservatory with a cycle of Beethoven Sonatas. They played them in memory of their friend with great feeling and with pain in their hearts.

It was as if with the Beethoven cycle, which became a part of the duo when it had just formed, Oborin and Oistrakh were returning to their youth.

VIII The Seasons

At the beginning of World War II Oborin, along with the artists from Bolshoi Theater was evacuated to Kuibyshev, but soon returned to Moscow. Like many other artists, he performed in hospitals, military units, and in concerts that were broadcast on radio throughout the country.

Shocked by the turn of events and the sudden change in his way of life, Oborin nevertheless had no doubts about his artistic path and his place among the working people.

Performances and meetings opened up new psychological boundaries of how one perceived music. The sensitivity of music's perception intensified because of the anxiety caused by war. Music called for battle, but it also consoled, energized, soothed, and softened hearts.

People were thankful for the moments of rest and enjoyment that Oborin's playing gave them. His artistry was still full of optimism and people were still drawn to him, just as all living things are drawn to warmth and light.

Satisfied with the response, which he felt as an artist, Oborin worked with enthusiasm and at times was unaware that he was adding new qualities to his already formed performance style.

Oborin, a Soviet person connected by blood to his native country, could not remain indifferent while seeing the suffering of Russia. The anger, however, did not break him or remove his characteristic kindness; rather, it provided his performances with composure and precision. Oborin's poeticism was becoming more severe and strict. The effect of the war deepened the pianist's artistry.

His performance repertoire was dictated strictly by the wishes of listeners.

This was a time of the rise of patriotic feelings and of great interest in Russian music. Forgotten pieces of Russian lyricism were being reborn; new compositions were being searched for; old manuscripts were being published. Soviet composers expressed the events not only in symphonies and songs, but also in cyclical piano compositions, sonatas, and concertos.

Oborin did not have problems with expanding this part of the repertoire, nor did he have to open unknown layers, overcome feeling of resistance, or improve the lyrical side of his pianism. He was prepared for this kind of work long ago. Was not Rachmaninoff his idol? And did he not acquire the understanding of Tchaikovsky's style while studying with Igumnov? In effect, Oborin's first concert program was symbolic in that it included little-known compositions of Soviet authors!

Oborin not only understood the soulful nature of Russian music, but he also felt it with the whole nature of a Russian artist.

This is the reason that during the years of war Oborin quickly moved forward as a great interpreter of compositions by Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Borodin, Mussorgsky, Balakirev, Liadov,

Rachmaninoff, and Liapunov. Even if in some other parts of Oborin's repertoire the young, highly artistic generation of pianists may have surpassed him, in the area of Russian music Oborin won the contest without effort.

The following is a list some but by no means all compositions performed by Oborin from 1941 to 1949:

Balakirev Islamey, Polka, Impromptu, "V sadu"

Borodin Little Suite, Scherzo

Glinka Nocturne La Separation, Barcarolle, Reminiscence de Mazurka, Variations on a Scottish Theme

Liadov Pieces

Liapunov Concert transcription of two excerpts from Glinka's opera Ruslan and Lyudmila

Mussorgsky Intermezzo, "Shveya"

Rachmaninoff Etudes-Tableaux, Six Preludes from Op. 32, Moment Musical No. 4, Polichinelle, Humoresque, Serenade, Barcarolle, Waltz, Polka, "Lilac," Trio

Rimsky-Korsakov Concerto, Trio

A. Rubinstein Three Barcarolles

Stravinsky Petrushka

Taneyev Trio

Tchaikovsky The Seasons, Dumka, Theme and Variations, 6 pieces on one theme, Danse Russe, Waltzes, Trio 'In memory of a great artist'

To this list one may add a number of compositions which became a part of the repertoire during the conservatory years and later, during the first decade of the concert career. These pieces include: Tchaikovsky First Concerto; A. Rubinstein's Fourth Concerto; Rachmaninoff's Second and Third Concertos, Preludes Op. 23; Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition; Liadov's Variations on a theme by Glinka; Glinka/Balakirev "Lark;" Liapunov's Etudes "Trezvon" and "Terek;" Scriabin's Second and Fifth Sonatas; Prokofiev's Third Concerto.

This is a massive list encompassing compositions with different formal structures and styles—from pieces by Glinka to Stravinsky's Petrushka. The degree of importance that each of these pieces played in the pianist's evolution as an artist was, of course, not always the same.

The two pieces that stood out from this repertoire were Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition and Stravinsky's Petrushka. They had a noticeable influence on enriching the coloristic effects, the declamatory aspects, and the contrast in Oborin's performances. But the pianist played these pieces less frequently in the late 1940s.

At the beginning of this period, works by Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky became the center of the repertoire. From Rachmaninoff's compositions, Oborin frequently included in his programs the Second and Third Concertos, Preludes in E-flat Major Op. 23 and G-sharp minor Op.32, Lilacs, and Barcarolle.

There was an evident preference for pieces with scenic character, and for embodying in music spiritual peace and joyful fulfilled life. Even in Rachmaninoff's Concertos, Oborin avoided sudden contrasts or dramatic coloring. Most of his attention was devoted to the lyrical beginning—a broad singing melody that was played with sincere but reserved feeling. What helped Oborin in approaching Rachmaninoff's melodic writing were the many years he spent working on Chopin's compositions with their utmost refinement, precision, and laconism.

In 1943 Oborin had learned Tchaikovsky's *The Seasons* [often called *The Months*]. He approached this seemingly simple task with apprehension because the performing fate of *The Seasons* had not been fortunate.

A friend of the great Tchaikovsky, music critic N. Kashkin, along with the composer's brother M. Tchaikovsky, considered *The Seasons* to be a composition that did not pursue great artistic goals.

Upon a request of the Nuvelist magazine editor N. Bernard, Tchaikovsky had been writing one simple miniature for the magazine each month, with the titles and epigraphs being suggested by the editor. Tchaikovsky's servant reminded him of the deadlines. This was a commissioned work that emerged without much effort.

Documented sources, however, do not entirely support the established legend. Besides, the circumstances surrounding Tchaikovsky's compositions did not always determine their meaning: the opera *Evgeni Onegin*, with its modest, lyrical scenes that were meant to be performed by students, instead became one of the greatest compositions in Russian music.

Something similar had happened with *The Seasons* as well, with the only difference being that its significance was not apparent immediately.

For a long time the pieces were considered not to be significant enough to be played on the concert stage. They were overshadowed by pieces with more pianistic brilliance and some other miniatures. Anton Rubinstein left out the cycle while preparing his historic concerts in the 1885-86 season, a decade after *The Seasons* had been written, even though he was a man of boldness and principle in choosing repertoire. He preferred instead other Tchaikovsky pieces, such as the Russian Scherzo, Romance, Waltz, and Song Without Words.

The Seasons remained almost exclusively as pieces to be played at home and to be used for pedagogical purposes.⁹⁵ They were played frequently, but in an amateur way: there was no precedent or tradition.

At the very end of the 19th century there were some modest attempts to play separate pieces in small halls and chamber music concerts. The pieces from the cycle that stood out included 'Troika,' 'Carnival,' and 'Harvest Song' —mostly descriptive of familiar events. They were played by Rostislav Genika in Har'kov and by Balakirev's student Tsaregradsky in Nizhny Novgorod.

Mikhail, a younger brother of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, was a talented amateur musician who introduced the great writer to *The Seasons*. Chekhov listened to the Barcarolle and Autumn Song with genuine excitement. The impression he received remained in his memory: in his Anonymous Story, one of the characters plays the Barcarolle and 'Snowdrop'.

Chekhov's love for *The Seasons* did not merely reflect the writer's taste in music; Tchaikovsky's lyrical images were also close to the spiritual aspect of Chekhov's art. And just as the writings of the young Chekhov were sometimes regarded as being superficial, so were *The Seasons*.

The key to the cycle, however, did not lie in the outward traits of the genre; rather, it could be found in the deep inner meaning of this music, as well as in its nationalistic color and poetic subtext. Knowledge and ability could not substitute for feelings and heartfelt emotions.

Artists are able to understand such music only if they possess the gift of lyricism, refinement, spiritualism, sensitivity; they also have to be inspired by Russian life, art, and poetry.

The first to take the initiative in re-evaluating the cycle's significance as a concert piece was Igumnov. Going against prevailing tendencies and instead giving in to an urgent artistic

⁹⁵ N. Zverev gave some of the pieces to play to his students in the early grades of the Moscow Conservatory.

need, he turned to *The Seasons*. Igumnov worked hard on finding the means to interpret the pieces; he tried many different ways of performing each of them. He searched first of all for the appropriate inflection and color.

In the words of the Soviet piano historian A. Nikolayev, who studied the issues regarding the interpretation of Tchaikovsky, “Igumnov achieved the necessary artistic effect through an extraordinary naturalness of intonation of each melodic phrase, through delicate skillfulness of pianistic colors and a wonderful, rhythmically sensitive expression of the living pulse of the composition.”⁹⁶

Oborin observed this process and was impressed by Igumnov’s experimentation while performing the pieces and making changes.

Igumnov’s performances of *The Seasons* made the performing artists take notice of the cycle, but it did not bring a fundamental change to how the pieces were regarded. Igumnov’s interpretation was viewed as a wonderful occurrence, but one which was so exceptional and original that it was impossible to imitate it.

Oborin’s courage in deciding to play the cycle may partially be explained by his heightened interest in the Soviet piano culture during the war years. The circumstances made the work easier. But on the other hand, to take on the cycle after Igumnov was risky: it meant competing against his teacher by choosing the area in which the eminent mentor achieved an especially high proficiency.

Oborin was guided by a conviction that Igumnov’s accomplishment did not exhaust all possibilities of interpreting *The Seasons*. The performance history of the cycle was essentially just beginning. “Igumnov’s artistic finding,” maintained Oborin, “was wonderful but not the only one; and no matter how great Igumnov’s influence is, I would still like to find my own approach.”

So what constitutes the meaning and originality of Oborin’s interpretation? In order to answer this question, let us turn once again to an already used method of comparison.

