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World-renowned pianist Vladimir Viardo will perform in “the noble style” of Russian piano on September 21st at 1900 Building
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Author Lana Yeager writes and edits for the Russian Kansas City section of The Russian America newspaper.

This Friday at the 1900 Building, one of the most outstanding pianists of modern times, Vladimir Viardo, will perform a concert of works by Schubert and Debussy and a Master Class centered on works by Liszt and Prokofiev. Viardo is a graduate of the Tchaikovsky Moscow State Conservatory. At 21, he won the Prix du Prince Rainier of the Marguerite Long-Jacques Thibaud Competition, and, in 1973, won the Gold Medal at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. He is a Distinguished Professor of Music at the University of North Texas, and a world-renowned piano professor and performer.

Mr. Viardo will play in Kansas City for the ICM 1900 Building Series, a program of Park University's International Center for Music which offers a full season of faculty, student and guest performances.

It was my pleasure to speak to Maestro Viardo this September about his amazing life story and his music.

Author

Lana Yeager

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A visit from a Russian-American

After we greeted each other, Mr. Viardo asked right away, "Are there a lot of Russian-speakers in Kansas City?"

"Quite a lot!" I replied, "And since most of us are fans of classical music, we're looking forward to your concert!"

The ensuing, relaxed conversation wove stories of a remarkable immigrant life with unique insights about creative practice and musical sensibility.

"Kid, come here!"

I was born in the Caucasus, in the village of Krasnaya Polyana, which is a famous resort now. It was the center of the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games, but it used to be a small village. This town has a special place in my heart. I was involved in building a church there, and I feel proud about that. And a local school gave my name to a small museum. In Krasnaya Polyana I feel humbled. My homeland is always in my thoughts.

While his travels to Russia usually take him to the major concert halls in cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, he returns occasionally to his hometown. He told me a lighthearted story about visiting Krasnaya Polyana after attending a music festival in nearby Sochi. Mr. Viardo was asked to attend a concert of non-professional musicians in Krasnaya Polyana and, just after the program master introduced him as a famous countryman, an elderly lady from the audience loudly said, "Kid, come here!"

And I was more than fifty years old. I approached the elderly lady.

"Was your mother a singer?" she asked, "Did she teach music?"

"Yes, she did!" I answered.

"Guess what? I nursed you when you were a baby. I even remember that you peed on my dress!" She was laughing.

Others in the crowd decided to make their contributions, too. "What do you do abroad? Come back home! We're going to build you a house here." And, "Well, if you don't come now, at least come back when you are very old, to be buried here, in the homeland."

Mr. Viardo went on to describe his childhood and the influence of his mother and grandmother on his later career.

My mother was born in Sochi. She was a classical singer. With a group of performers, she traveled from town to town through the region, performing concerts. My grandmother was in jail for "political reasons," as many other people were at the time. When she came home I was six years old. My grandmother is the one "to blame" for my taking up music: she made me play music for four hours every day. I cried; but even when I could, I didn't quit music.

Although his grandmother was not a musician, she valued everything that concerned the arts. An understanding of the profound social value of artistic study was part of her family heritage and Mr. Viardo's mother became a pianist and singer thanks to his grandmother's efforts and her effect on the family. This family commitment to artistic study would direct his career.

When I turned fourteen — we were living in Zaporozhye at that time — my mother decided that that city was too small for my musical education. She bought a train ticket and sent me to Moscow. Lucky for me, she had friends at the conservatory. I stayed with the Naumov family and I entered the Gnesinsky College in Moscow, where Irina Naumova was my teacher. My next step was the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory, where Lev Naumov, a genius musician as well as professor, became my teacher. Sadly, Lev Naumov and Irina Naumova are already gone, but I am very close with their children and grandchildren. We are like family.

His mother's decision to send him to Moscow and her contact with the Naumov family were decisive in launching Mr. Viardo's career, and he relished remembering it. The following years spent touring the USSR were, of course, also crucial to his musical growth; however, they also brought political confinement to his art.

