

A conversation with Grigory Ginzburg

Alexander Vitsinsky

Vitsinsky's conversations with Ginzburg took place on March 21 and 23, 1946, August 31, 1947 and October 7, 1949.

A.B. Vitsinsky. If you do not mind, Grigory Romanovich, I would like to start with your biography.

G.R. Ginzburg. My story is very simple. I was born in Gorky (Nizhnii Novgorod) on May 29, 1904. In the whole history of my family not a single person was a singer or played an instrument. My parents' generation was the first to buy an instrument and introduce their children to the world of music. That is how all of us, my two brothers and I, became musicians. My musical abilities were noticed when I was six, and I was "shown" to Alexander Borisovich Goldenweiser – that is how I ended up in Moscow with him.

A.V. How did your musical talents show themselves?

G.G. Although during my whole life I never really liked sitting at the piano, when I was five I enjoyed spending some time at the instrument and playing by ear whatever my older brother was playing. That amazed everybody. Success was immediate when I started serious lessons. The sister of the pianist Barabeichik was well known as a piano teacher in Nizhnii. I started studying with her and she offered to introduce me to Alexander Borisovich Goldenweiser. As a result, another pianist was born ...

I was connected to Alexander Borisovich for my whole life, and, apart from several short breaks, lived with him until I turned seventeen. I was alone in Moscow, our family stayed in Nizhnii Novgorod. The family moved to Moscow only after the revolution.

I studied at the Conservatory for a long time. I entered in 1917 but graduated only in 1924. However, there was a little break when I left Moscow with my mother. After graduating from the Conservatory I stayed with Alexander Borisovich as an assistant, and then as an associate professor.

A.V. How did the studies proceed in your childhood?

G.G. I can say only one thing: I hated practicing, never played the piano more than three hours a day. And even now, though for different reasons, I am unable to practice for more than three hours: I simply get too tired. But early on I did not play longer because three hours were enough to do whatever I had to and that was that.

Living with Alexander Borisovich was very exciting. Musicians would often gather in his apartment in the evening. Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Medtner would come, and though I was too young and did not participate, I was still able to listen and hear, digest it all and develop. Alexander Borisovich himself practiced a lot and I could not help but hear all that he played. I was very fortunate in that respect.

Later, the period of the Civil War was very difficult for my development. The early days of NEP (New Economic Policy) were very hard. I had to start an independent life, and there was nothing to built it on. It

was all very complicated.

A.V. How did your performances develop in childhood, in the beginning, and later, in your youth?

G.G. There were several stages: I was considered to be extremely talented when I was about eleven. At that time, before entering the Conservatory, I also was not very enthusiastic about practicing but everybody thought that I was very talented, especially technically. After entering the Conservatory at the age of thirteen, and especially when I was between fifteen and eighteen, the high regard for my abilities was rather shaken since musical studies really did not produce much in terms of results. Even now I am more interested in technology more than anything else. And then I was greatly attracted to cars and technology and to a much smaller extent to music. Only when I was eighteen did a new period start and music became something intimate, interesting, and understandable. All of a sudden I felt an interest in musical studies without doing anything to move me in that direction.

A.V. How did your interest in cars and technology appear and where did it lead?

G.G. I had a great many mechanical toys. They were all given to me by a friend of mine, coming from a very rich family. He himself was not a professional mechanic but was always involved with technology. I would sometimes spend the whole day in the apartment where he lived with his parents and those days stayed with me for my whole life. It was something unbelievable! How marvelous his mechanical toys and models were!

Alexander Borisovich also loved that. His apartment on Prechistenka at the time was almost a city block long ... With rails and switches put throughout all the rooms, Alexander Borisovich would crawl excitedly on the floor with me. Most of all we liked to arrange crashes. Steam engines with passenger cars would be set on a collision course from the opposite ends of the apartment. The switches moved, the engines crashed, fell and a fire would start. A marvelous sight: everything broken, fuel spilled from the burners, the whole floor a mess ...

Then Alexander Borisovich's wife (Anna Alexandrovna Goldenweiser) would come, a terrible row would start, the fire would be put out, we would be sent out to the back rooms, the oil would be cleared, the floors polished ... I could see that Alexander Borisovich was leaving with a heavy heart.

Probably, this fascination grew from seeing Alexander Borisovich being as fascinated with these things as I was.

A.V. And how did your musical studies continue at this time? Did you study with Alexander Borisovich?

G.G. In the beginning I studied with his wife. Sometimes he would come, ask me to play something. He himself gave me lessons when she was away somewhere. He started to teach me permanently when I was eleven.

As I was preparing for the Conservatory entrance exams he studied all musical subjects with me: elementary theory, playing four hands. We played Mozart, Beethoven quartets, other music for four hands every day.

Alexander Borisovich was very meticulous and demanding in my lessons, and always very generous with his time. Sometimes it was difficult for me. Once he was so upset that he threw all my notebooks out of the fifth floor window, and I had to run down to get them. That was in the summer 1917. However, I benefited enormously from these lessons, and I remembered them for the rest of my life.