There are three different popular interpretations of the piece ‘Troika’ [November] from *The Seasons*. In the hands of Rachmaninoff, the piece is uplifted to reach the significance of an epic generalization. The figure of Troika, just as in Gogol’s poem *Dead Souls* is the symbolic representation of Russia. “And you, Russia—aren’t you racing headlong like the spirited troika that nothing can overtake? The road smokes beneath you, bridges rattle, and everything falls behind. . . .”⁹⁷

The performance by Rachmaninoff is one by a person who misses his motherland tremendously. His performance is not veiled and is one in which everything is intensified and subordinate to the revelation of the dramatic beginning. From that come bold declamation, full sound, varied articulation, and noticeable elements of emotionality.

Igumnov, being a lyricist and a poet, had a different conception. The action unfolds slowly. Accents are softened. Refined dynamic gradations aid the flow of the melodic line. The sonority is flexible and soft; it does not exceed mezzo-forte. The general emotional color calls forth the memories of Levitan’s landscapes as well as of Chekhov’s *The Steppe* with its peaceful poetry: “The chaise raced along, while Yegorushka saw always the same -- the sky, the plain, the low hills. . . . The music in the grass was hushed, the petrels had flown away, the partridges were out of sight, rooks hovered idly over the withered grass; they were all alike and made the steppe even more monotonous. . . Now and then a glimpse of a white potsherd or a heap of stones broke

⁹⁶ A. Nikolayev, *Piano Compositions of P. I. Tchaikovsky* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1957) 64.

⁹⁷ N. V. Gogol, *Collection of stories*, Vol. 5 (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1949) 249.

the monotony; a grey stone stood out for an instant or a parched willow with a blue crow on its top branch; a marmot would run across the road and—again there flitted before the eyes only the high grass, the low hills, the rooks. . .”⁹⁸

This kind of Chekhovian—endlessly deep, soft, boundlessly sincere, and amazingly sympathetic style is also characteristic of Oborin’s interpretation of ‘Troika’. At the same time, the psychological side of his interpretation differs in a way from that of Igumnov. Oborin is not prone to the extreme refinement and subtle shading which are characteristic of Igumnov’s playing; neither does he possess the dramatic grandeur of Rachmaninoff.

Oborin’s approach to *The Seasons* is simpler, more natural—as a personification of full-blooded poetry of Russian everyday life. The pianist creates joyful, bright scenes in a straightforward and concise manner. In Oborin’s interpretation the sound is full, phrasing is easily comprehensible, and the texture is clear with a refined delineation between the voices; the rhythmic contours are clear-cut. These were the main means that helped to produce the effect.

No matter what Oborin plays, be it lyrical pieces or character pieces, he strives for the utmost precision of the musical vision; to the simplicity and clear texture of the composition. This explains his laconism and even terseness in using expressive effects and absolutely precise following of the composer’s markings. It is as if the performer is afraid to say too much; what he loses in originality he gains in sincerity and simplicity.

Such strictness may also be connected with another circumstance. Oborin, as a rule, performs the entire cycle of *The Seasons*. He plays separate pieces infrequently and reluctantly. The suite-like quality of the cycle does not seem to Oborin to be external. He does not search for regularities in its harmonic structure or tempo relationships. What is important for him is the inner justifiable logic of its construction and the psychological alternation of musical scenes. With this approach, the pianist is concerned not with the many interesting details but with separate rich shadings that bring color to the drama of the entire cycle.

In other words, Oborin approaches *The Seasons* the same way he would approach a large-scale piece, one that is meant to be performed in a large hall. In a piece that is gaining a foothold on the concert stage not without difficulties, it is especially important for the performer to achieve popularity and make the performance accessible to a wide circle of listeners. **(PIC 153)**

Oborin did not limit his performances of *The Seasons* just to the war years; he returned to this music on many occasions over some eighteen years after the war, performing before audiences both in his homeland and abroad.

His stubbornness and persistence produced results. After the successful performances by Igumnov, by Oborin and by Serebriakov and Briushkov (pianists from Leningard who also included in their repertoire *The Seasons*), there was no longer any doubt that the separate pieces or even the entire cycle, which takes up half of a concert, now deserved a permanent place on stage. The listeners received the work positively: the scope, sonority, and creative aspect of the pieces now seemed compatible with the demands of large halls.

Having already recorded some works from his extensive repertoire on LPs, Oborin happily agreed to record *The Seasons*. Those records acquired justified popularity.

The recognition of the value of *The Seasons* as a piece to be performed on stage came when it was included in the program of the upcoming Third (1966) International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow.

⁹⁸ A. P. Chekhov, Collection of stories, Vol. 6 (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1955) 20.

Starting in 1944, Oborin became busy with new artistic tasks. He began to travel abroad to countries that were now free from fascism.

Oborin, however, had already been abroad before: in 1927-28 in Poland and Germany; in 1935 in Turkey.⁹⁹ But these were sporadic tours, which happened infrequently. After the war had ended, however, the trips began to happen one after the other. Oborin visited the following places: Vienna in 1945, immediately following the liberation of Austria; Warsaw in 1946; Berlin in 1947; Weimar, Leipzig, and then London, Paris, Marseilles... and he took a two month-long trip to Japan. He had a frightening encounter in Hiroshima in the zone of the 'atomic desert,' by the ruins of exhibit pavilion, whose bare cupola remained the symbol of the destroyed city. Oborin gave concerts for people in whose blood there wandered death. **(PIC 159)**

During this remarkable time, when the suffering people were getting accustomed to peace, the musicians frequently were the first ones after the Soviet Army to pass on the truth about their country abroad.

The teams were made from the leading masters: singers, instrumentalists, and dancers. The following artists performed together with Oborin on a number of occasions: ballerinas Galina Ulanova and Irina Tihomirnova; singers Sergei Lemeshev, Zara Doluhanova, Natalia Shpiller, and Irina Maslennikova; violinist David Oistrakh; cellist Sviatoslav Knushevitsky.

Solo concerts with academic programs were performed rarely. Usually the performances were designed for mass audience. If there was no hall that had withstood the war, the concert was held in the public square, under the open sky.

The programs consisted for the most part of works by Russian composers. During the years of fascism, Russian music was forgotten in many countries. The youth was discovering Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, and Scriabin over again.

The concerts generated excitement and astonishment. "The lying fascist propaganda was trying to convince people that Russia stood apart from the general culture," said an Austrian counselor when welcoming a group of Soviet artists that included Oborin in 1945. "Their attempts were comical. We are happy that you accepted our invitation. The wall that stood between our two countries has now come down. We welcome you from the bottom of our hearts."

In Berlin, Oborin played at the opening of the House of Soviet Culture. This House, as Oborin wrote, was supposed to "serve the democratization of Germany and help the German intellectuals and the working class to acquire the true understanding of the Soviet Union, which in the course of several years was an object of Goebbels' slander."¹⁰⁰ Along with Oborin, there were other forward-looking persons involved in the German arts taking part in the opening of the House. They included professors of the Berlin University and directors of the state opera. **(PIC 156)**

In Germany, Oborin played Khachaturian's Piano Concerto. The Berlin newspapers noted that this was the first Soviet instrumental Concerto heard in Berlin in the past twenty years.

The atmosphere of the Vienna concerts of 1945 was described in an article by Boris Polevoi and published in the newspaper *Pravda*. "The arrival of the prominent Soviet artists created a true furor here," wrote Polevoi. "In Vienna—in this small town, where the barefooted

⁹⁹ In Turkey – together with a group of Soviet artists, which included D. Shostakovich performing as a pianist, D. Oistrakh, V. Barsova, M. Maksakova, A. Pirogov, I. Zhadan, P. Nortsov, A. Messerer, N. Dudinskaya, and A. Makarov.

¹⁰⁰ Lev Oborin, "Five weeks in the Soviet occupied Germany" *Novoye vremia* 18 (1947): 18-19.

boys whistle arias as they pull carts on streets; and where the stay-at-home mothers are ready to get into an argument concerning the strengths and weaknesses of a rising opera star's high C—the appearance of the Soviet masters of art, such as Aleksei Ivanov, Natalia Shpiller, Galina Ulanova, Lev Oborin, and David Oistrakh creates an enormous interest. We attended several concerts. The artists were met with cascades of flowers and applause after each performance. The newspapers dedicated entire columns to the reviews of concerts. Everywhere—in trams, the metro, in lines at the grocery stores and in restaurants—their names were in the air. Tickets to their concerts were being bought with lightning speed.”¹⁰¹

Pravda stressed that the triumph of the Soviet artists went further than the cultural borders. It acquired a character of a political event and was regarded as a *moral* victory; it also represented a “step toward strengthening the cultural connection between nations.”

In fulfilling such an important mission, the Soviet artists did not limit themselves to performing concerts. The listeners were also expecting to hear from them a live account of Russia. The artists involuntarily became campaigners. They stayed after concerts to talk to people; they were approached in the streets, museums, and everywhere they went.

Oborin was not skillful at arguing. Because he spent so much time practicing the piano by himself, he was not very sociable. Being sensitive and kind, he usually avoided arguments: only intriguing issues dealing with art were capable of bringing him out of his usual reservedly polite state.

In Vienna, Oborin had to participate in conversations with persons involved in the Austrian arts. Oborin's terse but precise answers and comments were listened to attentively. Oborin tried to talk about the Soviet music from the point of view of a professional without making generalizations. Sometimes he would sit down at the piano in order to explain an idea, and gradually, after getting carried away, would start playing excerpts from different pieces. He spoke simply and warned in advance about not knowing some facts, after which he would check his information and get back with the correct answer.

Oborin instinctively found the correct way of socializing: from music, from the piano—to all the questions of art and life.

Gradually such conversations started to take up a lot of time in his tours abroad. Oborin became accustomed to friends and foes, to true ignoramuses and stubborn spiteful people.

“In 1947, people asked me such questions in Berlin as ‘Is it true that it is forbidden to dance in your country?’ or ‘Is it true that jazz is banned in the Soviet Union?’ or ‘Do people play Bach in the Soviet Union?’ The French musicians wondered if it was ‘possible to survive on the income received from concertizing?’ It was almost impossible for them to understand that in the Soviet Union, the performer does not pay for the hall in which he or she performs... From our conversations with our colleagues-musicians—conductor Desormiere, singer Irene Joaquim, pianist Marguerite Long—we learned that the French artists live and work under very difficult conditions. Money determined everything. In order to be able to perform in a large hall, the artist has to be very wealthy. A performance in a large hall with orchestra does not bring any profit to the musicians; what is more, it bankrupts them.”

