

# Viktor Yampolsky Mixes Music and Business

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October 07, 2013



Viktor Yampolsky (left) performs with Natalya Savinova and Mikhail Tsinman as the Moscow Rachmaninov Trio.

Moscow is awash with classical music groups and ensembles, and last weekend's Night of Music highlighted many of the capital's rising stars. However, few groups can boast of the same level of experience as the Moscow Rachmaninov Trio, who have been playing together since 1994 and will soon celebrate their 20th anniversary.

In two decades of playing, the trio — made up of pianist Viktor Yampolsky, cellist Natalya Savinova and violinist Mikhail Tsinman — have played concerts throughout Europe and Asia, as well as extensive tours in their native Russia. They have helped to organize festivals for Russian musicians in China and Europe and their tours of musical schools in provincial Russia have enabled many young musicians to organize exchanges with European schools and play abroad.

Viktor Yampolsky spoke to The Moscow Times this week, in advance of the trio's upcoming concert Oct. 13 in the Rachmaninov Hall of the the Moscow Conservatory.

**Q: Can you talk a little bit about your group, the Moscow Rachmaninov Trio — how did you meet, when did you begin performing together?**

A: The trio has existed for almost 20 years. Natalya Savinova and I first met through mutual acquaintances and played together in a modern music ensemble in the '90s after the fall of the Soviet Union, when the musical avant-garde, works that had been formerly forbidden, was of great interest to the world. There was a composer, Ilison Denisov, one of the best-known Russian composers of the late 20th century, and he put together an ensemble to play this kind of avant-garde music. That is where we met and began performing together, and then later we decided to organize our trio and also got a violinist, Mikhail Tsinman, who had studied with Savinova. In 1994 we started to perform together, first in Moscow and later abroad, and since then we have worked together.

**Q: Do you think that in the past 20 years your group has changed significantly in terms of musical style?**

A: Well, yes. When we first organized the trio, we played purely classical music — Mozart to the 20th century. Since that time, we have played pretty much everything that is written and we have recorded quite a few albums. We play Russian music, Viennese classics, pretty much everything.

**Q: How does your trio differ from other classical music groups in Russia and around the world?**

A: How does it differ? Well, every performer has his own particularities and style, you will have to read reviews of our concerts, which you can find online.

**Q: Do you mostly play music by Russian composers? How do you pick the music that you play?**

A: Well, very frequently the people who invite us to play ask for a particular repertoire. Of course, abroad, people always want us to play Russian music, because we are authentic Russians, and in Russia it is the reverse: We play mostly Western European classics. Overall, our repertoire is very mixed, we can play whatever we want. Our favorites are probably Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms and Russian composers as well, but we have already done recordings of most Russian pieces. Right now, we are working on a recording of Schubert. I cannot say that I have a personal favorite composer.

**Q: Your group has played concerts both in Russia and abroad. In your opinion, how do the conditions for professional classical musicians differ in Russia and abroad?**

A: Well, it depends more on the concert venue than on the country. If the venue is up to professional standards, then conditions will be pretty much the same in every country. Of course, apart from professional venues, there are smaller concert halls and chamber orchestras, and those are all different. In Europe, there are many churches that organize concerts and also many concerts in private houses. In Russia, we do not have these traditions, though they are starting to spread here as well. Right now in Russia, most concerts are held

in large concert halls and conservatories or musical schools; venues that meet these professional standards.

**Q: Are these concert halls mostly in Moscow and St. Petersburg, or are they in other Russian cities as well?**

A: Well, there are many centers of musical education that organize concerts throughout the country. We have a project dedicated to bringing music to these provincial conservatories, I will soon be going on a trip to four cities: Nalchik, Astrakhan, Yekaterinburg, and Novosibirsk. So, pretty much all over Russia. In these cities, we will have concerts and master classes at conservatories. We have also invited two foreigners, both Italians. This project has been ongoing with different performers for the past three years. We have brought many of the world's leading musicians to Russian provinces, from Vladivostok to the Caucasus.

**Q: Could you talk about how you started to play the piano?**

A: Me? I don't even remember, it was a long time ago! Hahahaha....

**Q: What do you think about the condition of musical education in Russia right now? Has it changed since you were a student?**

A: Well, we organized the tour that I told you about mainly because we were thinking about this very issue. Because in general the Russian school has great authority in the world, but in the last 20 years, after perestroika, a lot has changed as financing has decreased. The prestige of the musical profession has fallen due to low earnings for musicians, particularly in the provinces, and in addition there was not any opportunity for exchanges with foreign schools, so there was a certain amount of stagnation. Then, the situation started to change due to government resources. This project, for example, is quite cheap but very effective. When we bring foreigners to the provinces, we develop direct connections between students and teachers in the West, they correspond and travel abroad. For example, one student quartet from Yekaterinburg is now in Europe, and they already have professional concerts abroad. For people like them from Yekaterinburg, this sort of exchange was practically impossible without help. Many others like them have gone on exchanges in Europe or entered competitions there, and so on. With this project, we also attract sponsors, like our main sponsor Gazprom, who we have worked with for eight years now. Sponsors help us to finance projects like the ones we did in China and Holland. I think it is an excellent sign that business is beginning to turn to culture, particularly noncommercial projects and social works. With a project like ours, for example, there is not much PR, but the effect is great.

**Q: Can you tell us a bit about your concert Oct. 13? What will you play?**

A: On Oct 13, we will have the first concert of our season in the Rachmaninov Hall of the Moscow Conservatory. This has been organized through the Moscow Philharmonic, which is quite prestigious. In this concert, there will also be some foreigners, a wind quartet. It is a commonly held belief that Russians excel at piano and stringed instruments, but Europeans play wind instruments better. Of course, we have very good string players in Russia too, but the Europeans get more interest. So I invited four leading string players from Italy, Germany and Switzerland. We will play Mozart in different combinations with piano and strings. It is

quite an unusual program; I think that for some of these compositions, this will be the first time that they have been played in Moscow. Here also, because I had to invite foreigners, I used some business connections and three companies are helping us — EY, Austrian Airlines — which is bringing them here for free — and Swissotel, where they are staying for free.

So, you can see how much easier this sponsorship makes it, because even the philharmonic is not wealthy. Ticket revenues are relatively low, and they do not want to raise prices because this would prevent many people from attending, and that would be wrong. Right now, it is very difficult for culture to exist without the support of business. Governments everywhere have cut back their support for the arts, even in Europe, and it is just a catastrophe. So you see, musicians these days cannot just think about music, but about business as well.

*The Moscow Rachmaninov Trio will play on Oct. 12 at 7 p.m. in the Rachmaninov Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, 13/6 Bolshaya Nikitskaya Ulitsa.*

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Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/10/07/viktor-yampolsky-mixes-music-and-business-a28358>