I cannot judge how correct Alexander Borisovich was in his approach but he gave me an absolutely fantastic technical foundation. With his meticulousness and methodical approach he was able to have my technical work reach the greatest of limits. Very few musicians are able to do this work so exhaustively to the very end. I played all kinds of scales with all possible stresses, rhythmic and articulation variations. I really knew all sixty Hanon numbers in all tonalities and could play any of them when prompted with absolute precision.

We spent a lot of time daily on these exercises and their mastery was polished to absolute perfection.

This military training stopped only after entering the Conservatory. The rules of admission required passing a technical exam. You would get a ticket with a Hanon number and play scales as directed by the committee. At this time – that was in 1917 – all these requirements were treated as a formality but Alexander Borisovich continued this work with me. At the end, it would be hard to say now, what in my technical skills comes from my natural abilities and what is the result of the relentless drills.

Alexander Borisovich never insisted on the directions regarding the physical movement of hands. From my current point of view, I was playing with terribly wrong movements, raising my fingers incredibly high. However, he did not stop this, he would only comment sometimes: "Why do you lift your fingers so high?!"

A.V. And how did the work on etudes go?

G.G. I played all of Czerny, all etudes Op. 299 and 740, a little less of Clementi and Cramer. An absolute precision in details in every hand was required. Every detail in a Czerny etude was controlled. Alexander Borisovich could enter the room where I practiced at any moment and check.

A.V. Did the work on a piece start in a slow tempo?

G.G. It started mostly in a slow tempo. Alexander Borisovich required an absolute adherence to the text. Naturally, no "dirt" or "smudge" were allowed. If I was playing in fast tempo that would mean that everything was studied to the end, finished.

A.V. Did you have to return to working in the slow tempo at this last stage as well sometimes?

G.G. Alexander Borisovich always said that one should constantly develop and never lose the self-control of the highest degree. And now, if I feel that I am not sufficiently in control of an episode of a piece, I return to the slow tempo, learn this fragment slowly, separately in each hand until I feel that this would succeed at a fast tempo.

Alexander Borisovich was developing meticulousness in work to an unbelievable extent. At a smallest inaccuracy he would require you to repeat everything from the beginning. And, of course, one had to repeat in the true tempo. He always considered that one can not gain the technique by playing in the slow tempo, so one had to play also in the very fast tempo.

When I entered the Conservatory after these incessant drills he gave me an opus of Chopin etudes and said that at the end of the year I would play the whole opus at the exam. First, I studied the twelve etudes Op. 25, then he gave me the twelve Scriabin etudes Op. 8 and then Chopin's Op. 10.

This work was done with exceptional perseverance. Alexander Borisovich never interfered with fingering or physical movement but required a refined artistic approach to these etudes and was incredibly persistent in that regard. As soon as I would enter his classroom for a second, he would immediately tell me: "Play these three etudes one more time," – and would specify which ones he wanted to hear. But I could simply miss the class... So I had to sit down and play these etudes. After that I would go down to some other classes – and then suddenly I would be called to the office of Alexander Borisovich – he was the director of the Conservatory then. "Play again these three etudes." I played again. He made comments, sometimes he would praise, sometimes criticize. And when we came home he would say again: "Play these three etudes once again." And that is how it was with all the etudes. Absolutely astonishing persistence and exactitude!

A.V. Did you use any special methods, rhythmic variations, and exercises in the technical work?

G.G. Of course. There were hundreds of various ways, hundreds of variations for each difficult passage! Tons of various exercises ... Most diverse rhythmic variations were used in different combinations. But Alexander Borisovich was not very insistent regarding all these methods and did not control all the work as it happened first with the Czerny etudes, and then the Chopin etudes and other pieces. In general, further on

he was less and less exacting in terms of the technical work and criticized me more and more for the purely musical aspects.

A.V. Have you used these methods in your own work?

G.G. Quite a bit. I should say that, as I now recall, this played mostly a psychological role. I thought that if I used a variety of techniques, that would be good, **had to be** good. The slightly mechanical process itself comforted me: maybe it did not produce any results but if I did not work through a difficult episode in a variety of ways, I had a feeling that not everything was done yet. And one can not go onto the stage with this feeling.

A.V. And how did you work on the octaves, which etudes did you play?

G.G. I did not play any etudes in octaves. I played Bach two-part inventions but Alexander Borisovich did not especially insist on that since he was afraid for my hands.

A.V. What was your attitude toward the technical work, did it attract you?

G.G. That was part of the daily routine and it did not occur to me that anything could be different. It was as necessary as doing arithmetic problems, so understanding of the necessity of this work was unquestionable. But what did give me an enormous pleasure was inventing an unusual fingering, contrary to all norm. Alexander Borisovich encouraged that, was interested in it, tried it himself, looked at how it worked. Sometimes he would use my fingering himself and then he would tell me: "I played with your fingers."

I was incredibly happy on these occasions, and was then much less interested in how a given phrase would sound in my own rendition.

An earth-shaking event regarding the sound was Egon Petri's visit. I was quite mature at the time – I was already eighteen. I remember that Petri gave his first recital in the Beethoven Hall of the Bolshoi Theatre. The impression he made on me with his sound mastery was incomparable – it was unreal.

