

Marija Judina

Forty years after her death, Marija Judina (1899-1970), one of the greatest pianist of the 1900's, is coming out of the isolation in which the official culture both in Russia and in the West had relegated her, fearing her independent views and her indomitable temper. She was continuously fighting in the front line for the freedom of the Church and of art, her two «comet stars».

The secret of her charm, of her ability to speak even to today's listener, may be, first of all, in her perception of music as a «beyond», as an open window on the Mystery that she pursues her whole life. Between Judina and her listeners – as Evgenija Otten, her big friend and godmother, will say – there is a «*dialog*, a creativity contest» in which the artist's ingeniousness has the gift of being able to recall «the *most precious knowledge capacity* that is within us – in the performer as well as in the listener, i.e., *wonder*». «By breaking into the listener's perception with her spiritual power, she helps him or her discover potentials that had even been unknown to him or herself». The genius reveals the human, enables the person to «discover within him or herself something he or she did not know was hidden inside. This is the fulfillment of the dialog».

Her concerts are not just that, and not only because she alternates her musical pieces with her reciting poems of her favorite authors – usually characters that were banned by the regime (in particular Pasternak). For the very way in which they were presented, they were a witness, in fact a «sacred performance». A music critic remembers this: «When this lady, with her straight hairdo which framed her face absorbed in her thoughts, would go on the stage in a long dark, stern dress, without looking anybody, absorbed in her inner world, she would sit at the piano, would wipe her hands and keyboard with a handkerchief, and then she would take a long break. It seemed to be a preparation ritual to something important. This something was above purely aesthetic criteria to put in the forefront a moral *pathos*. This is how her talks, her witnesses were perceived by listeners of different trends, preferences and views. They expected a catharsis and they were not disappointed in their expectations». According to a story that by now is legendary, even Stalin was captivated by her. He was struck by her performance of a concert of Mozart music (actually, Judina interpreted it as a «requiem» for the lager victims).

She was a troublesome character, irreducible to systems. Marija's life intertwines with the drama Russia was going through: as many of her contemporaries, she lives the hopes and expectations raised by the events of 1917. For sometime she even leaves the conservatory to throw herself body and soul into the revolutionary cause, but soon she discovers the true «revolution» in the Christian faith. In her diary of her youth in September 1917 she writes: «Faith? Yes! Art is only a path, only a joining ring. The ultimate purpose of every inner journey is faith and universal resurrection. Lord, my God, will the supreme good be fulfilled, and will faith welcome me in her sacred sanctuary? Lord, how I wish Your light, how I seek You in darkness!». And so, she who came from a Jewish family, even though they lived apart from their religious roots, received her baptism in the Orthodox Church on May 2, 1919.

In a world – the Soviet one – in which faith and personal convictions are left in a dark corner within us and all are pushed to live according to the rules of Orwellian «dual thinking», for Judina the only law is one's conscience, there are no others: so she propagandized «clerical» Bach and Solženicy'n's «epochal» novels; she covered immense distances to go comfort deported friends (she risked death for an infection contracted in Alma-Ata, in Kazakhstan, where she had gone to visit the widow of her spiritual father, Feodor Andreev); or to play for them, for example poet Osip Mandel'stam, confined in Voronež. She signs letters and appeals in defense of fundamental freedoms that were trampled on by the regime. She would point out to dissidents, though, that without mercy and forgiveness it's not possible to build a really renovated society. In the darkest times in the life of the Church, when, facing fierce persecutions, the official

hierarchy comes down to compromises, she chooses catacomb communities. In the last few years of his life, she turned to young Father Aleksandr Men', by telling him straight: «I have been told that you have the gift to convert people, and I have several close to me: could you help me? ».

She defended vigorously contemporaneous music and the avant-guard. She did so certainly not in order to shock the listener or to slap tradition in the face, but rather because she saw as much in Bach as well as in dodecaphonic music, a spark of the Spirit. «Contemporaneous music, for example Šostakovič – as she said – is the desperate cry of contemporaneous humanity, on the point of perishing; but desperation is the threshold of repentance, of going back to the Father's arms ». This position, which makes her so modern and unprejudiced, careless of conventions and rules, but also full of faith, is the exact opposite of many ostentatiously desecrating attitudes, but spiritually empty, purely formal, assumed by the avant-garde in the West. She writes about this to German music critic Fred Prieberg, like her very fond of contemporaneous music, and with whom she exchanged frequent and cordial letters for various years: «Here is what you are wrong about, Mr. Intellectual: there is no dogma, belief, religious practice, spirituality, authentically religious life that is *something to be taken for granted*, as you wrote, instead, in your last letter. *News are born every day*; exactly as Johann Sebastian Bach every Sunday would compose a new cantata, our inner life must also vibrate unceasingly and move continuously... while waiting for the *unheard-of* miracle that is about to happen for us on behalf of God, the world, and of man... This is how things are going!». On a personal level, she demonstrated an incredible, exaggerated generosity, that urged her to give away everything she has, in fact urges her to get into debt to help all those she happens to meet and see in their needs. She was so poor that she did not even own her own instrument.

Marija Judina's life alternated triumphs and misfortunes: at 21 she graduates with top grades from the conservatory of Leningrad. Almost immediately she obtained tenure and the title of professor. In 1930 she was thrown out because of her «reactionary and clerical position»; in the last few years of war, she played almost daily on the radio. She even went to the front, in the besieged Leningrad, to offer her contribution to the heroic resistance of the people; she clashed against new ostracisms after the first World War when, during the Cold War, the campaigns against «formalism» and «cosmopolitanism» begin also in music. Her concerts were reduced to six or seven a year, at the most, and in 1960 she was turned out of teaching even in Moscow. But all this only has a relative importance. Her purpose, her longing was realized: «I have looked all my life the Incarnation of Truth in man, in art, and in life. And with God's help, I have found it ».