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I've just met a girl named Maria

by Jay Nordlinger



Maria Grinberg. Photo via YouTube

Before a recent trip to Norway, I wanted to hear some Grieg. So, I went to YouTube, to click on the *Holberg Suite*. This suite is familiar in its version for chamber orchestra—but it is originally for piano. My eyes fell on a piano recording. The pianist was someone I had never heard of: Maria Grinberg.

I clicked on the recording. What bliss. What wonderment. What discovery.

Just when you think you have heard of everyone worth hearing about, you haven't. This is particularly true where the Soviet Union is concerned. Where has Mr. Ivanov (let's say) been all my life? Well, he was in the Soviet Union—that's why you have never heard of him. His light was under a bushel. Or not adequately spread.

I found a sketch of Maria Grinberg's life, [here](#). And I'll do a little sketching myself.

Born in 1908, she was but nine when the Communists took over. She lived essentially her whole life in the Soviet Union, dying in 1978.

She came from Odessa, that place so famous for artistry. “Her father was a Hebrew scholar, and her mother taught piano privately.” (I am quoting from that sketch.) One of Maria’s teachers was Felix Blumenfeld, who also taught Horowitz. Blumenfeld was the uncle of possibly the most celebrated piano teacher of the twentieth century: Heinrich Neuhaus. He was also a cousin of the composer Szymanowski.

When Maria was in her late twenties, her life took a turn, as so many lives did:

In 1937, both her husband and her father were arrested and executed as “enemies of the people.” The pianist was fired by the state-run management and got a job as an accompanist of an amateur choreography group. During that time, she occasionally participated in concert performances playing timpani. Somehow, after a while, she was readmitted to the management as a piano soloist.

I think of a song: “Some folks’ lives roll easy as a breeze.”

When Grinberg was in her late forties, “she noticed that her vision had become significantly worse.” It turned out she had a brain tumor. She had surgery and recovered.

She made many recordings, including of the Beethoven sonatas—all thirty-two of them. She was the first Russian pianist to record the complete Beethoven sonatas.

And yet, she was always disfavored by the regime, and always suppressed. They promoted you or they didn’t. And they did not promote Grinberg, at all. For example, her concerts and recordings would receive no notice in the press, even as they were enthusiastically received by individual hearers.

“Her sense of humor was legendary.” (I am again quoting from the sketch.) Get ready for a story.

Grinberg’s patronymic—her middle name, so to speak, stemming from her father’s name—was “Israelevna.” Daughter of Israel. So, the pianist was “Maria Israelevna.” There came a time when the Soviet state habitually referred to the State of Israel as “Israeli aggressors.” So Grinberg took to introducing herself as “Maria Aggressorovna.”

Okay, this is enough sketching. Let’s look in on some recordings. Here is the *Holberg Suite*. It is mature, correct, felicitous—and *exciting*. This is rare playing. It had the effect of making me love the *Holberg Suite* all the more.

Grinberg recorded a great range of music, including the Baroque. [Here](#) is Bach's *Capriccio on the Departure of a Beloved Brother*. You used to hear this piece a lot. Apparently, it has disappeared from pianists' lives. Anyway, Grinberg plays it with understanding, taste, and boldness. Boldness, I have learned, is one of her chief characteristics.

[Here](#) are some more Baroque composers, from points south: Scarlatti, Soler, and Carlos Seixas (a Portuguese who lived from 1704 to 1742). Grinberg plays a few pieces from each of them. Much of her playing is rough and wrong, I'm afraid. But I will give the great lady a pass.

She is more herself (if I may) in Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*, [here](#). The playing is straightforward, honest, and musical. It is a little too big for me at times. But I like that Grinberg refuses to let the songs be namby-pamby. She is not one to perfume.

In Rachmaninoff's transcription of Kreisler's *Liebesleid*—[here](#)—she is full of charm and grace. That's what you have to be, in this music.

Some Mozart? Try Grinberg in the Sonata in D, K. 576, [here](#). It is occasionally a bit sloppy and pouncy. But mainly it is sensitive, lively, and Mozartean.

You will not want to miss the *Symphonic Etudes* (Schumann), [here](#). In this work, Grinberg really shines. She is masterly and soulful. She plays seriously but without self-importance, which is wise. She is imaginative—free—but never out of bounds.

I have not listened to all thirty-two Beethoven sonatas. But I have listened to a few. [Here](#) is Grinberg in that granddaddy, the Sonata in B flat, Op. 106, known as the "Hammerklavier." She does some wrestling with it, as all pianists do. She also does some playing with it. All in all, a great recording.

So—to quote another song lyric—I've just met a girl named Maria. Almost forty years after her death, she is brand-new to me. And may we pause to give thanks for YouTube, one of the greatest inventions and gifts in the history of mankind? Also, consider this: How many other Maria Grinbergs are out there, waiting to be discovered by you and me?

I'll close with another Grinberg recording, [here](#). It is of Brahms's Intermezzo in E flat, Op. 117, No. 1. The playing is miraculous. Brahms would shed a tear of gratitude. Such a musician, Maria Israelevna Grinberg.

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His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled "Music for a While," can be found [here](#).