Petri returned often after his first visit and whenever he played in Moscow I could think of nothing else but approaching this perfection. This did not come without its extremes. One day I would play incredibly pianissimo, the next would bang as if possessed. Alexander Borisovich took this as something inevitable, related to age and personality. If I banged too hard, he would say that it was too crude but did not insist on restraining me too much.

Later, as I was older, I started to listen carefully to the piano sound, and Konstantin Nikolayevich Igumnov became a God for me. I started listening, looking at what he was doing and, indeed, learned a lot from him.

A.V. Which impression did you get from Medtner's playing?

G.G. I heard Medtner when I was older and his playing made a very strong, unforgettable impression on me. But I was tired from being unable to "hold on": it was such a high art that I could not understand at all at the time how he did it. The mysteries of his art were so dependent on the personality of the artist that I was puzzled, listened like a madman to every one of his performances, to every one of his words, but could neither understand, nor imitate or learn anything. Only after many years I started to recall, comprehend and understand what was the mystery of his art.

A.V. Do you have any recollection of any remarkable concerts from your youth? Did Alexander Borisovich take you to concerts?

G.G. He took me very often, especially to the matinees and dress rehearsals. So I have seen all our great musicians of that time. But I can not say that I absorbed a lot there – I was too young.

A.V. Can you tell about your studies at the Conservatory when you were older?

G.G. It went like this: by the time of my graduation from the conservatory I was absolutely confident in

myself, confident in my limitless abilities, and then literally in a year I felt that I knew nothing. That was a terrible time ... I saw that my technique was unstable, that everything was coming out imprecise, that I did not possess a sound, that I had more intuition than understanding. Suddenly, I looked at my playing from the outside and an astonishing self-adulation grew into a total dissatisfaction with myself.

A.V. Was this crisis related to a reevaluation of certain values?

G.G. My whole life, my whole psychology was formed under the influence of Alexander Borisovich. I literally looked at everything with his eyes, and when he praised me – that was like a praise from God. That was, probably, the reason for my unshakable confidence in my power and ability.

When I graduated from the Conservatory, found myself outside its walls, and encountered not the conservatory audience but the general public, suddenly I heard not only compliments, but also negative, critical comments. At first, I was puzzled as to why that was happening – everybody liked that at the Conservatory and now, suddenly, nobody liked it. I started to reconsider carefully everything I was doing and suddenly I saw that it was not all that good, it was all wrong.

A.V. But that was clearly an exaggeration, an intentionally negative picture.

G.G. I am not sure it was just that. If not for this period I would not be active on stage till now. This was a time when I reconsidered everything perfectly consciously. I understood a lot at the time. If you look carefully at what happens to performing musicians when they leave school and start to mature, you will notice how much of what was happening subconsciously, intuitively, what made a charming expression that made their fame as a wunderkind, with time becomes, either gradually or suddenly, empty and boring. While intuition lasts, everything is perfect, but when the time comes to replace or support intuition with thinking, heart, understanding, maturity, experience, – it turns out that these are missing, and there is nothing to replace the intuition ... This may also happen gradually, not in the transition period but it will certainly play a role eventually, unless a conscious, thinking component is sufficiently developed.

Pay close attention to such great performers as Borowsky, Orlov, Backhaus, and you will see that even their creativity diminishes. Very rarely someone manages to maintain mastery, wisdom and creativity to the end. Typically, during this second critical period, at the age of forty to fifty, there comes a time when an artist feels that he has nothing to say. Only the greatest preserve their artistic abilities to the very end.

I think that my first crisis arrived late. Usually it happens at the age of seventeen-eighteen, while I was already twenty two-twenty three. But it still came, the intuition went somewhere on its own but I was yet unable to involve reason and thought, though I did understand what I had to do, – and that brought about a psychological crash in the true sense of the word.

A.V. Had your performing career started by this time?

G.G. When I graduated from the Conservatory in 1924, apart from two recitals per season in the Small Hall of the Conservatory, there was almost nowhere else to play. I did not get many invitations from the provinces, administrators were afraid to take the risk. And the philharmonic did not exist yet, I think.

This continued until the Chopin competition. By that time I started to straighten myself out but the crisis was not yet over by the competition. There was a constant search, harshest self-criticism. I came to the competition not totally straightened out.

I had no other dramatic shifts in my life since. Now, I see my problems clearly, try to get over them but it all comes naturally and gradually, without the feeling that suddenly I see a vast emptiness ahead.

A.V. How did you overcome that crisis? Did you start working on the familiar or new pieces?

G.G. Only on the new ones. I did not want to look back. At that time I did not know which compositions were close to me, and which ones were far from me, and maybe even inaccessible for various reasons. I did not

understand this then. So I worked on everything that I could get my hands on, pieces I liked when I heard them in concerts. Sometimes Alexander Borisovich would say: "Why do you play all that nonsense? Here is a very good Prokofiev sonata. Learn it ..."

