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## Pictures at an obsession

Lansing pianist Sergei Kvitko  
at Carnegie Hall

page 8



# 'A particular genius'

Pianist Sergei Kvitko's road to Carnegie Hall

By LAWRENCE COSENTINO

**S**ergei Kvitko strangled his water bottle and looked at the clock. It was just before 7 p.m. on April 30, and he was due on stage at 7:30 for a grueling solo piano concert at Michigan State University's Cook Recital Hall.

That night, the hall was sold out and people were turned away. (A second concert, a week later, was added.) But Kvitko wasn't smiling. Before a concert, when no one is around, he often addresses the floor thus: **"Why the fuck do I do this to myself?"**

Racing the biological clock, Kvitko was marking his 45th birthday by training for a debut recital on Thursday at Carnegie Hall. He was hustling down his self-imposed "road to Carnegie" Midwest tour, with 14 stops in two months, with typical Kvitko overkill.

Kvitko isn't a career pianist, but when he plays, he leaves sweat — and occasionally blood — on the keyboard. His signature piece, the epic "Pictures at an Exhibition," is a hallucinogenic promenade in an imaginary gallery where visitors are sucked into the art on the walls. No Kvitko recital is perfect, but they are overpoweringly real, part artistry, part confession, part bullfight.

In 1996, Kvitko broke out of a strict Russian musical training to come to Michigan, where he blossomed as a pianist, composer, producer-engineer and video artist. This year, after 10 years of putting Lansing on the national classical music map with his magic upstairs tunnel recording studio, he returned to his first obsession.

Kvitko compared the draw of performing to live drama.

"I shouldn't say this, but on stage, you get to have the orgasm," he said. "When a recording is over, it's just, 'Are we done? Should we do it over? OK, let's have lunch!'"

At 7:05, Kvitko was pacing the hallway, scanning the growing line, looking for a distraction. A random passerby asked him for directions to the bathroom. He obliged.

Two dancers from Chicago's Joffrey

Ballet were getting ready to go on stage to dance to his music, but the newly remodeled Cook Recital Hall stage was dangerously smooth. They needed a bottle of Coke to smear on their shoes for traction. Grate-

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Sergei Kvitko

ful for something to do, Kvitko took them to the soda machine.

At about 7:10, a compact figure broke from the crowd of ticket holders at the door and glided toward him.

"Here comes trouble," Kvitko said.

It was his teacher from over a decade ago, MSU piano legend Ralph Votapek, winner of the first Van Cliburn competition in 1962 and a tough man to please.

"He was never very generous with compliments," Kvitko said.

There was no hug or handshake. Votapek stopped several paces away. "I saw your car being towed outside," he said blandly. "License plate SERGEI 1, right?"

Kvitko smiled for an eighth of a second and twisted his bottle harder. Votapek turned without another word and headed back to the line.

Within minutes, Kvitko was tucked in a nearby closet-sized practice room. Muffled breakers of Bach could be heard surging toward the door. It was 7:15.



Lawrence Cosentino/City Pulse

Sergei Kvitko warms up for an April 30 solo concert at MSU's Cook Recital Hall, part of his "Road to Carnegie" tour.

## 'FRIENDLY AND COMMUNICABLE'

In early spring of 1996, Kvitko was lighting a cigarette, pacing the parking lot behind the same recital hall, when Votapek caught up with him for the

from the stores, then cigarettes, then vodka, then sugar," he said.

The prestigious Gorky Conservatory, the third largest in Russia, provided top-notch training, but if Kvitko wanted to write his own music, or embellish a Mozart sonata with his own cadenza, it was just too bad. His hyperactive inner muse would have to wait for Lansing.

He practiced eight to 10 hours a day, plus coursework, while history raged

around him. "That's all I did," he said. "I remember watching Yeltsin on TV while practicing. I just played the piano through the whole thing."

Kvitko is precociously fluent in English, with a keen ear for humor. When he describes himself as "friendly and communicable," it's hard to tell whether he has missed a nuance or is making a joke.

But when he came to Michigan, he knew almost no English. With his scholarship and his American visa in the balance, he crammed for two months, replacing piano practice with grammar and vocabulary.

