

Interview

Of serenades, sonatas and symphonies

Elena Iqbal dwells on the pristine notes of the piano at the Russian Cultural Centre

FAYZA HAQ

ELENA Iqbal was encouraged by her mother to play the piano both at the school stage and later on. Her great uncle sang in the opera, while her father

don't play at home myself but practice here at the centre. I practice an hour and a half daily on my own. I make the students practice minimum 45 minutes daily but some of my students can't give even that time. The older students have to put

easier to play Beethoven than Liszt. I play Spanish guitar too though not at the same level as the piano. I learnt the guitar on my own and so my skill in that is limited."

Asked to elaborate on some of her favourite maestros of the piano,

that characterized the work of Romantics who followed him, specially in his ideal of program or illustrative music, which he defined in connection with his 'Sixth Pastoral Symphony' as 'more an expression of emotion than painting'. In musical forms he was a considerable innovator, widening the scope of sonata, symphony, concerto, and quartet; while in the Ninth Symphony he combined the worlds of vocal and instrumental music in a manner never before attempted.

"His personal life was marked by a heroic struggle against encroaching deafness, and some of his important works were composed during the last ten years of his life when he was quite unable to hear. In an age that saw the decline of court and church patronage, he not only maintained himself from the sale and publication of his works but also was the first musician to receive a salary with no duties other than to compose how and when he felt inclined."

Dwelling on Mozart's youth, Elena says "As for Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, he is widely recognized as one of the greatest composers in the history of Western music." "With Haydn and Beethoven he brought to its height the achievement of the Viennese Classical school". Unlike any other composer in musical history, he wrote in all the musical genres of his day and excelled in every one. His taste, his command of form and his range of expression entitle him to be considered 'the most universal of all composers'.

"Mozart's early talent for music was remarkable. At three he was picking out chords on the harpsichord, at four playing short pieces, at five composing". There are anecdotes about his precise memory of pitch, about his scribbling a concerto at the age of five, and about his gentleness and sensitivity (he was afraid of the trumpet). Just before he was six, his father took him and his sister, Nannerl (Marie Anne), who was also highly talented, to Munich to play at the Bavarian court, and a few months later they went to Vienna and were the toast of the imperial court and the noble houses.

"The brother and sister went to all the musical centres of western Europe Munich, Augsburg, Stuttgart, Mannheim, Mainz, Frank-

furt, Brussels, Paris and London, The Hague, Amsterdam, Lyon, Switzerland and finally went back to Salzburg. They played and improvised, sometimes at court, and sometimes in public or in a church. In Paris and London they met many musicians such as Sebastian Bach's youngest son, Johann Christian Bach. Here Mozart composed his first symphonies, three of which survive. At Vienna Mozart wrote a one act German singspiel Bastien and Bastienne and the Italian opera The Feigned Simpleton. And the rest of Mozart's life and achievement is history and is seen in the popular film 'Amadeus'."

Touching on the early years of another of her favourites, Schubert, Elena says, "Franz (Peter) Schubert was an Austrian composer 'who bridged the worlds of Classical and Romantic music', noted for the melody and harmony in his songs (lieder) and chamber music. Among his works are Symphony in C Major and Symphony in B Minor. "Schubert's numerous compositions between 1813 and 1815 are remarkable for their variety and intrinsic worth. They are the products of young genius, still short of maturity but displaying style, originality, and imagination. Besides five string quartets, there were three full-scale masses and three symphonies. His first full-length opera, The Devil's Palace of Desire was finished while he was at the training college. But at this period song composition was his chief, all-absorbing interest. In 1814 he first set to music a poem by Goethe, Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel from Faust; it was his 30th song and in this masterpiece he created at one stroke the German lied (art song). The following year brought composition of more than 140 songs."

Talking about Bangladeshi music, Elena says, "I've heard Nazrul geeti, Rabindra sangeet and Uchchar sangeet because my husband listens to them often, but to play those notes on the piano would be very difficult for the notations are different. It is not easy for me to catch the rhythm and the beat of the eastern music although, naturally I appreciate it and when hearing it at night, it relaxes me and puts me to deep sleep. My husband is a computer engineer, and although he

naturally enjoys the music of his country, he cannot play any instrument, which I might have learnt from him. There is a student of mine who brought me some notations of Rabindra sangeet but due to my pressures of my other work I could not apply myself properly on them. There are some special Rabindra sangeet pieces which I love but whose names I cannot always remember. When I hear them on low key at night, I feel that they drive out all my worries."

"I think popular western music meant for the day time when it puts energy in you and you can work twice as hard listening to it. In contrast, I think Rabindra sangeet is more suited for the relaxed periods of the nights. There are some Bengali songs in which I can understand all the words and these I enjoy immensely. As for fusion music, with a combination of eastern and western notes, I have not been properly exposed to that to have a specific opinion about it. However, I am attracted to Bangladeshi band music such as 'Miles' and 'Renaissance'. When I was young, I had loved Italian and German music as they had a similarity in melody and beat with Russian music in them. I liked modern French music too when I was a university student. Today, unfortunately I am cut off

from European rock, pop and country music".