Then Feinberg wrote his suite. I respected him, so I just learned it. I did not study it because I thought this piece was particularly useful for me at that time, I simply did not know what I needed.

A.V. Was there anything that particularly attracted you, was particularly close?

G.G. Romanticism. I was very attracted to it while classicism scared me. Now, on the contrary, all romanticism scares me, while all classics I perceive as something close, something that I know how to handle beforehand.

A calmer period began when I realized that it was just a passing stage, a search. Maybe I am wrong but I think that I should mostly play Mozart and early Beethoven. This is the true arena of my powers, something I know and can do best.

When I play a Mozart sonata I feel every note, I breathe this music. This is a true artistic joy, when you have a feeling that you penetrated the deepest "hiding places" of the composer. When I play a Mozart sonata I have moments when I understand perfectly clearly what he thought, felt, wanted to express in his music. This is a rare feeling but it is the most precious, loftiest goal. When you find something of your own, the closest – that is the moment of an incredible psychological joy.

A.V. Did you have such moments earlier, when you played the Romantics?

G.G. I felt wonderfully when everything fell into its place, brought approval and admiration. That is what occupied me. But I thought less about the author. Only now I started to think with the author.

A.V. But in the past you wonderfully played a lot of Liszt, for instance.

G.G. This is the result of an old attraction to the Romantics, and especially to Liszt. Of course, I have a reasonably well developed tradesman knowledge of sound possibilities. Probably, not without the influence of Konstantin Nikolayevich, with whom I never said a word about it, and not without Petri's help. Liszt was the moment of understanding that there was nothing left to do in that regard, it was the time to switch tracks.

The very first recital of Beethoven compositions that I played showed me that I have found a repertoire niche where I could use my knowledge and skills. And this area, in which I started to make a slow progress, ended up both as my favorite and most interesting.

A.V. When did this transition from Romantics to classics happen?

G.G. A long time ago. I was very interested in Schnabel, his Beethoven performances. I felt that this was truly close to me. I always liked classics more than, for instance, Liszt. But Romantics would come naturally to me while when I first really encountered classics, I did not know yet how to combine it with my abilities. I could adapt well to Chopin, Liszt but then I started to feel that there was nothing to do here for me anymore, while classics felt fresher and brighter. I started trying, searching, penetrating. It seemed to me that I would be able to find the type of sound that was needed for Mozart, Beethoven, that I would be able to find a use for my technique in this music.

A performer is often asked: "Why do you not play such-and-such piece?" Rachmaninov for some reason never played Medtner. He played just a single "Skazka". Rachmaninov played Schumann's Piano Concerto and they say it was the best of all he played. But, he did not play, for instance, "Kreisleriana". I think this is not because he was unable to understand "Kreisleriana". I think that he did not feel the necessary unity with the piece, with the instrument when performing "Kreisleriana". He remained by himself, and "Kreisleriana" was by itself.

This is how I am trying to explain to myself why many performers restrict their repertoire to certain

authors and pieces. Who could possibly have a better technique than Rachmaninov – but he played not a single Chopin etude. He played mazurki, the sonata but not the etudes. I think that this is a question of technical suitability which gives a great joy to a performer and whose lack is torturing for an artist.

For instance, I have received recently an absolutely wonderful sonatina from Estonia [by Eugen Kapp]. It is not difficult, there are no technical problems, it is very clear in form, and totally charming. One needs three days to learn it, to play it very well. Still, I do not at all feel friendly with this sonatina. It remains absolutely foreign to me. When I look at it, I am delighted. One can not say that I missed something in it or did not understand it, it has no difficulties. But I do not have the special feeling that I can play this sonatina...

What should one work on after the first stage of work is done – the score is memorized, fingering is fixed, the form and architecture of the composition are understood? This is all very simple. But it is terribly difficult to understand the "adaptability" to a given sonatina, understand the specifics of its sound. Inevitably, the question of the style arises: what is the style of the sonatina? Which sounds and which technique should be used, what is the degree of the sound power in it? I know the limits of sound with Liszt, know what should be stressed and what should not – this comes from the knowledge of style. I can not play a single piece by Prokofiev, and not because I do not like him. On the contrary, I would like to "adjust" to him but cannot find the correct correspondence in the sound character that I imagine looking into the score.

I very much like Rachmaninov but do not play a single composition by him because he is such a giant psychologically for me that I can not adapt to him. I can not afford to distort anything in him.

A.V Have you played Rachmaninov?

G.G. Yes, and I was convinced that this author is beyond my powers, – of course, not in the technical sense. You may say that Beethoven is a greater composer than Rachmaninov but I play his pieces. But Beethoven is seemingly simpler, it is much easier for me to adapt my sound to him while the gigantic figure of Rachmaninov dominates me ...

A.V Should we return to the biographical line? Your performing activity started after the Chopin competition...

G.G. It continues until today. We play little in Moscow but I play a lot in the provinces. For the sake of performing I take my time away from all my other work, especially teaching.

A.V When is the performing art felt sharper: during the preparation for a recital, or on stage?

