

Grigory Ginzburg: 'a true poet of pianistic craft', pictured here after his last concert in Moscow, 1960–61



All photographs courtesy Lev Ginzburg

Russian pianist Grigory Ginzburg was barely known in the West during his lifetime, yet he was one of the 20th century's most insightful pianists. Thanks to the release on Vox Aeterna of previously unheard live recordings, he is starting to get the recognition he deserves. By **Dmitry Rachmanov**

A LEGEND REDISCOVERED

With the passing of time it is becoming increasingly clear that the art of the Russian pianist Grigory Ginzburg (1904–61) belongs to the most significant pages of 20th-century pianism. The ease and flair with which he could dispatch a Liszt rhapsody or a most challenging transcription, all the while maintaining graceful poise, are legendary. To cite but one example, when Emil Gilels had to turn down recording the Liszt-Busoni *Figaro* Fantasy in 1948, Ginzburg stepped in at the last moment and went on to record this pyrotechnical work in one take (it is issued on BMG/Melodiya). At the same time the refined poetry of Ginzburg's pianism, his aristocratic phrasing and exquisite palette of colours emphasise the mesmerising effect of the music's timeless magic, where every note lives and every phrase breathes. This is particularly evident in such recordings as the Bach-Galston *Siciliano*, Chopin's op.25 Etudes, his F minor Ballade and some of the mazurkas and waltzes, and Liszt's *Les cloches de Genève* to mention just a few.

The piano historian and critic Grigory Kogan called Ginzburg 'a true poet of pianistic craft', while Ginzburg's junior colleague Tatiana Nikolaeva remembered: 'Grigory Romanovich was known as a high-calibre virtuoso, and that was certainly true. For me, however, it wasn't just the impeccable polish of his keyboard mastery that struck me most; the insightful depth of his playing equally deserved the highest praise: he was a true artist, not given his due, not even now.' For Alexander Goldenweiser's second wife, Elena, Ginzburg's art had a 'Mozartian' quality: 'It represents perfection, perfection of a sunny and joyful nature but also capable of expressing deep chaste sorrow; classical in its wisdom, it is harmonious in the ideal fulfilment of the musical conception and its complete realisation.'

For decades Ginzburg's art was one of Russia's best-kept secrets. Never promoted to the top official rankings by the Soviet authorities, Ginzburg's two dozen or so ▶

4 Melodiya LPs were not distributed outside the country, so in the West they were known only to a handful of connoisseurs. Then in the 1990s a few less-than-legitimate European labels started releasing CD transfers of some of those LPs. Despite their dubious provenance, those releases played a positive role in making the materials available to Western listeners for the first time; and, according to the pianist's daughter Elizaveta Ginzburg, they helped to disseminate her father's legacy, for which she is 'infinitely grateful'. Some Japanese labels followed suit, releasing more recordings from the Melodiya archives.

Most recently, in commemoration of Ginzburg's centenary, the Russian label Vox Aeterna began issuing the pianist's archival concert recordings, most of them for the first time. There are six albums released so far, with three more due out soon. The featured repertoire of these live recordings ranges from Bach to Gershwin and Mozart to Ravel, with some of Ginzburg's interpretations heard here for the first time, notably Schumann's *Carnaval* and, in the upcoming releases, his only two surviving recordings of Beethoven's sonatas (op.10 no.3 and op.57). Listening to such works as Chopin's B flat minor Sonata, Liszt's *Reminiscences of Don Juan* or Scriabin's etudes from op.8, one is struck by the sheer spontaneity and abandonment of these interpretations, which shed a new light on Ginzburg's artistic personality. Ginzburg, it turns out, was not just concerned about pianistic craft, balance and perfection alone, but was capable of being transported by the live moment, communicating the music's elemental passion and drama, often leaving the listener speechless. Undoubtedly, these new releases are poised to enhance Ginzburg's standing in the eyes of historians and pianophiles alike.