“We were told that if the soloist is able to arrange a concert with an orchestra at the Palais de Chaillot, and even if the concert is sold out, he will still have to pay another 150 thousand francs in order to pay off the owners of the hall.”¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ B. Polevoi, “Russians in Vienna” *Pravda* 18 August 1945.

¹⁰² Lev Oborin, Igor Bezrodnyi, “Concertizing in France” *Novoye vremia* 6 (1951): 27.

When Oborin and Bezrodnyi were in Paris, they found out that a number of workers wanted to attend concerts but did not have enough money to purchase tickets. They decided then to go directly to the factory in the Ivry suburb. The performance at the factory became a sensation. “We are overwhelmed that such professional artists as you would come here to the workers’ club,” noted one of the workers present at the concert... An employee at the Renault factory said: “You know, there were many of our workers at the concert who were able for the first time in their lives to listen to the playing of accomplished musicians live rather than on the radio. A concert ticket costs 300-500 francs and workers can not afford that. They won’t be able to go to Palais de Chaillot, and the American touring musicians would not go to the Renault factory club.”¹⁰³

Oborin also encountered a different kind of incident that took up a lot of energy in order to stay calm—something that was essential in the stressful concertizing atmosphere.

In Berlin in 1947, a correspondent from a newspaper that was being published in English in the Western sectors asked Oborin the following question: “Tell us, did you prepare Bach and Beethoven especially for concerts in Germany or do you play them in Russia as well?”

“It was easy to catch the malicious nature of the question,” Oborin said later. “I had to then patiently spell out the truth...”

“At that time, all the information that we provided concerning the number of Soviet music schools, orchestras, concerts, and the Soviet performers came as a complete surprise to the German intellectuals. But this is just one side of the story. On the other side, we could not help but notice that among the masses of the German intellectuals, youth, and workers, there was a genuine interest in the Soviet Union, and a desire to find out the truth about the Soviet people and their life.”¹⁰⁴

Oborin became one of the first Soviet pianists to fulfill the mission of world ambassador by concertizing in different countries of the world.

The post-war concerts abroad played an important role in his life. The ‘spoilt child of fortune,’ who was thrown into the depth of dramatic events of the first post-war years, started to rethink many things.

In order to appreciate what is close and dear to one’s heart, it is necessary to experience the remote and in many respects the alien.

Europe, plowed by war, had passed before Oborin’s eyes. Different countries, people, and events broadened the artist’s life experiences and intellect.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Lev Oborin, “Five weeks in the Soviet occupied Germany” *Novoye vremia* 18 (1947): 20.

IX RITARDANDO

Time was passing by. Concerts abroad were becoming a common part of Oborin's life. Although there were now more countries to which he traveled, such as Italy, Sweden, Greece, and Albania, the artistic novelty that stimulated the will no longer existed in these trips.

The traces of war were being erased with remarkable speed. Oborin again performed in large concert halls before a public that had been spoiled by celebrities. He gave predominantly solo recitals, counting for the most part on educated music lovers.

Oborin became acquainted with his listeners, became familiar with foreign piano schools, and learned about darker side of concert life abroad. By this time it was not unusual for him to go on these trips without experiencing excitement; he was only fulfilling a necessary and important obligation.

Oborin was now in his fifties. He was somehow becoming old quickly—losing agility and sharpness of feelings. There were times when it seemed as though nothing was happening: there were trains, concert halls, the flashing of faces, small talk, the standard friendliness, a well-regulated work schedule; train station – hotel – rehearsal – concert, again train station, etc.

What the naïve fans viewed as a celebration, to Oborin had become an exhausting obligation with time. He was becoming tired, not so much physically as mentally. He was getting used to successes as well as disappointments. Sound judgment was changing into skepticism, which undermined the poetic nature of Oborin's artistry.

There were signs of a crisis. These signs, however, were not severe. Oborin did not go through such artistic breakdowns as those of Gilels and Richter, both of whom had difficult and turbulent fates.

Oborin's signs of crisis were 'accumulating' slowly and continually. Some symptoms of unwellness were already apparent in the mid 1940s, when the pianist was going through an artistic revival and was at the peak of fame. It was already then that the inner stability and confidence so important to an artist, at times crossed into complacency. In addition, Oborin's desire to constantly perform a large number of recitals lowered the festive tone of his artistic career.

With time, the crisis became worse due to a number of circumstances. Some of them had no direct relation to his musical career. Other reasons had to do with Oborin's personality and lay in the logic of his pianistic development.

Oborin was not prepared for obstacles. Being a 'spoilt child of fortune,' surrounded by sympathies, he went through life relatively effortlessly. However, simplicity and easiness have their downside. The person loses resilience to life's misfortunes.

In his youth, when Oborin's pianism was still fresh, the poeticism and charm of his playing concealed its negative sides. With time, it became necessary for Oborin to constantly and energetically seek out sources for renewal. Instead he let himself take breaks; he followed the established order of the concert career and let the course of events take over, without trying to control them.

Just like any person, Oborin needed friends. As an artist, he had to have caring, devoted friends who understood his artistry and were capable of telling him the truth, no matter how harsh it may be. But Oborin's friendships which he so successfully acquired in his youth had dissolved by the 1940s.

This was a difficult time of personal crisis for Oborin.

In his youth, Oborin became friends with the composer Mikhail Kvadri. Kvadri, being a man of high culture, had an influence on the first steps of Oborin's musical career. Kvadri drew his attention to serious literature and painting. It was specifically Kvadri who, following the example of the French composers 'Les Six,' established the Moscow group of six composers, which in addition to him included Shebalin, Starokadomsky, Oborin, Cheriomukhin, and Nikolsky. The inseparable 'Six' usually gathered in Oborin's place in Solianka: this was an exciting friendship without calculation or caution. The young men generously shared their talents.

Later, Kvadri was condemned and had died. Friends were forced to forget his name, to renounce his memory, not knowing whether or not he was guilty. Later, Vsevolod Meyerhold was also arrested.

Oborin's friendship with Meyerhold continued for twelve years, starting during that memorable winter when the pianist, having turned famous, returned to Moscow from Warsaw.

Meyerhold invited him to his house. The young man was not used to the attention of such celebrities as Meyerhold and thus became shy once he arrived at his exceptional home.

Meyerhold's wife, the actress Zinaida Raikh, served a refined dinner at a small table. Meyerhold was kind and charming. At midnight, Oborin said goodbye. The look on his face said: "Why did you call me here?" Meyerhold smiled: "We will talk about business the next time. I only wanted to get acquainted with you."

The next time they met, Meyerhold did talk about business: "I would like to produce Merimee's *Carmen*. I will request the dramatic adaptation without embellishments. What I need is music that will help find new ways of combining musical impressions with theatrical ones. I need genuine Spanish music."

Oborin: I am a student of Miaskovsky and I don't know Spanish music.

Meyerhold: This is good. We will go to Spain and will study the Spanish folklore.

Oborin: But I am not an experienced composer.

Meyerhold: I don't want a skillful and experienced composer. Imagine the Spanish sun and you will feel like composing there.

Oborin: I am ready.

The trip did not happen. But Oborin did write some music for Meyerhold's plays.

The twenty-year-old pianist and the eminent director became friends. As a sign of friendship, Meyerhold dedicated to Oborin his directorial work on Griboedov's *Woe from Wit*. The dedication was announced in an article in the newspaper *Izvestia* on March 4, 1928.

Oborin was present at almost every rehearsal, observing with interest the unique directorial techniques.¹⁰⁵

The pianist played each new program to Meyerhold. The latter wrote down his impressions. These contained refined professional comments, impressions, fantasy-like sketches – an amazing world of imagination, which stirred up Oborin's feelings.

Meyerhold instilled in the calm and meticulous Oborin hatred towards moderation. He deprived Oborin of calmness, got in the way of him being proper and boring; taught him to live in a creative, interesting, and intense way.

At the Meyerhold's house Oborin met with Mayakovsky, Olesha, Pasternak, Bagritsky, Vishnevsky, Erenburg, and Selvinsky.

Then the thread suddenly broke. Oborin moved to Shostakovich, in Leningrad. The friend's personality was changing. He was extremely upset about criticism of his work published

¹⁰⁵ The premiere of the play, called *Woe to Wit*, took place at the end of March 1928.

in the articles 'Mess Instead of Music' and 'Ballet Falsehood.' He worked, but was no longer as frank, quick, simple, and sociable as before.

Oborin tried to make friends among pianists. However, Sofronitsky, whom he loved as an artist and who was capable of capturing Oborin's friendship with his intelligence and nobility, was a withdrawn person and preferred to be in solitude.

The result was that everyone whom Oborin loved in his youth and to whom he had a sincere connection was going his own way. Those mere eight or ten years changed many things. Old connections became weak, and it was difficult to create new ones at his age. In spite of the outward sociability, Oborin did not frequently open up his feelings.

In 1948, Igumnov had passed away. It was only after he had lost his teacher that Oborin realized how much he meant to him. It had been so long since the last time Oborin played new programs for Igumnov; he did not always ask for advice from his teacher and at times was not thoughtful enough of him.

However, Igumnov had disciplined Oborin by attending his concerts and giving critical comments. Igumnov remained for him the highest judge and authority.

Oborin's parents were getting old. Having raised him, they were the ones now in need of his help. His only sister was seriously ill.

Oborin did not have his own family. Being busy with work, he was afraid of quarrels, of having to do chores, and even of being responsible for another human being.

The time came when Oborin stopped caring about many things.

A brilliant artist who seemingly had everything a musician could wish for, Oborin turned out to be a lonely person in his adulthood. He lived only through his work and hid in his work a longing for friendship, warmth, and tenderness.

A pianist with a stronger will may have been toughened up by such difficulties. Oborin, however, had been broken by them.

The fading of the artistic will first had an effect on the process of practicing. The energy and purposefulness disappeared and were replaced by routine and discipline.

The rehearsals were brought down to a minimum: to save time, Oborin would come to each city where he was supposed to perform on the day of the concert. Coming in tired, he did not have time to play through in the hall, get used to the instrument, or get acquainted with acoustics. He made all of the corrections directly at the concert. Moments of adjustment were reflected in the quality of the opening pieces in the program. He had to count on inspiration; however, it would often let him down.