G.G. Of course, on the stage. Sometimes it happens at home that you sensed something, found something, understood, penetrated, created something artistically, but you have not yet truly created, as creation may happen only on the stage. That is why the studio recordings made without the audience come out usually worse than live recordings from the stage. I do not know how to explain this. You sit on stage and you feel that the listener is absorbing everything with an incredible sensitivity and precision. The feeling is that you are telling a story to the listener and he understands everything. You are telling, and the listener nods: "Yes, yes, I understand." This communication with the listener, when it happens, is a great artistic joy for you.

But when you are telling this to nobody, to emptiness – there is no creation. This may be a hundred-fold repetition. But there is nothing to make this process joyful, meaningful. It seems to me that after I reach a certain place I will simply get up and leave ...

A true performer plays only for his listeners. If he plays for himself he is not a performer.

A.V Are you nervous on stage? What is the nature of your anxiety?

G.G. It may be difficult for me at the beginning when I am playing on stage – I have not warmed up yet and, mainly, I do not know how the listener will treat me. However, as soon as the current between the listener and myself starts flowing, playing becomes easy. I start by being very nervous but it is totally clear

that if the current has started everything will be well. If this contact is missing, if you do not feel the listeners' reaction – playing becomes torturous.

This anxiety becomes terribly pleasant, you feel how each of your intentions, the sound, the images – everything is completely reaching the listener, you are totally understood, you feel comfortable and play better and better ... This is the creative excitement. It is probably related to the usual nervousness. At the moment you become creatively anxious, feel the listeners' attention, you start feeling a special responsibility for your performance, you are ashamed for every note that sounded not as intended. If this anxiety stops, the feeling of responsibility is broken and creation ends.

To an extent it may happen that the feeling of responsibility before listeners grows so high, reaches such a power that you suddenly feel that you are no longer in control, and then everything is possible – mistakes, "smudging" ...

I would only like to underline that this is inevitably connected to "artistic" nervousness since there is no performer who would not be anxious. When art stops, anxiety ends, a calm and irresponsible "play through" begins.

But sometimes it so happens that one failure knocks you out of the groove. Suddenly you forget something, or make a cut, or play wrongly ... This immediately hardens your hands, you feel right away that the current from the listeners stopped, ceased and it all goes downhill ... This happens sometimes just randomly.

A.V. Can we discuss how you work on pieces which are new for you?

G.G. I have just started working on the Feinberg Piano Concerto recently. He played this concerto several times for me – not because I planned to learn it – he was simply showing it to me, but as a result it so happened that I was able to go through the first stage, getting familiar with the piece, with the help of the author himself. So by now I know the overall concept and plan of the composition. The next task is to learn the text, memorize the score, get over the technical difficulties and so on.

A.V. The initial familiarization with the piece is past you, even in the author's interpretation – one can not ask for more ... But were it not to happen – how would you have started?

G.G. Of course, I start with learning it at the instrument.

A.V. Could you discuss in more detail how you work on a piece that you have not heard previously?

G.G. I would say that work on a composition undergoes three stages. The first stage is the germination of the image: one has to conceive the piece. The second stage is the elementary work: getting the fingering right, a detailed study of the composition. The third stage is what I call "adaptation": the general understanding may be quite right but when you encounter all the difficulty and complexity of an almost ready performance in practice, it often turns out that one has to adjust the piece to some extent to yourself.

The image is created gradually, starting with the first stage, but with time it grows clearer, is enhanced and crystallized, and at the end you arrive to a performance that satisfies you to some degree. There is always a whole sequence of errors and corrections in the search of the best means to relate this image.

The amount of time and energy spent at one stage or other depends on the composition, its style, author and other elements.

A.V. Could you tell a little more about each stage separately?

G.G. The first stage is simply getting familiar with the composition, of course at the the instrument. If I have never heard the composition I play it through, familiarize myself with the thematic material, with how it is developed ... At first I usually do not strive for the utmost precision but rather try to imagine how it should sound as a whole. If the composition is new and complex I will slowly and meticulously try to parse it. First of all I will try to understand the form of the piece, then will try to sense the harmonic foundation. This

is the stage of the most elementary study. In such cases the concept takes some time to emerge, it appears gradually as one gets familiarized with the piece.

A.V. Do you ever have the desire to go through the text without the instrument, imagine the sound or consider the architecture of the piece?

G.G. At first I have no desire to consider the text without the instrument.

The second stage is learning the material, preparatory work, mostly on various parts of the piece, various episodes.

You play almost immediately the simpler pieces. Here I think that one should play and study in tempo, getting as close as possible to what I think is needed in a given piece. The tempo is restricted here only by my ability to master the material. If I can not play in the fast tempo then I start playing slower but for the mechanics this is absolutely unnecessary. If I play too firmly, raising fingers higher than normally I will just develop a bad habit.

A.V. Consequently, you do not feel a need for a special work in a slow tempo?

G.G. At the beginning, in advance, I imagine the tempo as much slower than what it becomes at the second stage, that is, at the time when I learn the score and master the technical side of the piece. And for how many years I am fighting this habit! Still it all comes to the same: each segment by itself is played much faster but when you start playing the piece as a whole it turns out that one has to play slower ...

