

THE COMPETITORS - Russia's Wonder Children 2

Outline for a film by Irene Langemann

In the world of classical music, the piano and the pianist represent utopia, aspirations, failed opportunities and much more. The marvels of the black and white keys can create magic moments of intense delight, but it can also destroy human destinies. I have already dwelt on this phenomenon in several previous films.

From 1997 until 2000 I made the documentary film „Russia's Wonder Children“. It tells the tale of four piano child prodigies at the Central Piano School of the Moscow Conservatory. While other kids of their age were still playing



with dolls and Lego bricks, they already coped courageously with concert performances which would have even shaken the nerves of grown-up pianists. At the time of the filming, the youngest kid, Ira, was 8 years old, and Lena, the oldest, 16 years old. Nikita (9) and Mitja (10), two friends, already had a substantial number of own compositions to their credit. Consumed by an almost religious devotion to music, they seemed to me like wanderers from a lost dream world. While all around them Russian society disintegrated into chaos and poverty, their close-knit community was governed by different rules: discipline, hardship and hope for a better life.

Ten years have gone by since our first meeting. It is a known fact that a great number of highly gifted children when growing up - especially during puberty - lose their interest in making music or even lose their exceptional talent. Partly it is caused by the drudgery of the practice routine, partly by the development of new interests. But this did not happen in the case of these four adolescents - as they now are. All of them remained true to the music and are still showered with praise and distinction. But what price have they paid for it? Did a barely experienced childhood leave its marks on their psyche? Did the hard grind of many years pay off so that at least one of them made an international breakthrough like the once-in-a-lifetime exceptional talent of Evgeny Kissin?



Nikita, 18 years

By now they have shed their childhood nicknames, so customary in Russia. Mitja, Dmitry Krutogolovy (19 years old), is a boy who has been pushed around a lot, driven constantly by his teacher to excel in his performance. Due to the financial constraints of his family he has lived his entire life so far in a cramped room with this grandmother and mother. In 2006 he brilliantly passed his final exam at the Central Music School. Like his former friend and current competitor, Nikita Mndoyants (18 years old). Dmitry Krutogolovy scored first place among all piano applications at the entrance exam of the Moscow Conservatory, Russia's most renowned music school. And Nikita Mndoyants was ranked first in the composition category. Nikita's CV is an endless list of music competitions, at all of which he ended winning of course. In talking to him, the shy 18-year old reveals himself as a person to whom spiritual and religious values are of great importance.



Dmitry, 19 years

The now 25 year old high spirited and vivacious Lena/Elena Kolesnichenko has become in the meantime the mother of a five year old daughter and lives with her husband, a Russian viola player in Germany. Lena, who has performed in concert halls across the world since she was nine years old, is still enrolled as a student at the College of Music of Hanover. The birth of her daughter stalled for the time being her ambitions for a musical career. For an extended period of time Elena has hardly performed as a soloist and travelled with a cello player from one chamber music competition to the next one. They always came second. Is Elena at 25 already too old for a solo career? Can she still make a major breakthrough? When she was sixteen years old, she expressed her doubts at the time in an interview, „The greater your talent, the greater your responsibility. For me the most important thing is to survive in a professional sense. Some people believe that girls who are thought to be child prodigies disappear at a later stage. My aim is to make sure that it won't happen to me.“ She hasn't yet achieved this dream. But for now, the most important thing for Elena is her daughter. As a doting mother she under no circumstances wants to see her girl caught up in the maelstrom of pressure for musical achievement.



Elena, 25 years



A solo performer is continuously under severe pressure. Many succumb to the pressure. Because you need not only great musical talent, but also robust health and strong nerves. Ira/Irina Chistyakova's unselfconsciousness as a child, which we captured on film during her performances has been replaced by the burden of responsibility. At a competition three years ago, she was so nervous that „the keys slipped away under her shaking fingers“. The early dismissal from the competitions remains a deep-rooted trauma for her. And still the charming girl repeats time and again that it is impossible to set out on a career without participating in the competitions.

On the other hand, the international competition scene is so fraught with nepotism and inside connections that independent jury decisions are virtually non-existent. It is a catch 22 situation for all ambitious young musicians. One year ago, Irina again dared to participate in an international competition in Croatia – she was by far the youngest competitor. Though she was the audience's favourite, she only won the second prize.

The film „Competitors“ tells a universal tale of success and failure in the world of classical music. Approaching the four protagonists very closely, it will be a poetical study with a deeply human touch of four young people growing up under the severe pressure of just about inhumane competition. Is this strife for success at all costs necessary? What remains of normal life? Is the constant physical exertion by endless daily practise sessions still justifiable? During the intensive preparations for an international competition, seventeen years old Irina suffered such massive backache that she could hardly play anymore. Propped up by massage and physiotherapy, she set off to the competition. Is it possible in this profession to live in a relationship without putting the partner constantly under pressure? After magical moments of success during her latest performance in Cologne's Philharmonic Hall (we have recorded the concert), Elena Kolesnichenko first had to deal by telephone with a domestic crisis: Her daughter fell ill while she was on tour and her husband was completely out of his depth. But Elena the mother can do little more than give some advice by telephone. The concert tour takes precedence and continues the next day. The pain - both physical and psychological - is a daily companion and must be overcome somehow. And it is extremely difficult to add something new, refreshing, something of one's own to the international reservoir of piano ideas.