The level of the concerts became uneven. The poetic charm of his playing and the sensitivity of feelings were gone. Moreover, there were times when his merits in such circumstances turned into shortcomings. The objectivity for which Oborin strove, limited imagination. The improvisatory quality that was not based on thorough preparation was regarded as arbitrariness which was not justified by the nature of the music.

In order to maintain the 'form' in such an intense concert schedule, it was necessary to save emotional strength and nervous energy. This eventually led to clichés; the performances became secure but identical to each other.

In Stanislavsky's terms, the emotional artistry was replaced by exhibition artistry. Oborin's playing was impressive due to its pianistic qualities, but it no longer stirred up feelings. Although the strength of its impact may not have diminished, it had a different meaning now, one of superficiality.

Oborin felt the sympathies that the audience had for him and was trying to improve; however, his thirst for success got in the way. The natural need to perform was replaced by the task of making the listeners interested in his playing. This effort led to artificiality, forcefulness, and emotional falseness.

It became necessary to compensate for emotionality with repertoire: standard accessible and popular programs had formed. The pianist stayed away from difficult tasks, trying to hold onto the already-tried repertoire. He played those pieces which did not take much effort to prepare. He was restoring the repertoire rather than creatively renewing it. He played the same pieces over and over again. The encores, which always brought joy to the public, alternated between Chopin's Waltz No. 7 and Liszt's Second Rhapsody.

The intense concert life continued. With the decreased artistic aspect of the performances, the frequency of concerts had even increased: in some seasons, Oborin gave about 100 solo concerts in addition to chamber music performances.

The hurried work interfered with concentration. There was no time for self-analysis. His health was deteriorating.

However, due to his exceptional talent and love for performing, Oborin was able to defeat the artistic ailment at times. There were moments of uplifting and inspiration. There was an illusion of success since the concerts were well-attended and the pianist was being given prizes. The critics had also been spoiling him by avoiding the direct controversial questions about performing artistry. The crisis was going away slowly, in zigzags.

The 'hidden form' of the crisis was preventing it from being resolved. Oborin was shifting from one foot to another.

Did he understand the artistic condition he was in? Did he realize the seriousness of the situation?

There was much evidence of Oborin's suffering, even if there were no physical signs of it. He suffered not only because he risked being left out of the contemporary musical world but also because he was losing the joy of making music; the most cherished thing that he had in life was fading away.

In order to make a change, a person of Oborin's character and age had to make a decisive change in the routine way of his life, which would put an end to his loneliness.

In 1948, during one of the most difficult periods, Oborin made an important step. He had married a modest actress from a children's theater, one who did not belong to the familiar musical circle. Having gone through many adversities, she viewed life sensibly, avoiding deceptive illusions. This was a person upon whom Oborin could count.

The spiritual balance started to gradually restore. In 1950 Oborin's daughter was born. The little girl became a true head of the family. The endless love, tenderness and compassion which Oborin felt toward his daughter softened his heart, and consequently put him in a better mood.

He played the piano as a kind and sincere artist, one who was not striving for success and did not have a need to impress or surprise the listeners.

Oborin once again became the way he was as a young man, except more mature, wise, and calm.

X Pedagogy

During the years when Oborin did not always find satisfaction in his concert career, he found a source of energy and spiritual revival in pedagogy and in communication with students.

The pedagogical activity was growing. The pedagogical foundation was being built and there were the first significant achievements as a teacher. However, a number of objective circumstances, such as the inevitable generational change, both in performance and pedagogy, also helped Oborin to succeed in this field.

After the death of Igumnov, Oborin, his oldest student, was recognized as the head of the Igumnov school. He was in charge of the piano department, which included the following talented musicians: Yakov Flier, who concentrated his attention on pedagogy due to a hand injury that prevented him from concertizing; Yakov Milstein, a long-time Igumnov assistant and author of the vital research on Liszt; Aleksander Yegorov, who aside from teaching his own students was also helping Oborin; Vladislav Epstein and a group of young musicians who were getting experience teaching in the process of being assistants during their graduate studies.

The growing artistic popularity of Oborin in the Soviet Union and in many foreign countries, along with a general acknowledgment of his work, were also a part of those objective factors that helped establish Oborin's pedagogical authority.

But it would be naïve and wrong to note only these general instances, the ones over which Oborin had no real control. His pedagogical achievements were the result of his method of teaching and the progression of his pedagogical career.

Oborin had taught in his youth. When he was a student at the Conservatory, he taught at a music school. Later, A. Goedike, the head of the chamber music department at the Moscow Conservatory, invited Oborin to teach at the department, after he had become impressed by the pianist's refined ensemble intuition.

In 1931, upon finishing post-graduate school, Oborin became part of the faculty in Igumnov's department, and after a short period of being an assistant, he was given his own piano studio. At this time he was twenty-four years old. He clearly realized that in the process of teaching others, he had to learn pedagogy himself.

The lack of experience was compensated by his effort. The beginning pedagogue spent much energy on teaching. The possibilities of pedagogical influence seemed limitless to Oborin. Did he not achieve so much by overcoming his innate deficiencies with the help of Igumnov, Yavorsky, and also by working vigorously himself?

Oborin did not take into account the limits of students' talents. Demanding from them that which he was capable of doing himself, he did not understand the obvious difficulties of the less gifted students. He became distressed when a student who had been shown and explained everything went out on stage powerless. Oborin listened to the bad playing with agonizing embarrassment, as though it was his fault.

Isolated successes and pedagogical attachments did not change the crux of the matter. The initial passion for pedagogy diminished. The concert tours took up a lot of Oborin's time. He was forced to trust the self-sufficiency of the students. The pedagogical process was flowing irregularly, in bursts.

Oborin's teaching became steady only in the late 1930s and in the 1940s, when he changed many elements of his pedagogical method.

It would be wrong to claim that Oborin had developed a firm system of pedagogical influence. He represents the type of teacher whose methods and approach to the students are dictated by the peculiarities of individual artistic creativity. Both sides of Oborin's career – pedagogical and concertizing, are inseparable and equally essential for the fulfillment of his artistic life. Thus, the pedagogical methods are almost always concurrent with the methods of Oborin's own practicing, which reveal his attitude towards music, composition, and the performer's personality.

Oborin insists that the “school is formed not by learning through secure, be it even the best recipes, but through effort and direction in creativity, which are the essence of artistic conduct. In this way, the leading place is taken up not by a professional but by an esthetic side, which in a way serves as the musician's artistic code of morals.

Oborin cannot stand careerism, jealousy, obsequiousness, or flattery. He appreciates in his students modesty, friendliness, and in their work—persistence, artistic initiative, the ability to learn and comprehend the teacher's instructions. He does not want to impose anything on his students and does not view the student as, in the words of Leschetitzky, a pony which should be tamed. He loves music too much for him to make students do something that contradicts their concept of music. **(PIC 173)**

Oborin relates to the young pianists' determinations with the greatest care. First of all he helps the students find themselves. “A pupil is not simply a student, but a person of art who must be able to ‘seize’ and to stimulate the teacher's artistic creativity through his energy.”

The energy brings forth the will and the need to work, which is not dependent on successes, failures, or concert prospects. The will to work is the principal sign of talent. It is the only thing which allows the pianist to become a professional.

Since Oborin has gone through an incredible professional school and knows music the way only a true musician is capable of knowing, he becomes merciless when encountering dilettantism. He does not yell or become agitated. Instead, he punishes the student by being calm and indifferent.

The following is a typical way in which the lessons were taught, as remembered by the author of this book during the period of her study with Oborin.

A young but already self-confident student plays Schumann's Carnival. She has learned the piece cursorily; the composer's markings are replaced by her own dilettante feelings. Oborin is polite. He says several insignificant words and then closes the score. After the baffled student leaves, Oborin says in response to our perplexed question: “What could I have said?”

Next, a former student of Oborin arrives from Kuibyshev for a consultation. The performance is well-thought-through and prepared. It has interesting intentions and temperament. Oborin is awakened. “Oh, there are lots of things to work on here.” Small discoveries of the student give a push to Oborin's imagination. It makes him want to play. He demonstrates measure by measure without getting tired. Everyone who is present in the class gathers around the piano. The tempos and fingerings are discussed.

There are many instances of such passionate teaching of Oborin, thanks to his talented students. One morning he began to work with Tatiana Kravchenko on two Chopin mazurkas and had forgotten all about time. The lesson concluded at 8 o'clock in the evening. Another time he spent about three hours teaching Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata and the same amount of time on Schumann's Symphonic Etudes, both times with the talented N. Nuridjanian.

It should be noted that the more talented the student, the more interesting and productive are Oborin's lessons.

Communication with Oborin raises the students' self-esteem and faith in their abilities. This is why Oborin's piano studio produces diverse personalities instead of polished puppets. Everyone who comes here with a great desire to study finds truth and develops the natural qualities of their talent due to the unrestricted contact with the authoritative teacher.

3

In one of the articles dedicated to Igumnov, Oborin noted with delight the uniqueness of Igumnov's psychological influence on his students. "His influence on the student during the years of study may seem unnoticeable. However, as time passes, the pianist begins to feel more and more as an 'Igumnovite.' He listens to the sounds which his fingers produce from the piano and recognizes the very familiar colors of Igumnov's pianism. He looks at his hands and recognizes the very familiar movements of Igumnov's hands on the keyboard."¹⁰⁶ The principles of a particular school are mastered gradually; the culture is acquired through a long and painstaking process of learning, devoid of showiness.

The development of students in Oborin's studio follows a similar path. Oborin's pedagogy is precise: there are no general sayings, abstract opinions, theorizing, and approaching of a piece 'from within,' -- from extra-musical associations and ideas. In addition, his pedagogical method does not put much emphasis on any one particular range of muscles, and, in essence, disregards any special movement adaptation in a student.

The technical side of pedagogy is reduced to several simple requirements:

1. The posture at the piano should be straight with a slight tilt of the body towards the keyboard.¹⁰⁷
2. There should not be any excessive movements. The slightest exaggeration of movements breaks up the 'thread' of the music and disrupts the unity of the performance.
3. The hand should always be in contact with the keyboard.
4. There are three ways to achieve finger precision: by playing with firm sound from the shoulder; through exercises dealing with isolation of fingers while playing *forte*; and by playing with 'light' fingers.
5. Legato playing is difficult. "It is no wonder," noted Oborin, "that Busoni went so far as to say that legato playing on the piano is impossible. He would have been even more correct if he had defined piano legato as the illusion of connected playing." In legato playing, every sound is played clearly, with a precise movement of the finger; the feeling of legato is created through a relationship between the volume of sounds, the distribution of accents and agogic hints, all in accordance with the general meaning of the phrase.
6. Everyone adjusts to the instrument in his own personal way. If the pianist succeeds in forming his technique while avoiding all that is artificial and alien, his natural abilities will receive a strong foundation.