Born on 29 May 1901 in Nizhniy Novgorod, Grigory Romanovich Ginzburg began studying piano at the age of five with Sofia Barabeichik, the sister of the conductor and pianist Issay Dobroven. Showing an early talent, at the age of six Grigory was taken to professor Alexander Goldenweiser in Moscow, who immediately took the young boy under his wing and assigned his education to his wife Anna. Soon after moving in with his new teachers, the young Grigory lost his father, and the Goldenweisers practically adopted the boy. They took care of him as their own child, yet showed no slackening of their professional demands: 'Alexander Borisovich worked with me in a thorough and highly demanding manner, never begrudging

me his time.' remembered Ginzburg years later. 'The technical foundation he instilled in me was absolutely fantastic... I knew all 60 Hannon exercises in every key, all Czerny studies.' Apart from acquiring technical skills, the young pianist was absorbing the rich artistic atmosphere of the day at the Goldenweisers' household, which was frequented by such musicians as Rachmaninoff, Medtner, Scriabin, Blumenfeld and Igumnov, some of whom made a notable impact on the young Ginzburg. Igumnov became 'a god-like figure to me,' he said, while Medtner's playing 'made an indelible, an unbelievably strong impression on me.'

When he was 12 Ginzburg entered the Moscow Conservatory, where he studied until the age of 20, receiving the gold medal at graduation. Among his influences during



As a boy with his grandfather in Nizhniy Novgorod, 1910



With Tatiana Borisovna Goldenweiser, the older sister of Alexander, in Moscow, 1913. Alexander taught Ginzburg piano, and Tatiana was in charge of his education



Shortly after representing Soviet Russia at the Chopin competition in Warsaw, 1929

By the time I graduated from the Conservatory, I had a total confidence in my limitless abilities; about a year later I suddenly felt like I couldn't play at all: it was a horrible time

this time Ginzburg cited Egon Petri, whom he had heard when he was 18 and who had shaken him 'to the core: what Petri did in terms of piano sonority was unbelievable and incomparable to anything I had ever heard! All I could think was: how could I ever approach such perfection!'

Ginzburg made his official Moscow orchestral debut early in 1922 with the Persimfans Orchestra, in what was to become his repertoire staple: Liszt's Concerto in E flat major. What seemed like the smooth commencement of a performing career felt less carefree for Ginzburg himself: 'By the time I graduated from the Conservatory, I had a total confidence in my limitless abilities; about a year later I suddenly felt like I couldn't play at all: it was a horrible time. I looked at myself as if from outside and my self-confidence turned into self-doubt.' Reviews, however, were mostly encouraging: 'Ginzburg is a young powerful virtuoso with a strong tone and a brilliant technique' (1924); 'equally appealing is his temperament, his powerful approach to the works performed, and a fairly broad interpretative freedom he allows himself' (1926). Another review from Astrakhan in 1927 juxtaposes Ginzburg's artistic credo with that of Vladimir Sofronitski in whom, according to the critic, 'the sudden feeling of soaring is quintessential... as it is highly subjective, and also everything depends on his mood of a given moment.' He continues: Ginzburg's interpretations are thought through to the minutest detail, his soaring emotions are prepared and the blend with the spirit and style of the works at hand

Ginzburg's emotions breathe with healthy excitement rather than nervousness'

Ginzburg's early career was largely associated with the music of Liszt. By the mid 1920s, however, he had also become known as a fine Chopin Interpreter, and he performed an all-Chopin programme in 1925 in Kharkiv, including the Etudes op. 25, the B flat minor Sonata, the F minor Ballade, and some mazurkas and waltzes.

The year 1927 brought the most significant event in Ginzburg's career so far: the first International Chopin Competition in Warsaw, where he, along with Lev Oborin, Dmitri Shostakovich and Yuri Bryushkov represented Soviet Russia. Ginzburg's playing was immediately noticed among that of the 26 contestants. Already after the first round, the critic Stanislaw Niewiadomski wrote in the newspaper *Warszawianka*: 'Everything that comes out from under his fingers is not only technically perfect in the highest degree, but his playing is also unbelievably subtle in the way it is thought out and felt through.' Ginzburg eventually won the fourth prize (Oborin took the first), yet his international career was launched, or so it seemed. He received some concert offers, including one, alas, never fulfilled, for an American tour. An engagement that Ginzburg was able to honour was a tour of Poland, and in April and May 1927 he played numerous recitals, capping the tour with a concerto appearance in Warsaw under the conductor Einil Mlynarski (Artur Rubinstein's father-in-law), in which he performed the first concertos of Tchaikovsky and Liszt.