I worked at the Moscow Conservatory and was a soloist in the Moscow Philharmonic. I traveled all over the USSR. For 11 years, I was not allowed to travel abroad, as was the case, indeed, for many others, for example, the cellist Natalia Gutman, and Sviatoslav Richter, the legendary pianist. Then, I left Russia to work in the USA.



N. Naumova, V. Viardo and L. Naumov



V. Viardo and L. Naumov

The Noble School of Music

Rigorous traditions of classical music and piano training are ingrained in Russian culture, and Mr. Viardo and I spoke about that as a cultural contrast with the United States. He emigrated to the US in 1989.

In Russia, there are stylistic schools that belong to specific regions. Is there an American school of classical piano performance? No. In Russia and the former USSR, large cities such as of Moscow or St. Petersburg were always considered to be unique cultural centers. Piano "schools" of Russia and the former USSR differ from each other — Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev. I'm even able to guess by ear which school a pianist represents. There is one thing in common for all the schools of Russia and the USSR, though: they are noble. Even in remote areas of the US, it is known that Russian training in performance skills is the best, and this is because of its traditions. Russian schools took the best of the world's principles of musical creation and teaching methods. There is a joke: "What makes an American conservatory? It is when the professors are Russians and the students are Chinese." This is true at my school, too! And, a performance

school is not only the learning process, it is also how the pianist creates music on-stage. The beauty of every school is love, and how we as professors promote love for the art in our students.



V. Viardo with his students

Today, I played as never before!

We are lucky that Friday's Kansas City performance will include a Master Class, allowing us a glimpse of Mr. Viardo's instructional expertise. But while he is renowned in his role as Distinguished Professor, he also knows the freedom inherent in great performance, and wishes it for his students.

[...] Yes, there are concerts when I play "as never before." During my best concerts... I can't even describe what I'm doing. I can't explain. It's like someone is guiding me. A blessing of the unknown — this is how I can name it.

I want to share a story about my student Ivan Sokolov, who is well-known in Moscow. We were working on one Prokofiev Sonata for a piano competition. The student and I conquered every single note. At the performance, he played beautifully,... but the opposite of what we had done during preparation! After the concert, I asked, "What did you do? It was incredible!" "I don't know," he said. I hugged Ivan.

This is what I am talking about: when you are not you, and you cannot explain what happened. This is what I call true creativity. I use this technique with my talented musicians. I ask them to play five-six variations of the same music. It's like changing the accent in the phrase I love you, I LOVE you, I love YOU — the meaning is different every time. I never know how my students will play on stage, where their musical impulse will be. Going on stage, I do not know how I will play today. I never know. Of course, the basics of the music are one thing, but the state of my soul is different. What affects it? Many things. Everything affects it!

Vladimir Viardo on Schubert and Debussy

On September 21st, Kansas City will be able to hear where *the state of his soul* leads Vladimir Viardo as he plays Schubert and Debussy. He reflected briefly but richly in our interview on what he hears in these composers.

Schubert is brilliant! His music comes from pain and from the fear of death: he had an unhappy life, and maybe that's why he expressed those feelings. But that pain in Schubert's music is generative, not destructive. This is the beauty of Schubert.

Debussy includes hidden citations in his compositions, allusions to the music of other composers, but he is all the while an innovator. He was a pianist at the home of Nadegda von Meck, Tchaikovsky's patroness. He was impressed by Khovanshchina, the Mussorgsky opera. Debussy was influenced by Mussorgsky, who

didn't follow strict compositional principles, and in fact, didn't know them. So, Russian culture played an important role in his music, but Debussy was very creative in his allusions to these influences.

Mr. Viardo is looking forward to sharing his experience with Schubert and Debussy with a Kansas City audience when he plays this week: "I hope my listeners in Kansas City will feel my love and admiration for the talent of the composers whose music I will play." I encourage classical music fans in Kansas City to experience the unique performance by one of the world's great piano masters, this Friday at 1900 Building.



V. Viardo (third from left), First Lady Betty Ford (center)
and Mrs. and The Honorable A. Dobrynin, USSR Ambassador to the US (at right)

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Telephone

1. 816.547.8297

Email

info@internationalmidwest.com

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