The basis of technique should be mastered in the early stages of learning. The foundation is then strengthened in the future, not through repetition of technical exercises, but through the process of learning new literature and acquiring musical experience.

The selection of repertoire is of paramount importance. "I insist on the extensiveness of the repertoire and don't allow the student to limit himself in repertoire when studying at the

¹⁰⁶ Lev Oborin, "A Wonderful Russian Pianist" *Literature and Art* 8 May 1943.

¹⁰⁷ Such posture, judging by a famous painting of I. Kramski, was characteristic of Anton Rubinstein.

Conservatory. I love it when a student plays many different pieces.” This is Oborin’s principal theory on repertoire.

In the beginning of an independent performing career, the pianist, trying to obtain recognition, may play whatever is close to him and that which shows his best side. At the Conservatory, Oborin gives the students those pieces which he knows they will struggle with and which they will have to master. What is important is the achievement of the artistic goal rather than achievement of success on stage. Oborin calls the type of pedagogy which shows off only the strong parts of the student ‘speculative:’ “it gives an immediate result, flatters the teacher’s self-importance, but at the end, it does not prepare the student to be capable of searching and it leads to performances being limited.”

Once the student turns to a specific style, he is free to choose whichever composition suits his taste. Thus, initiative in expanding the repertoire is encouraged.

After coming up with the program, the student begins to work independently and comes to the lesson when the teacher’s help is required.

The quality of the first performance at the lesson is not of great concern. The piece is first played in its entirety, either from memory or with the score. Having a phenomenal memory and never having experienced any difficulties with memorization, Oborin appreciates the natural way of memorizing through the process of a gradual learning of the piece. In his opinion, trying to memorize forcibly takes away from reading the score carefully.

The student is allowed to play a piece under tempo for a long period of time. Starting with the first lesson, a student is required to pay strict attention to the composer’s indications as well as have a reasonable understanding of phrasing and voice-leading.

Oborin uses a roughly similar pedagogical approach with all of his students, regardless of talent or the level of pianism. Just like Igumnov, Oborin patiently studies all elements of a particular composition. He does not search for an interpretation that fits a particular student, nor does he adapt the piece to the personality of the student; the composition itself, with its objective meaning, dictates the way it is approached.

Oborin’s instructions are precise, accurate, and frequently spoken in aphorisms. “It seems that you play *piano* with your hands and *forte* with your feet,” Oborin says to a student who had just played Chopin’s Fantasy. To another student who had trouble with the final movement of Beethoven’s Sonata No. 26, Oborin said the following: “You have to do just one thing: pay attention to the movement of your thumb. It acts as the brake in your technique.” After a student’s performance of a Bach’s fugue, Oborin said: “You conveyed the feeling, but not its development. Let’s work on the gradualness of transitions and think about the logic of the emotion.”

Similar to many concert artists, Oborin explains what he is teaching by playing himself. Sitting at the second piano, he plays almost constantly, but his playing in the studio differs considerably from the way he plays on stage. On stage he plays as an inspired artist, while at the lesson he becomes an analyst who tries to vividly show the meaning of music and at the same time keep with a particular task that stands in front of the student. Sometimes Oborin plays together with the student, who then immediately comprehends the accompanying instructions of the teacher.

During such lessons, Oborin highly encourages the student’s artistic creativity—his explorations, discoveries and innovations. At the final stages of working on a piece, Oborin frequently conducts the performance, using the skills he acquired in the conducting classes of K. Saradjev, B. Walter, and G. Abendroth.

The extent of the composition's final finishing depends on the level of development of a student's performance skills. "Once in a while, I don't see in a student an innate need for thorough practicing. I don't want to work on artificial coaching for the sake of one successful performance. I train my pedagogical patience and learn how to wait. During the time immediately preceding a concert, I know from my own experience that nerves are strained and each word is perceived especially sensitively. Thus, I'm afraid of 'scaring off' the emotion or limiting the creativity."

The teacher's recommendations during the pre-concert period have to do mainly with the regimen of the performance. Oborin considers it beneficial to play pieces slowly right up to the time of the concert. The amount of practicing on the day of the performance is limited to an hour and a half. After the concert, he sometimes holds a class analysis of the performance.

In order to develop the 'feeling of being on stage,' Oborin considers it important for the young pianists to perform systematically: "It is impossible to learn to perform on stage if every performance turns into an extraordinary event that paralyzes the will." Multiple performances on stage of the same composition are another important way of improving the interpretation and the general artistic development.

4

Oborin's pedagogical career has been assessed differently in the course of three decades. The attitude towards it depended not only on the intensity and quality of Oborin's work itself but also on the change that was happening in the general tendencies of piano pedagogy, specifically in the evolution of the Moscow piano school.

Unlike the Leningrad school, which was going in one direction for a long time and was headed by Nikolayev, the Moscow school represented a complex combination of bright, significant phenomena, each of which differed in their artistic independence and originality. During this flourishing period of the Moscow school (when Oborin was beginning his pedagogical career), there were also important general qualities to this school: poeticism, refined playing, high sentiments, faith in spontaneity and in improvisation as the essence of music. The solving of technical problems and the famous integration of movement methods that were characteristic of Nikolayev's school were not important elements in the teaching of the Moscow school pedagogues.

This was the situation until the early 1950s, when the conceptual and artistic 'accents' began to shift gradually.

In the post-war period, music competitions became popular. 'Competition-mania' captivated the young performers; the competitions turned from being one of the ways to advance to concert stage, to being the only way.

It was impossible for the gifted students' never-ending preparation for competitions not to have had an effect on the pedagogical methods. The performance style was ruled by the demands of the competitions. Important and profound qualities were sacrificed in favor of reliability and precision. The repertoire was becoming limited. In order to participate in competitions it became necessary to perfect the same group of pieces. The technique was improving, but the noble aesthetic qualities of performance were being lost. Thus, the perfect atmosphere had been created for objective interpretations that were correct, polished, but devoid of sincere feelings and spontaneity.

Oborin, being a man of principle in everything that concerns art, is not particularly flexible and does not want to change his methods in favor of the practical demands of the present

moment. Because of his artistic nature, it pains him to view his studio as a ‘factory of laureates,’ as well as to see the limited repertoire and knowledge, and the commotion surrounding competitions.

Oborin follows his own pedagogical path. Ambition is limited. Only those for whom it serves as beneficial necessity end up preparing for competitions.

Oborin teaches more eagerly those musicians who are hard-working. They include not only solo pianists but also pianists who are talented chamber musicians, teachers, composers, and musicologists.

His students include composer G. Myshel, working in Tashkent; chamber musician T. Iliuhina, now a studio docent at the Yerevan Conservatory; M. Bogomaz, docent at the Sverdlovsk Conservatory. Another one of Oborin’s students included Genadii Rozhdestvensky, now the Republic’s artist and the chief conductor of the USSR RTV Symphony Orchestra.

Various branches of Oborin’s piano class were formed in many conservatories, colleges, and concert halls. At the Leningrad Conservatory, for instance, T. Kravchenko became professor of piano and received the title of RSFSR Artist of Merit; N. Nuridjianian advanced as a collaborative pianist in the class of wind instruments; M. Gambarian – as a piano teacher; V. Demchenko as a teacher of specialized music school at the Conservatory.¹⁰⁸

A large number of Oborin’s students are teaching successfully in Armenia. They include A. Ambakumian, Armenian SSR Artist of Merit; E. Apresova, Armenian SSR Teacher of Merit, and O. Petrosian, teacher of the specialized school at the Conservatory; T. Iliuhina, chamber musician and docent.

The following students of Oborin work at the recently formed Far East Institute of Art: V. Kasatkin, Zh. Kocharian, M. Tskipurishvili. The young pianist-pedagogues also carry out a productive musically enlightening work in the Far East. They give lecture recitals, organize amateur piano groups, and advise music schools located in remote counties.

In Tbilisi, Minsk, Rostov-on-Don, Kazan, Dnepropetrovsk, Ashhabad, Oriol, the pedagogical successes of the following people are highly regarded: T. Amiradjibi, I. Tsvetaeva, M. Katz, S. Antsishkina, I. Dubinina, N. Rogal-Levitskaya, V. Weinberg, and others.

An abundance of bright, talented performers appeared in Oborin’s class in the mid-1950s.

At this time, Mikhail Voskresensky successfully performs in competitions in Romania, Brazil, and the German Democratic Republic. Oborin’s work with Eduard Miansarov produced satisfactory results, when the latter received a major prize at the First International Tchaikovsky Competition. Miansarov’s intellect, sophistication, and innate musical taste are the basis from which the young pianist develops his artistic qualities and begins his concert career.

Other students who demonstrated obvious talent toward concertizing included Adrian Yegorov, a laureate of the Marguerite Long International Piano Competition; Natalia Yuzbasheva, who received a diploma at the First International Tchaikovsky Competition; as well as gifted foreign pianists N. Aladjem from Bulgaria, T. Ashot from Iran, and others.

During the period of 1955 to 1962, a total of nine Oborin’s students become laureates of international competitions.

Both of the Tchaikovsky competitions [1958 and 1962] – the most difficult in terms of the requirements and the most significant of all post-war competitions – served for Oborin as a test of his pedagogical convictions. Some of his principles were validated while others had to be abandoned.

¹⁰⁸ Presently, M. Gambarian teaches at the Gnesin School.

While observing this friendly person sitting in the jury—always calm and seemingly looking at the surroundings as if from the side—not many people can tell how sharply he is analyzing the pianists’ playing, what kind of notes he is taking, and what strong emotions he is experiencing all through the events of the competition.

Competitions undoubtedly helped Oborin perfect his methods of cultivating artistic qualities and creativity in his students.