During the 1920s and 30s Ginzburg performed all over Russia, widening the geography of his tours each year. His repertoire grew steadily: by the end of the 1920s new works included both books of Brahms's Paganini Variations, Twelve Etudes op. 8 by Scriabin, Ravel's Sonatine and some transcriptions by Rachmaninoff. He often opened his recitals with works by J.S. Bach, usually in transcriptions by Busoni, Godowsky or Galston. Starting in the 1930s, Ginzburg found himself drawn to the music of Beethoven and Mozart: 'I may be wrong but I feel that more than anything else, I need to play the music of Mozart and early Beethoven. This is the area which truly suits me most and which I know and do the best... When I play a sonata by Mozart, I truly breathe that music, feeling its every note: there are moments when I suddenly understand very clearly what the composer thought, felt and tried to express with his music. It is a rare sensation, but it is the most valuable thing to which one aspires.' His students remembered him saying: 'If one can master Mozart and Beethoven, then Liszt becomes easy.' At the same time, Ginzburg approached contemporary Russian music, adding works by Medtner, Prokofiev, Myaskovsky, Kabalevsky and Feinberg, whose piano suite* he learned early on and whose Third Concerto he premiered in 1956 in Saratov. It wasn't as simple when it came to Rachmaninoff: 'I love Rachmaninoff more than anything else but I do not play a single piece of his, so enormous is he to me psychologically. I simply do not feel I can touch ▶

* Probably Suite no. 1, as Ginzburg is talking about the period of the late 1920s ('Then Feinberg wrote a suite. I respected him, so I picked it up and learned it.').

him!' But other Russian composers found their way into his repertoire: the 1940s saw Ginzburg perform Balakirev's *Islamey* and Tchaikovsky's G major Sonata for the first time. Ginzburg's recording of the latter work, in my opinion, still remains unsurpassed.

Apart from solo work, Ginzburg showed increasing interest in collaborative performances. In 1929 he went on a tour of Russia with the singer Nazari Raisky, and in September of 1930 he participated in a Rachmaninoff tribute by performing the composer's second two-piano suite with Henrich Neuhaus, their only collaboration ever. Although from time to time appearing with such groups as the Beethoven Quartet, in later years Ginzburg was inclined to work with individual artists more than with larger ensembles, such as quartets or quintets. His partners included the young Leonid Kogan, with whom he recorded all three violin sonatas by Grieg, among other works, and the guitarist Alexander Ivanov-Kramskoi, with whom he performed a number of compositions. From 1954 on, Ginzburg presented numerous vocal programmes with the soprano Nadezhda Sukhovitsina

The early 1930s saw Ginzburg develop an interest in the art of the piano transcription, in which he later excelled having had a chance to play for the writer Maxim Gorky at his house on two occasions, the pianist, responding to a spontaneous request from the author wrote a transcription of Grieg's *Peer Gynt* Suite no 1 op 46. The episode seems to have spurred Ginzburg's creative impulses in that area, and the art of transcription became one of his specialities. In later years he authored such gems as the 'Figaro cavatina' from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, *Russian Song* by Rakov, and the march from *Caucasian Sketches* by Ippolitov-Ivanov, among others. Among Ginzburg's unrealised projects were the transcriptions for piano and orchestra of Tchaikovsky's Piano Sonata in G major and Liszt's two-piano *Concerto pathétique*.

In January of 1936 Ginzburg went on his second foreign tour, revisiting Poland after nine years and performing in the Baltic States and Sweden. 'Ginzburg's talent has developed greatly,' wrote the Polish critic Wieniawski. 'His refined musicality and a remarkable artistic sense... undoubtedly show that Ginzburg is one of the top pianists of our time.' In Poland he played ten concerts in twelve days all over the country. Coincidentally, the timing of Ginzburg's tour overlapped with Polish tours by Cortot, Casadesu, Hofmann and Rachmaninoff, all at the same time.



With his brother, Yakov Ginzburg (left) 1900–1963, pianist and later professor of the Vilnius conservatory



With his students Sergei Dorensky (at the piano, now the leading professor of the Moscow conservatory) and Igor Chernyshov, early 1950s



Alexander Goldenweiser and colleagues in the Moscow Conservatory; from left to right, sitting: Lia Levinson, Goldenweiser, Lyudmila Sosina, Leonid Roismann; standing: Dmitry Bashkurov, Ginzburg, professor Abram Shatskes, Sergey Dorensky; mid 1950s



Not until after we lost Ginzburg did we truly realise the significance of what we had possessed only yesterday.. .

