

the PBI profile

Piano prodigy Lola Astanova became a YouTube sensation in 2009. Now, with her glamorous performances and passion for fashion, all the world's her stage.

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Photography by Michael Price*





ASTANOVA STUDIED UNDER LEV NAUMOV AT THE MOSCOW STATE CONSERVATORY.

Four years ago, Russian-American virtuoso pianist Lola Astanova sat at her Steinway and pressed “record” on a video camera.

What happened next was a happy little YouTube accident.

“Okay, so a lot of you have probably heard the song ‘Don’t Stop the Music’ by Rihanna, and I happen to like that song as well,” Astanova says in the clip, nervously rubbing her denim-clad knee. “So here’s my take on it ... something different ... which was a lot of fun to do. And that’s my gift to her, and I hope you guys enjoy it.”

For the next four minutes, Astanova’s fingers blazed up and down the piano, infusing the bright dance tune with the fire and force of Sergei Rachmaninoff’s classical piano concertos. When she was done, she took a deep breath and then giggled.

That was more than 1.5 million views ago. Now, Astanova can rightfully call herself not only a YouTube sensation but also one of the most exciting things to happen to classical music since the Three Tenors—Luciano Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo and José Carreras—reintroduced opera to the masses a little more than 20 years ago.

“She is a very passionate and sensitive pianist with great charisma,” says Ramon Tebar, conductor of the Palm Beach Symphony, which performed with Astanova for the first time two years ago. “Our audience loves her. She has a superb technique that allows her not only to play the most demanding repertoire but serves her well to communicate the ideas and conceptions of the work she plays.”

Astanova was born in the former Soviet Union, where as a little girl she became curious about her mother’s upright piano. Her mother taught piano out of their home and didn’t want young Lola to pursue a music career because it was so difficult. Her father, a mechanical engineer, thought music lessons would be good for his intensely curious daughter. Astanova’s mother relented, and Lola took to the piano “like a tornado,” she says. By age 6, she was studying at the V. Uspensky Specialized School of Music for Gifted Children under Tamara Popovich, the school’s most famous teacher. By age 8, she was giving

performances alone and with orchestras in Germany, France, Italy, Austria and Russia. By age 13, she was featured in a UNESCO documentary called *Prodigies of the 20th Century* even though she says she never took that “prodigy” label seriously.

“I enjoyed being competitive that way and even with other kids,” she says, adding she had a normal childhood where she was allowed to play with friends and have Barbie dolls. “That environment was very good for studying and for being creative and learning. But I also went to school with kids who were so talented that the level was just so much higher than what you would normally see among kids that age.”

Still, she said she did feel the pressure that came with being a student at an elite music school.

“You felt that people were expecting you to play well and that your teacher was strict and pushed you to the limit,” she says. “I think that is hard as a child, especially. So I felt that responsibility and it helped me mature faster because my teacher wouldn’t talk to my mother about things like performing or whether I prepared. She would talk to me and I would have to explain myself. That was terrifying.”

Terror aside, for a reserved young woman the piano was also a release, an instrument that allowed her to open up and show her passion and emotion to the world. After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Astanova knew it was time to experience a different life where she could pursue an arts career seriously. After considering various conservatories and teachers in Europe, Astanova got a special skills and abilities visa in 2000 and moved to Houston, where her older brother lived. Although she studied music at Rice University and with various American teachers, she traveled home frequently to study at the Moscow State Conservatory with Popovich and Lev Naumov, who is considered the godfather of the Russian piano school.



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“[Naumov] taught the old way of piano, and in one lesson with him, you would have an awakening of sorts,” Astanova says. “He would be so specific in what he wanted from you, yet so gentle and strict. He knew so much about piano that it was overwhelming, and I was fortunate to have a teacher like him in my life.”

Although Astanova had been performing since her youth, her performance at the Classical Superstars Fantasy Concert in 2008 was a career changer, meriting not only attention from the mainstream press but also a placement in the Neiman Marcus catalog.