He raised his score on the MSU English test from 30 to 96 percent. "I'm amazed at how fast he learned English," Votapek said. "He's embraced this country. He didn't seem to be suffering from any homesickness."

Kvitko said he's "too busy" for nostalgia.

"Nobody cared about musicians in Russia," he said. "People don't have things to eat, things to wear, and here you are with

first time, minutes after his audition at MSU's music school.

"You're in," Votapek told him.

The words meant a new life for Kvitko and his mother, violinist Larisa Megaromova. That March, they came to Michigan on a sister-city exchange between Flint and their native city of Togliatti. Kvitko carried a small suitcase with two dictionaries, English-Russian and Russian-English, and his music. "That was all I had," he said. "I never sent for my stuff from Russia."

Togliatti is a post-Soviet hulk of a city where auto manufacturing is still king — along with ammonia and nitrogen production. After a youthful try at violin, Kvitko started on piano at the ripe age of 12.

"There was no TV and nothing else to do," Kvitko said. "I didn't do drugs and I wasn't drinking."

His father was an engineer and his mother was a violin professor, but life was grim during the post-Soviet economic chaos of the early 1990s. "Toilet paper disappeared



# Kvitko

from page 8

your piano. Who cares? Here it seemed to be quite different."

Soon there was more reason to stay. After moving into his apartment in 1996, Kvitko fell in love with an acidly witty, soft-spoken next-door neighbor, James McClurken. They are still together.

"That was one of the main reasons I didn't want to go anywhere," Kvitko said. "We kind of hooked up right away, and I didn't want to leave because I was happy."

All Kvitko's story lacked was a castle, and that came along in 2007, when the couple moved into one of Lansing's biggest mansions, the Potter House. Kvitko converted the 2,000-square-foot third floor ballroom into a recording studio. McClurken, an ethnohistorian and expert on Native American tribes, helped him set up the business. At one airy end of the ballroom, Kvitko enthroned a 9-foot Steinway he named after Alexander the Great's horse, Bucephalus, although he doesn't go out of his way to tell people that. ("It sounds like syphilis.")

He and McClurken prefer to keep their private life private. (McClurken didn't want to be interviewed for this story, shunting the spotlight to his partner.) Suffice it to say, they have a domestic set-up that's unthinkable in Russia.

"It's pretty much impossible to be gay in Russia," Kvitko said. "It's not safe, even in Moscow and the big cities."

Kvitko worked hard as ever at MSU, earning a doctorate in piano. He recalled one of his graduation recital pieces the way a sergeant reminisces about a bridgehead. "There's a glissando in Liszt's 15th Hungarian Rhapsody," he said. "You play it with the side of your finger. It's a great effect, but I permanently damaged my finger. Bone damage. I still feel it. I looked down and there was a trail of blood running across the keys."

## 'NO DEAD COMPOSERS'

On a warm summer morning in 2010, Kvitko and mezzo-soprano Patricia Green dragged a load of sensitive equipment, including Green's vocal cords, to Lake Lansing.

"I couldn't believe anybody could talk, let alone sing, at 5 in the morning," Kvitko marveled.

Green, a champion of new music, credits Kvitko with "a particular genius."

"There's a depth, a force, a physical, emotional and soulful investment," Green said.

Green heads the vocal program at the University of Western Ontario. In 2002, while Green was on the MSU faculty, they performed together on a concert tour they facetiously called "No Dead Composers."

That morning, they searched for a spot to record a song by Canadian "acoustic ecologist" R. Murray Schafer, to be performed



Photo by Ricard Cohen

Kvitko brings a musician's ear to his work as an engineer and producer, earning him wide respect in the classical world. His studio is a converted ballroom in the third floor of his Lansing home.

in the outdoors, "at water," with birds and frogs and other natural sounds.

A disc of music for solo voice, written in the last 30 years by living composers, is not your typical classical CD, but "La Voix Nue" ("The Naked Voice") is the kind of quixotic project Kvitko relishes.

The first take on the lake with Green was interrupted by a dog; the second by a passing airplane. Kvitko patched a pristine take out of four.

In the studio, Kvitko is more of a collaborator than a technician, even with veterans like MSU's Walter Verdehr. The Verdehr Trio has commissioned and premiered over 200 new works from nearly every top living composer.

