

Backstage with Olga Kern

By Victoria McCabe

It's midnight in Moscow, but Olga Kern is wide awake. The Russian piano dynamo is chatting with *NJSO: Backstage* in advance of her highly anticipated performance of the "Rach 3" (Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto) with the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra next weekend, and before the discussion makes it out of her formative years, it's clear that there is no better pianist to take the bench for this piece.



OLGA KERN piano

Kern tells me a story she's heard since her early childhood: her great-grandmother was a mezzo-soprano who performed across Russia. Her accompanist got sick once, prior to a program of Rachmaninoff works. She searched high and low for a pianist who could handle the accompaniment—"Rachmaninoff's music was written for piano and voice," Kern says, "not the other way around." The composer happened to be in town, went to the singer and said: "Why are you asking around for a pianist? I'll play with you."

Kern's grandfather still has the program for the concert. And in the composer's memoirs, Kern says, is a note about that evening.

A few generations later, Kern had her first experience with the Rach 3. She doesn't remember it, but that's most likely because she wasn't born yet. Her mother, a pianist, was performing the concerto while pregnant with the daughter who would one day garner worldwide acclaim for it.

"The concerto is quite difficult for a pianist, but when I was learning it at age 15, it came to me with such ease—I felt like I knew it already," Kern says. "I was telling my mother, and she said there had to be a connection. I'm sure of it too."

Buoyed by a family gift for music (her father is a pianist too), Kern first performed solo at age 6. She performed her first solo with orchestra at age 7, and she won her first competition at 11.

Kern made headlines in 2001 when she garnered a Gold Medal at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition—the fiery Russian with the nuanced melodic touch was the first woman to win the competition's highest honor in 30 years.

"Of course, to win is an incredible honor—both as a musician and as a woman," Kern says. "I'm very proud to show that the piano profession is not just for men."

After she won the competition, Kern found herself with management and a recording company—and a lot of open doors. "For me, in one day, everything changed."

It was her childhood fantasy realized: "At my first concert, the first minute I stepped onstage, I understood that it was where I was supposed to be," she remembers. "There were all these lights, the energy of the audience ... I found my place."

And after the Van Cliburn Competition, she made it happen. She had already been performing, but she was able to book "10 times more" engagements. Now, Kern performs more than 150 concerts each year.

"I'm living the life of a real musician," she says. "I always wished for it, and the dream came true."

* * * *

With 150 concerts a year, it's a given that much of Kern's life is spent on the road. "I'm traveling so much I don't know where I can say is really 'home,'" she says. Though she has an apartment in Moscow, where her parents still live, she names her New York City apartment as the place that feels the most like home.

She lives near Carnegie Hall, and she takes in opera at the Met whenever she can. A passionate nature lover, she says that if she's not too busy, you'll find her in Central Park.

In a way, she says, her appearances with the NJSO will be a homecoming show—her friends are geared up to flock across the river to watch her perform. "Having my friends there, these concerts will feel different. It's great. I'm looking forward to seeing the Manhattan skyline from the Jersey side!"

Practicing on the road can be tricky, Kern says, but she makes sure to have a piano at her disposal at all times. "I am playing so much different repertoire, I really need to keep everything fresh in my hands and in my head."

Does all the practicing become tedious? Not if you love what you do, she says. "I actually love practicing because there's always something new to find in the music. These composers had so much to say ... the ideas and the melodies are just so endless. I find all those things in practice. It's kind of magical."

As for learning new pieces quickly, Kern's dedication is nothing short of absolute. One time, she had the idea of performing all the Rachmaninoff concerti in two evenings. She had never played his Fourth Piano Concerto, so she took extraordinary measures. "I learned the piece in two weeks by playing it 20 hours a day every day," she says. And she isn't exaggerating.

"You need to have lots of strength to sit and sit and sit, but if you love it, you'll want to. I knew I would do it because it was my biggest wish. It's a matter of focus."

And, of course, a huge coffee pot.

* * * *

Constant traveling does have its upsides. "I'm a gourmet food addict!" Kern enthuses. "I've been to every state in the U.S., so I know what I like the most everywhere. I love to go to Asia; there are so many unique flavors to find—it's a bonus! If I'm in a place I've never been before, I ask the locals what they would recommend. I'll always try something specific to that country."

She's a fan of *Top Chef*, and though her skills aren't quite that good, she says her friends never complain about her cooking.

