

Music in pianist's blood

His confidence comes through experience

By WILLIAM LITTLER
MUSIC CRITIC

Few solo musicians can thank dancers for launching their international careers, but after sharing the same stage with Peggy Baker in cities as far afield as Los Angeles, Copenhagen and Ghent, Toronto's Andrew Burashko happens to be one of them.

"It was a fluke," the pianist smiled, as he paused between preparations for his fifth solo appearance with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra at Roy Thomson Hall Saturday evening.

"Peggy had left the White Oak Project and was doing solo performances and I was doing a lot of work with Arraymusic. She knew Michael Baker and Henry Kucharzyk of Arraymusic and through them I was asked to play 10 little bagatelles by Tchernin on one of her programs."

The bagatelles next grew to a half hour of music and then to a full program. A duo was born.

"With Peggy I had the opportunity to play things over and over, to come into contact with an individual personality and mind, who could express what I was doing musically in movement."

"Essentially I play and she dances. I don't have the opportunity to look at her. She listens to me and it never ceases to amaze me what she finds to say through the music."

"The idea of sharing a stage with a famous dancer was difficult for me at first. I have a healthy ego and the performances were done for dance audiences and reviewed by dance critics. I was just this guy up there. But when we performed in Los Angeles a music critic came and people are starting to treat what we do as a collaboration."

It was during another collaboration, when he was all of 16, playing the Mendelssohn *D Minor Trio*, that Burashko caught the ear of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra's then conductor and managing director, Andrew Davis and Walter Homburger.

That's the way he prefers to be recognized. Unlike so many young musicians, especially young musicians from Russia (Burashko was born in Moscow in 1965), he has shunned the competition circuit and built his career from performance to performance.

"I did the Canadian Music Competitions-Kiwanis shtick as a kid and I didn't enjoy it," he says. "I could never imagine playing well feeling I had to outdo someone else or someone else had to outdo me."

Music was in his blood anyway. His mother, a conducting graduate of the Moscow Conservatory, teaches solfège and musicianship at the Royal Conservatory in Toronto. Her mother was a pianist and her maternal uncle was the great virtuoso Ossip Gabrilowitsch.

It wasn't altogether clear at first that young Andrew would flower musically on the family tree. Yes, with music surround-



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ANDREW BURASHKO: Toronto pianist was born in Moscow into a musical family. He has appeared with orchestras across the country.

ing him, he did ask to take piano lessons. But after one or two of them he realized how difficult a road lay ahead and asked to stop.

It wasn't until the family had moved to Canada and he was 9 that serious studies began with Marina Geringas and they stopped again at 18, when, in what he describes as his "last act of rebellion," he decided to enroll in science at the University of Toronto.

Science claimed him for all of one year. Music effectively reclaimed him when, at the urging of a fellow pianist, he spent the following summer at the Banff School's chamber music program and experienced the teaching of Marek Jablonski.

After a couple of years at the University of British Columbia he eventually became Jablonski's student at the Royal Conservatory, where he also worked with Leon Fleisher and where he now teaches himself.

"I learned from those two guys that it's about music and not about the fingers," he insists. "In Russia, the view of the concert career is a bit skewed. If by 18 or 19 you don't have the definitive chops, that's it. No hope. It took me a long time to get over that and realize I'll be forever learning."

Forever playing, too, it seems. In addition to his work with Peggy Baker, Andrew Burashko has appeared with orchestras across the country and in festi-

vals stretching from Vancouver to Budapest.

"What a performer needs is confidence and it only comes through experience," he says. "When you are a student performing once a year you have that whole year to prepare. Two seasons ago at the Festival of the Sound in Parry Sound (where he will appear again this summer) I had to fill in for somebody and learn the Mozart *G Minor Quartet* and four other pieces on four days notice. Last year I had six concerts with four different programs in one week.

"If you had asked me beforehand if I could have done this, I definitely would have said no. You have to be subjected to that torture and survive to realize you can do it. Next season I have another week from hell, but I'm calm about it now. It's not overwhelming."

After years as an intermittently rebellious student, Andrew Burashko has learned what it means to be a professional.

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