A.V. How does the work continue?

G.G. When everything is ready, the preparatory work is done and the text is memorized, comes the most important part – the third stage. Only then you realize that essentially nothing has been done! One has to build the architectonics of the whole performance so that it would contradict neither the author intentions nor your own concept.

A.V. Consequently, the first and the third stage have a somewhat common purpose?

G.G. The first and the third stages indeed have something in common. However, there is an enormous difference between them. It is one thing to imagine music disconnected from the specific difficulties related to fingers, hands. But as you are fighting these difficulties in practice, overcome them, then music takes on a different character. That is why I am talking about "adaption" during the third stage.

A.V. What is its goal?

G.G. The third stage is the most crucial and important. Here you find the necessary means to express the images. And here you are constantly checking your performance as to how it would be perceived by an outside listener. Each movement is checked both from the technical viewpoint and listeners point of view: is all as it should be, is everything clear. One should play comprehensibly. I always remember that I will play for someone, I play and think that I am playing this phrase not for myself but for the listener. I may feel when, for instance, a phrase comes out flat, that it will not reach the listener. You start questioning: why did this happen? You start thinking, looking deeply into what the author wrote, trying to sense it.

A.V. Does this work always happen at the instrument?

G.G. No, not always. Further on, I do not want to play so much, and when I know the material well, know all the details, I sometimes want to simply sit down with the score without playing, see the elements of which the composition is built, without burdening myself neither with the performance, nor sound, nor fingering, but simply imagining the sound. This work may go on in a street, in any place. Then, without the score, I go through, listen to the piece in my mind. This is an easier way to consider the importance of a particular part and understand the errors of the overall plan of the performance.

A.V. Do the sound associations bring about the mechanical ones?

G.G. Typically at these moments I am simply imagining the music. I may force myself to imagine the performance also mechanically and sometimes do that to check myself, check how well this is implanted in my memory, but usually I imagine only the music. It sounds incomparably better in my mind than it comes out at the piano, this is the ideal that can never be reached.

A.V. What happens when you return to the instrument?

G.G. The same process continues at the instrument. Whether or not it seems that I have done everything, thought through and defined, I still check if I have really done and studied everything, if everything really falls into its place, if everything comes out as it should, how solid everything is, and if any mishaps may happen. This is a constant work. No matter how well I manage to play a piece, some details always remain not totally satisfying.

A.V. Do you work mostly on the details or on the piece as a whole?

G.G. Of course, as a whole. You work constantly on the whole, around the clock. You go to bed, get up – and all the time think whether you will play the piece, and how you will play ... You work on the details at the instrument. You play the whole piece through and see that some detail is not right, another one is not right ... And you work on those.

A.V. If you feel that the concept of the interpretation has been nailed down and all the ideas are being successfully realized technically – does the piece grow closer to you, do you start liking it?

G.G. Most of the time on the technical "adaptation" is spent at the second stage. This is the groundwork for the pathways along which the thought will flow from the head to the hands. Naturally, a composition grows closer to you during the work. You are bound to it in your work. This moment arrives when I feel that I have written the piece myself. It is so close to me that I can not imagine that it was written by somebody else. Of course, I know perfectly well that I am not the author of this music but it is as close to me as to the author.

A.V. How does the further pre-recital work continue?

G.G. I can tell you what I consider to be the perfect conditions to make everything possible to play well. This does not mean that I really will play well. There are many reasons for that which I do not quite understand but I know what I should do to make everything possible for a successful performance.

The program preparation should be finished at least two weeks before the concert, that is, the program should be learned. Two weeks in advance there should be no hesitation in the text, fingering and so on. When the program is ready one should practice for two hours a day. One should play as follows: in the morning, without warming up the hands, you should play the first half of the program, and later the second. I should see what happens – do I spend too much energy, do I lose my breath too fast? I try to restrain myself if I feel that I am playing too fast, faster than I should play on stage, I train myself for that. So I play, keeping myself in check, correcting various mishaps and unclear, smudged notes.

On the day before the concert I play through the program only in the morning and later would neither clean it, nor check it. On the day of the concert I play in the morning. I would take just one most difficult place, very short – a page, page and a half. If it comes out well – good. If not – then comes the moment of desperation. Half an hour later I try it again. It usually comes out fine the second time.

Then you would lie down with a book, read a little. You are reading and are constantly playing through in your head. It would not be right to get too absorbed in the book. But the book should be interesting enough to distract you, so that you would rest a little. Otherwise, in a minute your thoughts start going back to the concert keeping you anxious all the time.

A.V. How do you view rehearsals in the hall? Do you like to rehearse?

G.G. I try to play as much as possible on the instrument that would be used at the recital. It is especially important to try it several times if the program is virtuosic – but not all at once. I play and check myself – how everything is coming out, and in which condition I arrive to the finish.