“People started noticing me after that and inviting me to do certain performances,” says Astanova, who has performed for the September 11 Memorial on Vladimir Horowitz’s Steinway piano and at Carnegie Hall. “It had a lot of mainstream appeal that maybe not a lot of classical music projects have for one reason or another. But these were very lucrative, exclusive engagements that were very good steps for me.”



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For one thing, audiences were taking notice of the glamorous young woman at the keys.

“Lola has an extraordinary ability to communicate with the audience,” says Misha Levintas, her manager. “Every time she takes the stage, I know there are people in the audience who are touched in the most profound way. I have witnessed it on many occasions, and to me that is more valuable than any critical acclaim or financial success. It is what performing art is all about.”

Still, Astanova is very hard on herself.

“It’s my personality,” she says. “You take all the good things for granted and try to improve on all the things you think you can do better. It’s the discipline from growing up and working with the teachers I’ve had that were perfectionists and wanted every little detail to be perfect. I’m very critical of myself and wish I could change that, but I don’t think I can so it doesn’t make life easier for me.”

Another thing she can’t change: her passion for high fashion. Despite her obvious musical talents, some listeners pay a lot of attention to Astanova’s striking looks, glamorous style and seemingly impractical stilettos.

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it,” says Astanova, a self-described beauty product junkie who is known to wear gowns by Chanel and Tom Ford, among other designers. “The founding fathers of classical music—Wagner, Liszt, Chopin and so on—were very fashionable people who dressed impeccably. I read a story about Chopin once where he was complaining about how he couldn’t afford to buy this fabulous pair of gloves he had seen. So that’s how we know he was into fashion. There’s nothing wrong with that. I think it’s a sign of respect for the audience, who dresses up and sees a night of classical music as a social outing.”

When she’s not performing or practicing, Astanova says she likes to spend time at the beach or by the pool. She’s an avid reader too, devouring everything from Russian fiction by Fyodor

Dostoevsky to philosophical tracts by Arthur Schopenhauer. The latter, it’s worth noting, wrote the world was driven by a continually dissatisfied will and continually sought satisfaction, a philosophy that must speak to the perfectionist Astanova.

“I will always try to take chances and experiment,” she says. “I do not think that classical music can remain the same as it was 100 years ago. I will always try to do something that feels interesting or unusual or could be exciting for the audience. That’s the purpose of an artist, to ask questions, rather than have all the answers.”

Astanova visits Palm Beach frequently and says she is fortunate to have forged so many friendships in the town.

“It is a wonderful community and I always love performing there because I feel like people love classical music and are knowledgeable about it,” she says.

Astanova will spend the fall touring Europe, Australia and the United States. At press time, the Palm Beach Symphony was negotiating two concerts with Astanova for its next season. Astanova will also be developing more videos for her YouTube series “La Musique et L’Ardeur” (Music and Passion), which features interviews with and performances by the pianist in high-definition video. Although Van Cliburn and Chopin didn’t have Twitter accounts, Astanova does, and she keeps fans updated about her performances, interviews and downtime at @followlola.

Social media is helping her connect with a new generation of classical music lovers, she says.

“Nowadays, I think some of the biggest pop stars shoot to get videos on YouTube because that’s where people get their information now,” she says. “If you have something to say, your career will continue.”

And the fans who keep on clicking on Astanova’s videos will make sure she’s heard loud and clear. ◀◀



SCAN TO WATCH ASTANOVA
PLAY A SEGMENT FROM
RACHMANINOFF’S “MOMENT
MUSICAL NO. 4 IN E.”





LOCATION: Kravis Center for the Performing Arts, West Palm Beach
MAKEUP: Tim Quinn, celebrity face designer and national director of creative artistry for Giorgio Armani Beauty
HAIR: Julien Bonnin for Frederic Fekkai Salon, Palm Beach, using Fekkai products