She insists that her pre-concert routine is boring. She wakes up as late as possible, practices a little bit, reads a little bit and then walks outside. "The fresh air gives me this positive energy, and it helps me relax," she says. "I spend time by myself so I can concentrate."

Afterwards, she says, is when she's in motion: "After a performance, I am completely, happily exhausted. I want to sleep but I can't go to bed right away because I'm so excited."

She always tries to take time to talk with audience members. "Sharing my feelings with the audience, seeing their reaction—that's satisfying," Kern says. "I love what I'm doing so much, and I really want to give the public everything I have. I want them to feel what I feel."

* * * *

Kern's biggest hobby, she says, is painting. Combining her loves of nature and art, landscape paintings draw her in. The paintings that hang in her New York City apartment are the work of Boris Chaliapin, a 20th-century Russian painter. When Chaliapin immigrated to France, he took a different approach to his work. "People think it's different painters," she says of the diverse landscape styles. "The French is so rich, the Russian so sad ... it's beautiful."

His father, Fedor, was, as Kern puts it, "the greatest bass voice in Russia." The elder Chaliapin was, ironically, best friends with Rachmaninoff. The pair toured together, relaxed together, influenced each other artistically.

In addition to the landscapes Kern loves so much, Boris Chaliapin painted a famous portrait of his father's dear friend—the most famous portrait of the camera-shy composer, she says.

Kern actually almost bought the portrait, but the seller was in New York when she was out of town. I point out that even her hobbies bring her right back to Rachmaninoff. She thinks about it like she hasn't considered it before.

"Yes, it's very interesting," she ponders. "How it's all connected."

* * * *

Though Kern won't be on stage for the NJSO program's second half, she also has some family stories about Tchaikovsky. Kern's great-great-grandmother was a pianist who had a long friendship with the composer. Her grandfather has letters Tchaikovsky wrote, as well as "unique and priceless" photos he plans to one day give to the Tchaikovsky Museum.

Her family's incredible music legacy won't stop with her. Her 11-year-old son, Vladislav, began playing the piano at age 3. "It was so natural," she marvels. "He just started to go to the piano and try to play things little by little." He has already made his debut at Lincoln Center and has toured in Denmark and Russia.

As much as her family ties could easily cause her to name Rachmaninoff or Tchaikovsky her favorite composer, Kern says: "If I could name one favorite composer, I wouldn't be a musician. I love everything so much—Schubert, Beethoven, modern music, French music, Bach. Whenever I'm listening to someone's music, I'm just so excited by that person."

In an assertion that would make both her great-grandmother and great-great-grandmother proud, Kern says that she draws inspiration for her piano technique from singers. "My goal is to make the piano sing," she says. "It's the biggest instrument, and it has everything—strings, hammers, more. It can sound like an orchestra, or it can sound like a beautiful choir; you just need to know how to make it work."

When she watches operas or works with singers (she can count Placido Domingo, Renée Fleming and Kathleen Battle among her collaborators), she studies their breathing, pacing and phrasing. "I know the piano can do the same thing," she says.

* * * *

Speaking with Kern, it's hard to imagine her doing anything other than the dream she's living right now. But as she talks about her passion for the collection of paintings that adorn her apartment and then describes her own infatuation with capturing the subtle shades of nature on a canvas, you get the sense that Kern could do anything she wants. She finds so much joy, so many details, in everything she does. And when she says "everything is possible," you believe her.

"I just love to paint landscapes," she says. "The colors—the grass has so many different greens in it, tree leaves can have a million different colors in it. It's magical."

Her frenetic touring schedule leaves little time for her to paint, but she hangs on to her adolescent love for the art form. "Maybe one day I'll have a house outside in a beautiful nature setting," she muses. "I'll have oil, brushes and paper, I'll be really quiet, and I'll just wake up early every day and paint."

The NJSO program's title "Russian Romantics" is ostensibly named for the two legendary composers whose works adorn it. But it might as well refer to its starry-eyed soloist, too.

Kern performs Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 with the NJSO on its Russian Romantics program March 25–28. For more information or to purchase tickets, [click here](#).



New Jersey Symphony Orchestra
60 Park Place, 9th Floor, Newark, NJ 07102
Box Office: 1.800.ALLEGRO (255.3476)
Local Phone: 973.624.3713
Hours: Monday - Friday 9 am to 5 pm

Please do not reply to this email. Questions or comments may be sent to: tickets@njsymphony.org

To modify your email preferences, [click here](#).