In order to outline their development and the growing up process more starkly I would like to juxtapose several episodes from the film „Russia's Wonder Children“ for each of the protagonists. Another option is, e.g., to show an encounter between a protagonist with an internationally renowned musician like Daniel Barenboim, himself a former child prodigy who has made an international career.

Under no circumstances it is going to be an elitist film, dealing only with cascading notes, voluble scales and keyboard acrobatics. Of course music will be the centrepiece of the film, because it is the elixir of life and source of inspiration of our protagonists. But it will be essentially a film about the lives of these four young people.

Bio-Filmographie von Irene Langemann

Born in Issikul, Omsk Territory/USSR. Studied Performing Arts and German Literature at the Tcepkin Academy of Performing Arts in Moscow. Since 1980 actress, director and playwright in Moscow, since 1983 anchor woman on Russian TV. 1990 emigrated to Federal Republic of Germany. From 1990 to 1996 editor at Deutsche Welle TV in Cologne, since then freelance film director.

FILMS (selection):

1993 *Nirgendwo verwurzelt - Aussiedlerschicksale* (Rooted Nowhere)

Documentary 30 min., director and author, Deutsche Welle

1994 *Die Götter bitte ich um eine Änderung* (I beg the gods for a change)

Documentary 30 min., director and author, together with Frauke Sandig, Deutsche Welle

Festivals: „Message to Men“ St.Petersburg 1994

1995/96 *Imperium der Träume - Das Bolschoi-Ballett zwischen Mythos und Realität.*

(Empire of the dreams- The Bolshoy Ballet between myth and reality)

Documentary 60 min., director and author, MDR/WDR/arte

1996/97 *Auf Wiedersehen in Berlin* (See you in Berlin)

Screenplay for a feature film, Supported by Filmförderung Hamburg and BMI Drehbuch

1998 *Klasse(n) Klänge* (Humboldt's next generation)

Documentary 77 min., director and author, WDR/3SAT und DW-TV

2000 *Russlands Wunderkinder* (Russia's Wonder Children)

Documentary 98 min., director and author, WDR/ARTE, Filmstiftung NRW

Festivals: Berlinale 2000 (Forum); DocAviv Tel Aviv; Int. Documentary Film Festival Munich, Docfest New York, Int. Documentary Festival Amsterdam, Hot Docs Toronto 2002.

Awards: Golden Gate Award Competition, San Francisco 2001; Merit Winner in Category 1. The Arts

2000 *Im Sibirien Polens* (Goldap - In Polands Siberia)

Documentary 60 min., director and author, ARTE G.E.I.E. Straßburg

2001 *Lale Andersen - Die Stimme der Lili Marleen*

(Lale Andersen - The Voice of Lili Marleen)

Documentary 90 and 60 min., director and author, WDR, NDR, DW-tv, Filmbüro NW

Festivals: Golden Chest Film- and TV-Festival Plovdiv, Bulgaria; New German Films at Museum of Modern Art New York; Nordische Filmtage Lübeck; Int. Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, Filmfest Lisboa 2002

Awards: Grand Prix Golden Chest Festival Plovdiv

2003 ***Die Martins-Passion*** (Martins' Passion)

Documentary 96 Min., director and author

ARTE G.E.I.E., WDR/3sat, YLE, NPS, Filmstiftung NRW

Festivals: FIPA 2004 Biarritz; "It's all true" Sao Paulo; Philhadelphia Film Festival; 19. Documentary Film Festival Munich; "Golden Prague" Prag; Banff Rocky Awards, Kanada; „Message to Man“ St. Petersburg, Russia; Pocono Mountains Filmfestival/USA; Montreal Film Festival New Cinema/Canada; Chicago Documentary Festival; Havanna Film Festival
Awards: FIPA D'OR in Biarritz; Banff Rockie Award; Centaur – for the best full-length documentary, St. Petersburg; Best Documentary Pocono Festival

Kinoverleih: Zephir, Kinostart September 2004

2004 ***Eis und Orangen – Unterwegs im neuen alten Europa***

(Ice and Oranges - on the road in the new old Europe)

Documentary 88. min, director and author, ARTE G.E.I.E.

2007 ***Rubljovka – Straße zur Glückseligkeit*** (Rublyovka - Road to Bliss)

Documentary 94 min., director and author, RBB/ARTE, WDR, Filmstiftung NRW

Festivals: International Film Festival Munich, Viennale, Kasseler Documentary Filmfestival, Golden Chest International TV Festival, Guangzhou Documentary Filmfestival, Festival Tertio Millenio, Göteborg International Filmfestival, Human Rights Film Festival Zagreb

Awards: Standard- Readers' Jury Award (Viennale), Best of Photography (Golden Chest)

Blut und Honig - Europa grenzenlos (Blood and Honey)

Documentary 92 min., director and author, ZDF/ARTE