I try to conduct rehearsals in the conditions as close as possible to the recital. One has to take into account the fatigue factor. It is one thing to study at home, learn something: you play a piece, then chat on the phone, get distracted by something else ... But on stage you have to play at full strength for the whole half, and sometimes unpleasant surprises happen – your hands get tired, your body gets tired. You simply feel that it is difficult to finish the piece, there is no energy left to be as expressive as at home. Hence, everything has to be reconsidered. Typically, it is easy to see what is wrong, what should be changed.

I also try to reproduce other conditions as they would be at the time of the concert – for instance, lighting on the stage. I come to the rehearsal with un-warmed hands because I know that at the concert, with all the anxiety, my hands would not be sufficiently warmed up anyway. I want to be on top of the situation whatever condition of my hands is. I take an intermission where it is supposed to be and rest for the correct time. I play the whole program from start to end, missing nothing, whether or not there are pieces that concern me more than others, because every composition creates a certain frame of hands and mind. This is why I allow myself no deviation from the program. This is like a dress rehearsal. But I would do the same at the second rehearsal.

A.V. Does it happen that you need to make some small adjustments during a rehearsal, for instance, in the use of the pedal, fingering, other nuances?

G.G. This never happens at a rehearsal. Changing fingering is unthinkable, I am afraid even to think about that ... I try to achieve the conditions as close as possible to the concert during the rehearsal and at the same time preserve some physical and emotional energy. This means that during a rehearsal I can not get carried away, reach the limit so as not to waste energy that I need to save for the concert. This happens absolutely subconsciously. I play "at full power" to an extent possible, I try to "imitate a concert" but in reality this never happens. I cannot make myself play as I would for the public.

A.V. Do the realities of the performance on stage make it possible to realize everything that was prepared, created in advance?

G.G. Overall, certainly so. A great role is played by the better piano and acoustics. Everything sounds more perfect. You would rehearse on the day before in the hall and it would seem that the piano has little problems but then you enter the stage for the public and you hear a very different sound. Very strange indeed!

A.V. Why does that happen?

G.G. Evidently, a special nerve tightness. Hands are different. The senses are sharpened. Of course, it is one thing if I enter the stage so nervous that I feel neither hands nor feet, but if I come out in a more reasonable state and **know** all the difficulties that I am going to face, I can estimate that the sound is better than at the rehearsal. During a rehearsal in an empty hall it all sounds terribly ...

A.V. Is there a big difference between your normal state when playing or during a rehearsal, and your state during a performance on stage?

G.G. The difference is about the same as between a normal person and someone who was just given an injection of opium or cocaine. This is an absolutely different physical state! I am sitting now and am feeling my body, its weight, may sneeze or cough. There is nothing like that on stage. I have no physical senses, neither sneezing nor headache, nor hunger – nothing! This is simply a totally different state!

A.V. What is your attitude toward this state, how do you bear it?

G.G. I do not like it before the concert. I like it after the concert. I am madly scared before the concert. It seems that I would be unable to play anything.

A.V. When is the culmination of the performing art felt stronger: when you prepare a performance or during the concert itself?

G.G. It is stronger at the concert. But only after I have played and not as I am playing. You have no feelings during the performance. When you sit on stage your personality is split in two: one is playing and the other is controlling. Sometimes one of them gets carried away if this is the music he loves, but the other should stay calm and observe.

A.V. Do you feel the audience reaction?

G.G. Certainly! Not only do I feel it, I sense it with all my soul. There is not a single note for which I would not know the audience reaction.

A.V. How does it get to you?

G.G. This is a mystical aspect. I can not understand why sometimes I feel absolutely clearly that people are listening so attentively that it is scary – they are attuned to your slightest movements.

A.V. Does it happen that the reaction of the audience differs from your own?

G.G. It may differ. But this is always my fault and not the listeners'.

A.V. Have you checked this somehow?

G.G. I checked after a concert. There may be various reasons why they do not listen. For example, the program: there were too many pieces, one after another. Or imagine that I would start the recital with a new piece – certainly they would not listen! It would be impossible to make the audience listen to a new piece because the normal interaction between the performer and the listener has not yet been established. Hence, that intention would be wrong. If you play too fast, not taking into account the abilities of the listener's ear – you will not reach him. I am convinced that the listener is always right. Whether this is the listener of the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, or from a workman audience – the listener is always right. If he is not interested in what I am playing, one has to draw conclusions about the program. One should play what he understands and so that he would be able to understand.

A.V. How do you feel the audience: as a whole or as individual people some of whom you know?

G.G. Usually it seems to me that there is not a single listener in the audience who does not understand everything exactly as I do. He is as receptive to each note as I am and he may be as unsatisfied with the performance as I am.

A.V. But you do know that only a small fraction of the listeners in the hall are professional musicians while others are much less skillful in discerning the nuances of the interpretation?

G.G. Those professional musicians-pianists also do not know everything. Nevertheless, I have no distinction whether it is Rumiantsev (a stage worker in the Small Hall of the Conservatory – A.V.) or Yakov Zak sitting in the audience.

A.V. Does the composition of the audience play a role?