Dwelling on her personal life, Elena says, "I have been married for 20 years and my elder daughter is called Anita and the younger one is called Sabina. My husband had tried to do some sort of business in Russia but we had to pack up and return here. My daughters have been born in Russia and I hope to go there soon for a holiday with my mother, who misses me."

Touching on her opinion of Bengali food, clothes and lifestyle, Elena says, "I'm here since '87 and in fourteen years I have got adjusted to the ways, including the slightly spicy food and the draping sari, which I wear only on special occasions, as I find it difficult to manage as daily wear. Normally I wear shalwar-kameez as I feel at ease and comfortable in it. I do make some Russian dishes at home but this is not often. I ride rickshaws too occasionally, but my mother, back home, disapproves of it because it involves a tolling rickshaw-puller. I learnt Bangla at home, more from my 'bua' rather than from my husband. However, when the two of us are alone, we speak in Russian."

What has been Petersburg's loss is Dhaka's gain.



Elena with her students at the concert held at the Russian Cultural Centre

played an accordion-like instrument and her mother playing the piano. Elena says, "My mother bought me a piano to play on at home at an early stage. I used to study music after my routine formal education at school. We had practical lessons twice a week and musical literature once a week, along with choir and music grammar on other days. I studied electrical engineering later on and worked in that subject for two years in Russia. However, I always played the piano at home all throughout my stages of growing up at Petersburg. I took it up as a profession later, when I came to Bangladesh with my husband, when my children were a little grown up."

She adds "I have now been teaching the piano at the Russian Cultural Centre for two years now. I have classes both in the morning and evening, and students come according to the convenience. I

in much more time, as much as at least two hours daily. There is no end to practicing. I have 15 students at the moment and thus my hobby has changed into a profession. My hours are not fixed and sometimes I put in even four hours an evening apart from the morning work."

Asked which pieces she had played at the recent concert at the Russian Cultural Centre, Elena says, "They were The Moonlight Sonata by Ludwig van Beethoven and a piece by Franz Liszt, this being our second concert. It takes time for the children to prepare although I could give performances after every two months myself, so to say, although good pieces come only after every six months. In this concert only the children performed and I hope, next time, to get the adult students to play in public too. Along with my seven children had performed. The children find it

Elena says," A universal genius widely regarded as the greatest composer who ever lived, Ludwig van Beethoven dominates a period of musical history as no one else before or since'. Rooted in the Classical tradition of Haydn and Mozart, his art reaches out to encompass the new spirit of humanism expressed in the works of Goethe and Schiller, his elder contemporaries in the world of literature, and above all in the ideals of the French Revolution, 'with its passionate concern for the freedom and dignity of the individual'. He revealed more vividly than any of his predecessors 'the power of music to convey philosophy of life' without the aid of a spoken text; and in certain of his compositions is to be found the strongest assertion of the human will in all music, if not all art. Though not himself a Romantic, he became the fountainhead of much

RECOMMENDATIONS



New German Film Festival

On the inaugural day of the week-long festival of New German Cinema celebrating the 50th anniversary of Goethe-Institut in Germany and 40th anniversary of Goethe-Institut in Bangladesh, Zahir Raihan Film Society and Goethe-Institut Dhaka will screen three films today. 'Cat and Mouse' by Hans-Jürgen Pohland, 'Aguirre, Wrath of God' by Werner Herzog and 'Wrong Movement' by Wim Wenders. Venue: Goethe-Institut Dhaka, Road No 9, Dhanmondi. Time: 3.30 pm, 5.00 pm, and 6.30 pm respectively.

Duhshomy: The Rape and Death of Shima Chowdhury

'Duhshomy', a documentary video by Yasmin Kabir will be shown at the Liberation War Museum on June 9 at 5:00 p.m.

A discussion on the film and the case (including Yasmin who was raped and murdered in Dinajpur) will follow the film show.

Calligraphy

A calligraphy exhibition by 10 artists is being held at the National Museum Lobby. The exhibition will continue everyday from 10:00 a.m to 5:00 p.m. till June 13.

Group Exhibition

A group exhibition by six front ranking artists of the country will start at the Bangla Gallery from June 8.

The artists are - Shafiquddin Ahmed, Mohammed Kibria, Kazi Giasuddin, Monirul Islam, Shahid Kabir and Shahabuddin.



Elena seen with her husband and daughters Sabina and Anita

TV GUIDE

Table with TV program listings for various channels (BTB, HBO, STAR GOLD, BBC WORLD, STAR WORLD, ALPHA BANGLA, ZEE ENGLISH, ZEE CINEMA, ESPN, STAR SPORTS) including today's highlights and a pick of the day.