In the fall of 1962, Oborin went to the United States of America as a member of the jury of the First International Van Cliburn Competition. At the competition, despite the unfavorable conditions, both organizational and artistic, the second place was awarded to Yakov Zak’s student Nikolai Petrov and the third place went to Oborin’s student Mikhail Voskresensky. **(PIC 179, 182)**

Upon returning to Moscow immediately following this success, Oborin published an article in the magazine *Sovetskaya muzyka*.¹⁰⁹

After giving the talent and stamina of the young pianists its due, Oborin once again returns to the question that has the most important meaning for him: “Are the wide-spread international competitions beneficial for furthering the national pianism and for the comprehensive development of young talents? The number of competitions is threateningly growing in number, and if one begins to take part in many of them, there arises a ... risk of the young pianists being ‘coached’ for particular competition programs, without having an opportunity to develop an artistic personality. The infatuation of the concert organizations with laureate diplomas frequently makes it difficult and at times even gets in the way of the talented people getting to the concert stage. Such people have a lot to say to the listeners, but do not have what I would call a ‘sport’s streak,’ which is necessary in order to show oneself in the competition environment – those people are denied access to the concert stage.”

Oborin comes to a decisive conclusion: “Let there be fewer competitions and more contemplative, creative work done by the youth and with the youth -- work that is infused with the fire of artistic exploration and bold endeavors!”

XI

The Strength of Talent

In 1957 Oborin turned fifty. He did not want to have the anniversary celebration: he was afraid of grand speeches and commotion, and he did not consider his career worthy of such honor.

Oborin spent his birthday in the Moscow suburbs of Snegiri, in the company of his family: his wife, seven-year-old daughter, mother, and sister; his father had passed away not long before.

Oborin’s fame had reached its peak. But being a ‘spoilt child of fortune,’ he had yet to experience its many blows, such as the untimely deaths of his peers with whom he shared artistic life. Those peers included Sofronitsky, Ginzburg, Starokadomsky, and later Knushevitsky.

He was going through artistic difficulties and through changes that were happening at the Conservatory. It appeared that there was stability in Oborin’s life; however, in reality, Oborin was not happy with himself. Having turned fifty, he felt the need to leave Moscow for a while.

¹⁰⁹ L. Oborin, “Fort-Worth, Cliburn Competition” *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 12 (1962): 70.

He wanted to be in solitude and think about the future. Oborin went to the Black Sea, to a place where his favorite writers, such as Kuprin, Babel, and Paustovsky had lived at some point.

During the extremely hot summer, Oborin became ill. A severe heart attack with complications was diagnosed as an acute infarction. If it were to happen again, it could lead to a grave outcome. The patient was very cautiously transferred to a hospital.

The concert season had begun: everyone was playing piano, giving lessons, practicing; but he was lying in bed without moving, unable to even get up.

Another chapter of Oborin's life had concluded. He discovered the tragedy of losing one's health. The tormenting days of illness had begun.

Oborin was now confined to the hospital room: there was a window through which he could see the dull sky; a glossy wall, the bedside cabinet. He was surrounded by cardiographs, fever curves, and the sound of the loud beating of his heart. Oborin's fear and thoughts were the only two things that escaped the vigilance of the doctors.

There was plenty of time to think. "I was searching for the causes of my mistakes and delusions;" said Oborin, "I wanted to figure myself out, in case I still had time to live."

Because of the illness, Oborin began to view his life more clearly. There was a constant dialogue going on between the man and his own conscience.

Three months later, Oborin returned home. He was thin and timid. He began a new life, expressing a childlike interest in the most ordinary things. He became very wise, having found out the price of the peaceful beating of the heart.

Oborin approached the piano with trepidation, discovering the happiness that music brings. He now understood what the concert stage meant for him, and how essential and valued every moment of communication with listeners was for him.

In the fall, Oborin gradually began to return to concert life. His first performance was that of Mozart's D minor Concerto. He played in such a way that it made the listeners cry; many of the experienced orchestra players could not contain their words of amusement as well. This was a performance of a poet, a romantic. Having suffered from illness and having been afraid of moving his arms abruptly, he gave his whole heart to the music. This was a joyful spiritual revival, marking a new stage of the pianist's artistic biography.

In the life of every major artist there comes a time when he feels the need to look back at what he has accomplished and sum up the experiences.

Oborin understands the 'secrets' of his art wholly and with assurance. He no longer generates arguments or conflicting opinions. His artistry acquires the kind of flawless, precise contours which are customary to be called classical.

Such is Oborin today: a deep, incisive artist; a poet of the piano.

"What one clearly remembers is the moment when he sits at the piano and prepares to play. He brings the right hand down on his lap, with the left resting on the keyboard. The pianist turns his head slightly to one side and concentrates for about ten seconds. Then, upon removing the left hand, he touches the keys rapidly, and a clear stream of sounds fills the space. One feels that the person playing is a great master with an open, kind soul, one who reached a complete fusion of talent and great technique... His playing in a way spontaneously transmits his personality, that of a sincere person, far removed from pretense and posturing."¹¹⁰

Oborin's artistry does not stand out for its surprises. He does not like artificial and false originality. He is very open and friendly. In Oborin's hands the piano sings freely and broadly.

¹¹⁰ Gindzi Yamane, "Regarding Oborin's performance" Tokyo-shimbun 1 October 1956.

The technique is ‘enveloped’ in spiritual warmth and thus is not noticeable. His understanding of form is such that the shape of the whole may be seen from any angle. The pianist strives not for overwhelming dynamism, but for simplicity and genuineness. He is a lyricist and the poeticism of his playing touches one’s soul.

In our time of extreme emotional intensity Oborin’s playing goes back to softness and to joyful, calm beauty.

In addition to the type of repertoire which is especially close to the pianist (Chopin and Russian piano music), other qualities of Oborin’s playing serve as testimony of the continuity of Russian piano culture’s tradition: his singing tone, charming simplicity, his flexible and natural phrasing.

The artistry of Nikolai Rubinstein and Taneyev serve as historic sources for Oborin’s pianism; his alma mater, the Moscow Conservatory, however, serves as the foundation, having raised and influenced him.

Both at home and abroad, Oborin’s artistry is perceived as personification of the national school. “At the basis of his playing lies Slavonic lyricism,” emphasized a Japanese newspaper critic, “Perhaps, his playing even lies outside of west European tradition, in which the logical rationalism is so extreme.”¹¹¹

The world perception of a Soviet person is born out of sincerity of feelings, truthfulness, and inner virtuousness. “In terms of its spirituality, it is impossible to hear such a refined performance among us. This must be explained by the difference in society that surrounds the artist. Only a musical culture that is connected with the life of the people and with a strong public system can give birth to such art.”¹¹²

Oborin’s career was being helped by the wide nationalistic support. His homeland has been very generous towards the artist. Oborin becomes one of the first pianists to be awarded the State prize. Other honors include: title awarded by the state in honor of cultural achievement; national artist of RSFSR; orders of Lenin, Working Red Banner, and Symbol of Honor.

Over a period of almost four decades, Oborin’s concert career acquires a colossal scope: he gave three thousand, five hundred concert appearances, playing about eight hundred pieces from the piano literature on stages all across the Soviet Union and in seventeen other countries.

The trips follow one after another. The breaks between them are spent teaching in piano studio at the Conservatory. The number of students is growing: Oborin never turns down those in need of his pedagogical help and those who have earned their right by being talented. More than two hundred musical ‘children’ and ‘grandchildren’ of Oborin work in music institutions and concert organizations across the country.

Upon completing a concert season, Oborin frequently participates in juries of various music competitions. Because of Oborin’s fair and unbiased opinions, he is often asked to take part in finding ways to organize competitions. Even those who are much older and experienced than Oborin, ask him for advice. For instance, when the famous French pianist Marguerite Long was traveling from South America to France and discovered that Oborin was in Lisbon, she made a stop specifically to discuss with Oborin the questions regarding the art of contemporary performing.

Oborin played an especially important role in the post-war Chopiniana. He participates in organizing Chopin competitions. Together with the pioneering persons involved in the musical

¹¹¹ Masao Hirashima, “Wide, free singing” [Mainichi-shimbun](#) 30 October 1956.

¹¹² Gindzi Yamane, “Oborin’s playing” [Tokyo-shimbun](#) 1 October 1956.

art, Oborin makes sure that the established interpretations of works of the great Polish composer are preserved and developed further.

However, his primary focus in life is concertizing. By now Oborin has returned to a concert schedule which gives him an opportunity to expand his repertoire and practice without feeling rushed.

Oborin rethinks the way he used to perform some works long ago. During the 1961 Festival 'Spring in Prague,' Oborin's performance of Rachmaninoff's Third Concerto with Leopold Stokowski conducting created much excitement. In many cities across the Soviet Union, the pianist performs Chopin's B minor Sonata and Debussy's Preludes in a new and highly polished way. His interpretations of sonatas by Mozart and Beethoven became more profound.

In the fall of 1962, Oborin performed Shostakovich's Piano Quintet with the Borodin Quartet at the International Festival in Edinburgh. During the winter of 1963, Oborin spent almost two months in Japan. There he performed concerts jointly with Aram Khachaturian and Leonid Kogan. Khachaturian's piano Sonata was performed abroad for the first time along with his Piano Concerto, the latter being especially successful.

Significant events included Oborin and Oistrakh making a recording of all ten Beethoven Violin Sonatas in Paris; performing them live in Moscow in the Spring of 1963; and touring the United States.

In 1963 Oborin participated in Volzhskoi Festival.

In February of 1903, in one of the letters to his sister, M. I. Ulianova, Vladimir Ilich Lenin wrote: "...Recently I attended a good concert for the first time this winter and was very satisfied, especially with the last Tchaikovsky Symphony... Do you have good concerts in Samara?"

Sixty years later Tchaikovsky's works were once again played in the Kuibyshev Concert Hall. They were included in the program of the festival dedicated to Lenin's birthday. The eminent pianist played his beloved Tchaikovsky First Concerto with sincere excitement. Oborin has performed this Concerto with many orchestras in the world under the direction of the most renowned conductors. This time the orchestra was conducted by a young musician, S. Dudkin; nevertheless, the orchestra and the soloist played brilliantly, festively, and with spirit. In the solo program, Oborin performed Beethoven's Sonatas, including Lenin's favorite, the Appassionata...

Oborin's immediate plans involve a program entitled 'small historical cycle' consisting of the best works for piano literature; a program devoted to Mozart works; and new performances of concertos by Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Khachaturian, and Balanchivadze. He is also planning to include some yet-to-be-performed pieces by young Soviet composers.