Ginzburg's teaching career, which started at the Scriabin Junior College of Music soon after his graduation from the Moscow Conservatory, was advancing as well. By 1935 he had the rank of full professor at his alma mater, and the pianist remained there until his forced retirement in 1959, which was shrouded in intrigue. Many of Ginzburg's students, among them Gleb Akselrod, Sergei Dorenskiy, Igor Chernyshev and Alexei Skavronsky, held positions in conservatoires of the former Soviet Union for the rest of their lives, and some continue to do so today. Ginzburg often adjudicated competitions, and he helped to organise workshops and seminars in which he lectured and taught. Between 1935 and 1937 Ginzburg was also in charge of the performance branch of the Composers' Union.

After Germany attacked Russia in June 1941, Ginzburg at first volunteered to serve in the civilian corps but was soon called off to resume his work at the Conservatory. He later gave regular performances for the troops leaving for the front as well as for the wounded. After the war Ginzburg lent his time and expertise to developing a programme to increase production of quality pianos in the Soviet Union, and for making the instruments available to music schools. After meeting with Ginzburg in Budapest in 1956, the director of the Hamburg division of Steinway Pianos invited the pianist to be the firm's consultant in the USSR. Soon after that, at Ginzburg's initiative, a number of Soviet concert organisations began purchasing Steinways for their concert venues. He travelled to Tallinn several times to oversee the new factory there, which eventually grew into Estonia piano manufacturer. On

24 February 1949 Ginzburg received the Stalin Prize for his contributions to the performing arts, on the occasion of which he performed all the major orchestral works of Liszt in a recital at the Great Hall of the Conservatory. This performance was captured on one of the Vox Aeterna releases [VACD001011].

The years of the post-Stalinist thaw (late 1950s and early 60s) saw Ginzburg touring Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, as far as the Soviets would allow him to tour (the pianist's reluctance to join the Communist Party and some of his colleagues' behind-the-back jealous denunciations did not help to lift the imposed restrictions). With the pianist's artistry continuously on the rise, his health, tragically, began to deteriorate rapidly: first stricken by a heart attack in the spring of 1960 while on tour in Petrozavodsk, Ginzburg was soon diagnosed with an incurable cancer. By the autumn of 1961 it was clear that Ginzburg's days were numbered. Burning with creative energy almost until the very end, he was preparing his next programme, destined to remain unrealised. It was to consist of Beethoven's last two sonatas, opp. 110 & 111, and Shostakovich's Second Sonata. On 10 November 1961 Goldenweiser, who fell ill at the same time, wrote his erstwhile pupil a last letter: 'Dear, kind Grisha, I love you so much that I even fell ill simultaneously with you! Regrettably, it seems that your condition is more serious than mine... Get well soon! Let's try to beat each other at this! I think of you all the time; I truly love you like my dear son! Your old (very old) A. Goldenweiser.' The teacher passed away on 26 November; his student outlived him by only nine days.

Realising the magnitude of the void created in the piano world by Ginzburg's untimely passing, the critic David Rabinovich poignantly wrote: 'Again a tragic death, again a horrible loss! Not until after we lost Ginzburg did we truly realise the significance of what we had possessed only yesterday... How do Ginzburg's artistic calibre and all his contributions to our music measure up with but a handful of articles dedicated to him, a meagre amount of the recordings, which preserved his playing? We are all forever indebted to him!'

It is true that Ginzburg could not escape the slings and arrows of Soviet reality, which did not allow its artists the freedom they needed to realise their potential fully. The Soviet cultural bureaucrats, whose politics, based on suspicion and suppression, tightly controlled all of Russia's artistic matters, may not have trusted Ginzburg more than any other citizen, and were not willing to promulgate his career beyond a certain point. Be that as it may, we will be forever grateful for whatever did survive from this great artist. 🇺🇸

Materials used in this article are derived from the compilation of memoirs published in Grigory Ginzburg: Stat'i, Vospominaniya, Materialy (Sovetskiy Kompozitor, Moskva, 1984), and from the author's interviews with the pianist's children, Lev and Elizaveta Ginzburg. Translations are by the author.

A discography of the collected recordings of Grigory Ginzburg, which includes the six Vox Aeterna volumes, is available on request via post or email. Contact the Editor using the postal and email addresses on page 4. Three further Vox Aeterna volumes will be released later this year.