"They're creating a whole new body of work," Kvitko said with admiration. "They do it whether it's commercially successful or not."

**"Something inside said, 'Why not Carnegie Hall?' It's a bucket list thing. Next I'll go to Burning Man."**

## Sergei Kvitko

Verdehr has recorded with top engineers from Chicago, New York and Vienna. He said Kvitko is "right up there with them."

"We pick the takes we like based on a consensus between us and him," Verdehr said. "He's very valuable because we trust his judgment."

Kvitko admits CD sales are "abysmal," but that's not the point.

"There's that small niche of people that find them, and want them, and find them, and they're happy," he said.

"It's new, it's daring, it's not profitable," Green said. "That's the thing about art."

The CDs that do sell advertise his studio better than any business card. When Kvitko gets back from Carnegie Hall next week, he has dozens of projects and a solid month of studio time backed up and waiting.

For decades, Votapek went to WGN Studios in Chicago to record, until Kvitko produced his acclaimed disc of Gershwin music in 2006.

"After that, somehow I felt there was no reason to go out of Lansing," Votapek said.

New music isn't everything. Kvitko knows that local legends like Votapek, flutist Richard Sherman and cellist Suren Bagratuni lust after a chance to climb the highest summits of their instruments, no matter how many Heifetzes or Rostropoviches have gone before them. Bagratuni's two-disc set of unaccompanied Bach cello

entia. Kvitko's "Pictures" CD was called "among the best ever made" by the American Record Guide, despite hundreds of predecessors, and named a Critics Choice pick for that year. What could top that?

"Something inside said, 'Why not Carnegie Hall?'" he shrugged. "It's a bucket list thing. Next I'll go to Burning Man."

## CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN

The road to Carnegie got smoother when Kvitko discovered beta blockers, used by hundreds of performers to counteract stage fright since the mid-1970s.

"When I played on the stage, I was absolutely terrified to the point where I'm incapacitated," he said.

He learned to hide it over the years, but the drug gave him the final push to commit to Carnegie. To get there, he assembled reviews from magazines like Fanfare, Gramophone and the American Record Guide and called some "famous and powerful" friends in New York. One in particular was key, but Kvitko said he would prefer not to be named for fear of being besieged by favor seekers.

Kvitko said "buying the house" wasn't necessary and he only paid for "expenses" like posters.

To Patricia Green, that's not the point.

"He's presenting a concert and he's chosen one of the best concert halls in the world to do it," Green said. "He's climbing to the top of the mountain. They don't just let anybody play there."

Will Carnegie quell Kvitko's restlessness? Probably not. A brooding oil portrait of the pianist by Russian émigré artist Alina Poroshina, visible to anyone who comes to his studio, has his number. (Following the oscillating lighthouse of his ego, Kvitko left the picture on the floor, giving the impression that he's proud of the portrait, but never hung it up, which would be a bit much.)

In the portrait, Kvitko is hunched at the piano, oblivious to the cheerful daylight creeping from behind. Eyes closed, he touches the keyboard with his left hand and the score with his right, connecting the two like a neuron in a tuxedo.

Poroshina's other portrait of Kvitko, minus the tuxedo, delves even deeper.

"It's informal," Kvitko said, waving off further discussion. He's viewed from the back, nude, standing in a meadow. He looks to his left, his face knotted with determination and dread, clutching

a sheet in his right hand. He seems to be facing an unseen enemy and mustering the resolve to strangle it.

By mid-May, about 70 people — most likely friends and well-wishers from Lansing, along with curious Russian émigrés in New York — had paid to share Kvitko's big night at 268-seat Weill Recital Hall. He says it will be his last big solo recital.

"If only five people show up, I'll play just as well," Kvitko said. "Not just as well, but just as honestly."

suites is only one of many definitive recordings he's produced for others.

In the mid-'00s, Kvitko gradually realized that he was not immune to the mountain-climbing bug.

"Maybe the world doesn't need another recording of 'Pictures at an Exhibition,' but I do," he said. "I do it different than anybody else. I don't say it's better or worse, but it's my version and I want it to be out there."

To Kvitko's (professed) amazement, others felt the same way, some of them influ-