Oborin's love for music is selfless and never-ending. The strength of his talent lies in the power of continuous improvement.

Everything about Oborin now points to his rise of energy: the repertoire, the intensity of his concert career, success, and most importantly, the artistic inspiration of the artist.

Forty years ago, the young Oborin appeared on the concert stage as a minstrel of unblighted happiness. Since then, he has gone through a long journey.

In the wise peacefulness of Oborin's present artistry, there is optimism and firmness of spirit, which have been strengthened by life's trials.

He plays with joy, sensing the contact with the audience and the effect of his work. Surrounded by devoted students, Oborin sees in them the continuation of the best ideals of the

Soviet piano school. He is as happy as a person can be who is carrying out what he was meant to do in life – a life devoted to the musical art of his homeland.

[Translator's Note: Oborin died in Moscow on January 5, 1974 at the age of 66.]

APPENDIX

The Main Concert Repertoire of L. N. Oborin

- M. Balakirev—Islamey; Polka; Impromptu; ‘V Sadu.’
- A. Balanchivadze—Concertos Nos. 1-3.
- J.S. Bach—34 Preludes and Fugues from the Well-Tempered Clavier; 3 Partitas (C minor, E minor, D Major); Italian Concerto; Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue; Capriccio in B-flat Major.
- J.S. Bach/F. Busoni—Chorales; Prelude and Fugue in D Major.
- L. van Beethoven—Sonatas Nos. 1, 2, 4-8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 17-21, 23-32; Concertos Nos. 1, 3-5; Sonatas for violin and piano; Sonatas for cello and piano; Triple Concerto; 32 Variations; 6 Piano Trios.
- A. Borodin—Little Suite; Scherzo.
- J. Brahms—Intermezzo; Rhapsodies; Variations on a theme by Handel; Capriccio in B minor; Concerto in B-flat Major; Opp. 116, 117, 118, 119; Trio No. 1.
- J. Haydn—6 Sonatas; Trio No. 3; Concerto in D Major.
- M. Glinka—Nocturne ‘La Separation;’ Barcarolle; ‘Reminiscence de Mazurka;’ Variations on a Scottish Theme.
- M. Glinka/M. Balakirev—The Lark.
- C. Gluck/C. Saint-Saëns—Alceste (Caprice).
- E. Grieg—Concerto; Sonata; Ballade; Lyric pieces; Sonatas for violin and piano; Sonata for cello and piano.
- A. Dvořák—Dumky Trio.
- C. Debussy—Preludes; Suite Pour le Piano; ‘Children’s Corner;’ L’isle joyeuse; Sonata for cello and piano.
- D. Kabalevsky—Preludes.
- F. Liszt—Années de Pèlerinage; Sonata in b minor; Fantasies on themes from Mozart’s (Busoni) Marriage of Figaro, Don Giovanni; Rhapsodies Nos. 2, 11, 12; Spanish Rhapsody; Etudes; Etudes d’après Paganini; Concerto in E-flat Major; Totentanz; Valse-Impromptu.
- A. Liadov—Pieces; Variations on a theme by Glinka.
- S. Liapunov—Etudes ‘Trezvon’ and ‘Terek.’
- F. Mendelssohn—Rondo Capriccioso; 15 ‘Songs without words;’ Concerto in d minor; Trio No. 2 in C minor.
- N. Medtner—Sonata-Reminiscenza.
- W.A. Mozart—Sonatas in C Major, F Major (two), B-flat Major, and C minor; Variations on a Minuet by Duport; Fantasy in D minor and C minor; Rondo in B minor; Concertos in A Major, D minor, C minor, and G Major.
- M. Mussorgsky—Pictures at an Exhibition; Intermezzo; ‘Shveya.’
- N. Miaskovsky—Sonata No. 1 in D Major for violin and piano; Sonata for cello and piano; ‘Pozheltevshiy stranitsi.’
- S. Prokofiev—Concerto No. 3; Sonatas Nos. 3, 7; Preludes; Pieces from suite and ballet Cinderella; ‘Skazki staroy babushki;’ ‘Suggestion diabolique;’ Sonatas for violin and piano; Sonata in C Major for cello and piano.
- F. Poulenc—Mouvements perpetuels; pieces.

M. Ravel—Le Tombeau de Couperin; Pavane; Sonatine; Le gibet; Valses nobles et sentimentales.

S. Rachmaninoff—Concertos Nos. 2, 3; Preludes Op. 23; Etudes-Tableaux Op. 33, 39; 6 Preludes from Op. 32; Moment Musical No. 4; Prelude in C-sharp minor; Polichinelle; Humoresque; Serenade; Barcarolle; Valse; Polka; Lilacs; Trio; Sonata for cello and piano.

N. Rimsky-Korsakov—Concerto; Trio.

A. Rubinstein—Concerto No. 4; Trio.

C. Saint-Saens—Concerto in G minor.

D. Scarlatti—15 Sonatas.

A. Scriabin—Concerto; Sonatas Nos. 2, 5, 10; Etudes Opp. 8, 42; Preludes; Poem-Nocturne.

B. Smetana—Trio.

I. Stravinsky—Petrushka (3 scenes).

S. Taneyev—Trio; Quartet.

C. Franck—Sonata for violin and piano; Symphonic Variations.

A. Khachaturian—Concerto; Toccata; Poem; Sonata.

P. Tchaikovsky—Concerto No. 1; The Seasons; Dumka; Theme and Variations; 6 pieces on one theme; Trio ‘In Memory of a Great Artist,’ Children’s Album; Pieces Op. 40; Danse Russe; Waltzes.

V. Shebalin—Quasi-Sonata; Trio.

K. Szymanowski—Mazurkas; Maski.

F. Chopin—4 Ballades; Concertos in F minor and E minor; Sonatas in B-flat minor and B minor; Fantasy-Impromptu; Preludes; Etudes; Fantasy; Barcarolle; Berceuse; Polish Fantasy; Polonaises in B-flat Major, F-sharp minor; A-flat Major; Waltzes; Scherzo; 22 Mazurkas; Trio; Sonata for cello and piano.

E. Chausson—Concerto for violin, piano, and string quartet.

D. Shostakovich—Concerto No. 1; Preludes; Sonata No. 2; Piano Trio; Quintet.

F. Schubert—Trio in E-flat Major, B-flat Major; Duet for violin and piano; Sonatas in A minor, B-flat Major; Fantasy in C Major; Moments Musicals; Quintet.

Schubert/Liszt—Songs.

Schubert/Tausig—Andantino with Variations.

R. Schumann—Fantasiestücke; Fantasie in C Major; Carnaval; Toccata; Papillons; Etudes Symphoniques.

II

Recordings of L. N. Oborin on LP, Tape, and Film. ¹¹³

A. Balanchivadze—Concerto No. 3 (with the USSR RTV Large Symphony Orchestra under the direction of B. Khaikin).

L. Beethoven—Sonatas No. 2 in A Major, No. 14 in C-sharp minor, No. 15 in D Major, No. 26 in E-flat Major, No. 31 in A-flat Major; Concerto No. 4 (with the USSR RTV Large Symphony Orchestra under the direction of A. Gauk; and with the Berlin Radio Orchestra under the direction of K. Ivanov); Concerto No. 5 (with the USSR Radio Symphony Orchestra under the direction of A. Gauk); Sonata No. 5 in D Major for cello and piano; Kreutzer Sonata for

¹¹³ The violin sonatas listed here are performed by D. Oistrakh and L. Oborin; the cello sonatas—by S. Knushevitsky and L. Oborin; Trio—by L. Oborin, D. Oistrakh, and S. Knushevitsky.

violin and piano; Trio in B-flat Major, op. 97; Triple Concerto (L. Oborin, D. Oistrakh, S. Knushevitsky and the USSR RTV Large Symphony Orchestra under the direction of A. Orlov); 10 sonatas for violin and piano (D. Oistrakh).

A. Borodin—Scherzo in A-flat Major.

J. Brahms—Ballade in D minor; 4 pieces, Op. 119.

J. Haydn—Trio No. 3.

M. Glinka—Variations on a Scottish Theme.

E. Grieg—Sonata No. 2 in G Major for violin and piano.

A. Dvořák—Dumky Trio.

C. Debussy—Jardins sous la pluie.

E. MacDowell—Moto Perpetuo.

E. Linko—Menuet in Finish style.

F. Liszt—Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2; Gondoliera from *Années de pèlerinage*; *Aux cypres de la Villa d'Este*; *Venezia e Napoli*; *Sonetti del Petrarca* in E Major, A-flat Major.

F. Mendelssohn—Trio No. 2.

W. A. Mozart—Concerto in G Major (with the USSR RTV Large Symphony Orchestra under the direction of A. Gauk).

M. Mussorgsky—*Pictures at an Exhibition*.

N. Miaskovsky—Sonata No. 1 in D Major for violin and piano.

L. Pipkov—Pastoral.

S. Prokofiev—Prelude in C Major; pieces from the ballet *Cinderella*.

M. Ravel—Trio.

S. Rachmaninoff—Preludes Op. 23, No. 6 and Op. 32, Nos. 10 and 12; *Etudes-Tableaux* Op. 33, Nos. 1-6, 8, 9; Concerto No. 2 (with the USSR RTV Large Symphony Orchestra under the direction of A. Gauk); Concerto No. 3 (with the USSR RTV Large Symphony Orchestra under the direction of A. Gauk; and with the USSR State Symphony Orchestra under the direction of K. Ivanov); Trio.

N. Rimsky-Korsakov—Concerto (with the USSR State Symphony Orchestra under the direction of N. Anosov); Trio.

J. Sibelius—Andantino in F Major; *The Spruce*; *Lyric Waltz* Op. 96.

A. Scriabin—*Sonata-Fantasy* Op. 19.

B. Smetana—Trio.

S. Taneyev—Trio.

J. Field—Nocturnes No. 9 in E-flat Major, No. 10 in E minor, No. 11 in E-flat Major.

C. Franck—Trio.

I. Hannikainen—*Berceuse*; 'First Snow.'

A. Khachaturian—*Toccata*; Concerto (with the USSR RTV Large Symphony Orchestra under the direction of A. Khachaturian).

P. Tchaikovsky—*Dumka*; *The Seasons*; *Songs without Words*, Op. 40 No. 6; *Waltz* Op. 40 No. 8; *In the Country* Op. 40 No. 7; *Six pieces on one theme* Op. 21; *Prelude*, *Fugue*, *Impromptu*, *Funeral March*, *Mazurka*, *Scherzo*; Concerto No. 1 (with the USSR RTV Large Symphony Orchestra under the direction of A. Gauk; and with the Berlin Radio Orchestra under the direction of K. Ivanov).