G.G. It plays a colossal, enormous role! Sometimes you step on stage and feel that it would be impossible to get into contact with this audience. You simply see that the people have not come to listen to what you have to say. Maybe they were waiting for something else, or got a sufficient dose of one poison or other – for instance, the Foxtrot-dancing poison, – in other words, they do not need your performance, they do not love music but rather seek entertainment.

A.V. Which audience is more perceptive to serious music – maybe a young, student audience?

G.G. Of course, a young audience is the most responsive especially as far as applause is concerned. It is a good audience. In the provinces you usually encounter various intelligentsia – there are engineers, doctors, teachers, highly qualified workers, who overall always judge you correctly because they have a healthy taste, they go to the concert with the hope to reach out to the performer. We have many good audiences here in the Soviet Union, so that if you approach them honestly, reach out to them with an open heart, you will find understanding and appreciation. The audience constantly makes an adjustment for your feelings, that is, they "correct" you if you listen to them carefully.

I am anxious in various ways when I am playing a concert. Sometimes I am nervous that I would forget something, or that something would happen, but I am always anxious as to how responsive the audience would be to what I have to offer. Before each concert you think about how you could possibly penetrate the mystery of the soul of the unknown and undefined that you would meet in the hall and what makes up the audience. As I recall a concert afterward, I can say literally about each moment, each nuance, whether my thoughts reached the audience. It is exactly at this moment, in these twenty bars that my relationship with the audience was messed up. Why? It is not that I played badly, on the contrary, it seemed to me that I played well, but I just sensed that it went right by the listener. I always feel this clearly and then start to torture myself with thoughts, analyze why that happened.

This is torturing but that is the best school because neither your friends nor teachers would be able to tell you what this sense tells you.

A.V. Do you allow for some aberration here, that this may be a mistaken, illusory feeling?

G.G. No, this is the most certain and unmistakable feeling, I was guided by it for many years. I cannot say that this happened at the beginning of my career because at the time it was much more important for me what Alexander Borisovich would say, but later I realized that neither Alexander Borisovich nor Konstantin Nikolayevich can tell me what I can get from the immediate sense of the audience during the concert.

Any serious performer experiences this influence and knows how it sounded today, how the listener perceived it at that moment, this instant, and how each phrase entered his heart. I feel the audience as a whole and not as a collection individuals. It is impossible to fool me and I would not be distracted by the presence of a group of professional musicians.

A.V. Grigory Romanovich, when you say "phrase entered listener's heart", do you mean the power of the emotional effect on the listener, of the emotional interaction with the audience? How is this aspect, or, rather, this main content-wise goal of the performer, addressed in the preparation of the performance? This was almost never discussed in our conversations.

G.G. It is very hard to talk about it, one cannot express this in words.

A.V. Could you possibly still try? Which avenues do you take? The answer to this difficult question is of great interest.

G.G. How could one say this ... Here is one example. I was unable to play Tchaikovsky's "Lullaby" (in the piano transcription by P. Pabst – A.V.) for many years. I simply could not! I listened to how Konstantin Nikolayevich Igumnov played it, admired him, tried to imitate his sound, his manner of playing, it seemed to me that I played as well as he did, and even expert musicians were saying that it was coming out wonderfully and I could play it with a great success ... Still, whenever I played "Lullaby" in a concert, listeners remained totally indifferent.

At first, I blamed the audience. I told myself that the public loves only fast and loud pieces, that it simply does not understand. But why did they listen differently when Konstantin Nikolayevich was playing? It seemed to me that I was playing even better than he did – I heard some "transitions" in his performances,

which I did not have. And it seemed to me that it sounded better in my hands. Meanwhile his "Lullaby" reached the audience and mine did not ...

I was painfully searching where my fault was and finally realized clearly that I missed the living breath of the song. I did not take into account that this song even if not a folk song, is the same as a folk song. And my listeners were quite right to be puzzled: the pianist was playing for so long and so quietly that it would become boring and unpleasant.

When I understood that clearly I was able to get past all my shortcomings and now I may say with a great satisfaction that when I play the "Lullaby" I have a greater success than with Liszt "Campanella" and in the provinces I am more often asked to play the Tchaikovsky "Lullaby" or the "Autumn Song" than the "Campanella".

This living flow of the melody, the living declamation line is what I learned from Goldenweiser, Igumnov, Neuhaus, Chaliapin. There was not a single concert when I would not sense it.

Here is another example. We all know the Tchaikovsky fis-moll waltz. Even twenty five years ago it was treated as a lollipop not quite worth playing. Nobody could see any special artistic interest there. Once I was at a Goldenweiser recital, he was playing Chopin and Liszt but then played this waltz as an encore. He played it with little perfection, even without the sound perfection that Konstantin Nikolayevich used to have, he played somewhat primitively from my point of view then but I sensed with a little surprise that both the audience and I myself were absorbed by it.

And I was thinking: what is the matter? What had happened? Sound-wise this was not that great, and musically – where was the complexity? But I was just overwhelmed, I felt how this music penetrated straight into my soul! Why did it make this impression? Only much later I realized that in this rhythm, this breath of the melody the performer managed to relate maybe the very thing that Tchaikovsky intended, what was precious to the audience and hence absorbed it so completely.