F. Chopin—*Four Ballades*; *Sonata* in B minor; *Waltzes* Op. 34 Nos. 2, 3, Op. 64 No. 2; *Mazurkas* Op. 6 No. 1, Op. 7 No. 2, Op. 17 No. 1, Op. 41 Nos. 3, 4, Op. 50 Nos. 1, 2; *Nocturnes*

in C-sharp minor and F-sharp Major; Preludes Nos. 1-2, 6, 8, 9, 11, 15; Etudes Op. 10 Nos. 6, 9, Op. 25 Nos. 1-3, 5, 7; Trio.

D. Shostakovich—Preludes Op. 34 Nos. 1, 10, 12.

F. Schubert—Impromptu in F minor and B-flat Major; Duo for violin and piano; Trio in E-flat Major.

R. Schumann—Carnaval; Arabesque; Contrabandista (Spanish Romance); Etudes Symphoniques.

R. Schumann/F. Liszt—Frühlingsnacht; Widmung.

Foreign Recordings

L. Beethoven—Sonata No. 14 (Japan). Sonata No. 26 (GDR; Czechoslovakia). Concerto No. 5 (GDR). Trio in B-flat Major Op. 97, Triple Concerto (England). Ten Sonatas for violin and piano (France).

A. Borodin—Scherzo in A-flat Major (France).

M. Mussorgsky—Pictures at an Exhibition (Japan; France).

S. Rachmaninoff—Preludes Op. 23 Nos. 6 and 10 (Hungary).

N. Rimsky-Korsakov—Flight of the Bumblebee (Czechoslovakia).

A. Scriabin—Soanta-Fantasy (France).

A. Khachaturian—Toccata (France).

P. Tchaikovsky—The Seasons (Japan).

F. Chopin—Waltz Op. 34 No.2, Mazurkas Op. 6 No.1, Op. 7 No. 2, Op. 17 No. 1, Op. 41 No. 3, Preludes Nos. 1-3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 15 (Poland; Hungary). Four Ballades (Hungary), Mazurkas Op. 6 No. 1, Op. 50 Nos. 1, 2, Nocturnes in C-sharp minor and F-sharp Major (Czechoslovakia).

R. Schumann—Carnaval (Hungary).

III

List of Oborin's Students

N. Aladjem, Bulgaria.

Z. Alimova, accompanist, Moscow.

A. Ambakumian, Armenian SSR Artist of Merit, docent at the Yerevan Conservatory.

T. Amiradjibi, teacher at the Tbilisi Conservatory.

S. Antsishkina, teacher at the Dnepropetrovsk Music College.

E. Apresova, teacher at the specialized school of the Yerevan Conservatory.

Z. Arnapolskaya, teacher, Moscow.

G. Atlasman, soloist of USSR Concert Tour Association (UCTA).

T. Ashot, Iran, laureate of Chopin International Competition and of a competition in Geneva.

T. Baronova, accompanist at the Moscow Conservatory.

A. Bakhchiyev, laureate of International Competition at the Youth Festival in Berlin; soloist at UCTA.

N. Bogelava, accompanist at the Moscow Conservatory.

M. Bogomaz, docent at the Sverdlovsk Conservatory.

T. Bikanova, accompanist at the Moscow Conservatory.

V. Weinberg, teacher at the Ashhabad Music College.

E. Weinstein, teacher at the Gnesin School.
 L. Vasilieva, teacher at the Musical College at the Leningrad Conservatory.
 N. Venedictova, accompanist at UCTA, Moscow.
 A. Venkov.
 M. Voskresensky, laureate of the Schumann International Competition, International Competition in Rio de Janeiro, Enescu International Competition, Van Cliburn International Competition; teaching assistant at the Moscow Conservatory.
 M. Gambarian, teacher at the Gnesin School.
 T. Gerasimovich, teacher the Gnesin School.
 A. Ginzberg, teacher at the Gnesin School.
 S. Goldberg, accompanist at UCTA.
 T. Guseva, laureate at the All-Union Competition and Chopin International Competition; teacher at the Moscow Conservatory.
 V. Delson, musicologist, Moscow.
 V. Demchenko, teacher at the specialized school of the Leningrad Conservatory.
 A. Dokumentov, teacher at the Kostromskoi Music College.
 N. Domashevskaya, accompanist at the Moscow Conservatory
 I. Dubinina, candidate of musicology; docent at the Kazan' Conservatory.
 A. Yegorov, laureate of the Marguerite Long International Competition; teaching assistant at the Moscow Conservatory.
 M. Yerokhin, accompanist at the Music College of the Moscow Conservatory.
 A. Zhurova, accompanist at the Moscow Conservatory.
 R. Zdobnov, teacher at the Gnesin School.
 B. Zemliansky, teacher at the Ippolitov-Ivanov Music College, Moscow.
 I. Izachek, accompanist at UCTA.
 T. Iliuhina, docent at the Yerevan Conservatory.
 I. Ischukov.
 V. Kasatkin, teacher at the Dalnevostochny Institute of Art, Vladivostok.
 I. Kataev, conductor, Minsk.
 M. Katz, teacher at the Rostov College of Music.
 L. Koloskova, accompanist at the Moscow Conservatory.
 N. Korolkov, accompanist at the Great Theater of USSR.
 Zh. Kocharian, teacher at the Dalnevostochny Institute of Art, Vladivostok.
 T. Kravchenko, RSFSR Artist of Merit; professor at the Leningrad Conservatory.
 I. Kron, teacher, Moscow.
 A. Kuznetsov, soloist at UCTA.
 N. Kuleshova, teacher at the Ippolitov-Ivanov Music College, Moscow.
 V. Limcher-Maksimova, accompanist, Moscow.
 I. Malisheva, teacher at the Ippolitov-Ivanov Music College, Moscow.
 T. Manuilskaya, teacher at the Central Music School of the Moscow Conservatory.
 V. Merkulov, chief editor of the television studio in Moscow.
 E. Miansarov, laureate of the First Tchaikovsky International Competition; soloist at UCTA.
 I. Mikhnovsky, laureate of the All-Union Competition, Moscow.
 G. Mushel, Uzbek SSR Artist of Merit; composer, Tashkent.

N. Nuridjanian, award winner of an International Competition; accompanist at the Leningrad Conservatory.

T. Oganesian, accompanist at the UCTA, Moscow.

I. Perlin, accompanist at the Moscow Conservatory.

O. Petrosian, teacher at the specialized school of the Yerevan Conservatory.

I. Popova (Man'ko), accompanist at the Moscow Conservatory.

L. Prosipalova, teacher at the Moscow Conservatory.

N. Rogal'-Levitskaya, teacher at the Orlov College of Music.

T. Rogal'-Levitskaya, music school director, Moscow.

G. Rozhdestvensky, RSFSR Artist of Merit, principal conductor of the USSR RTV Large Symphony Orchestra, Moscow.

D. Saharov, laureate of the Chopin International Competition; award winner of the Tchaikovsky International Competition, Moscow.

G. Stahde, teacher, Riga.

R. Strahova, teacher.

N. Suslova, teacher at the Music College of the Moscow Conservatory.

Ye. Tahtaulova.

M. Telenchak, teaching assistant at the Moscow Conservatory.

D. Triggvason, Iceland.

N. Tiuleneva, accompanist at UCTA.

S. Harlampidi, accompanist at the Moscow Conservatory.

E. Khachaturian, conductor, Moscow.

S. Hentova, Doctor of Art; docent at the Leningrad Conservatory.

I. Tsvetaeva, docent at the Minsk Conservatory.

M. Tskipurishvili, teacher at the Dalnevostochny Institute of Art, Vladivostok.

G. Tsipin, musicologist, Moscow.

B. Tchaikovsky, composer, Moscow.

A. Chertova, music school teacher, Moscow.

I. Shatskova, accompanist, Leningrad.

N. Sherwood, teacher at the Central Music School of the Moscow Conservatory.

N. Shirinkaya, teacher at the Central Music School of the Moscow Conservatory.

E. Epstein, accompanist at UCTA.

N. Yuzbasheva, laureate of the International Competition in Budapest and award winner of the First Tchaikovsky International Competition; soloist at UCTA.

Translator's Note

Russian pianist Lev Oborin was in his mid-fifties when in 1964 one of his former students from the Moscow Conservatory, Sofia Hentova, who also happened to be an accomplished writer, produced a book about his outstanding performing and teaching career. To this day, it remains the only book published that is devoted solely to the life of this distinguished Russian pianist. The year 2007 marked 100th anniversary since the birth of Oborin, at which point The International Piano Archives at Maryland decided to have the book translated from Russian into English to make this informative account of Oborin's life accessible to non-Russian speakers as well.

In this thorough biography of one of the most eminent Russian pianists of the 20th century, Hentova also devotes a significant portion of her writing to such subjects as the founding of the Gnesin School and to discussion of the different ways other pianists besides Oborin interpreted the works of Chopin. One also gets a sense of the general atmosphere of the musical world in the Soviet Union in the first half of the 20th century.

In translating this book, my goal was to retain the feeling of the original, which at times was challenging due to certain stylistic peculiarities. Since the book is a Soviet publication from the 1960s, Hentova occasionally incorporates idiosyncratic constructions which reflect the times when the book was written.

After the publication of the book, Oborin would live for another ten years, in which he continued to teach at the Moscow Conservatory and to perform at home and abroad. He made his American debut on November 28th, 1963 with the New York Philharmonic under the direction of George Szell. Oborin had made many recordings in the course of his life, and a number of his CDs have now become available. Lev Oborin is still remembered today for his important contribution as a teacher, having been a mentor to numerous outstanding pianists. His legacy continues through the teaching of his many students, both in Russia and in other countries.

I would like to express my gratitude to Donald Manildi for giving me the opportunity to work on this project and for providing me with some much appreciated advice on a number of occasions.

Margarita Glebov