

# The New York Times

**Starry, Starry Night: The New York debut, once a musical rite of passage, is not what it was. But an ambitious Ukrainian still wants to make his mark.**

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By DANIEL J. WAKIN

THE pianist shrugged on his black velvet jacket, fluffed his thick chestnut hair and flapped his hands at his sides. Sitting down at the upright piano in his spare dressing room, the 31-year-old musician closed his eyes and lowered his head. After a few deep breaths, he roused himself with a series of sharp chords.

"Places, please, places," said a voice over the loudspeaker. The pianist, a onetime conservatory phenomenon from Ukraine named **Vitalij Kuprij**, walked down a narrow aisle to the stage door of Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall.

"O.K., let's have fun, everybody," he said in lightly accented English to no one in particular. Then, at precisely 8:30 on the evening of Feb. 12 — the night of the Great Snowstorm of 2006 — he stepped onto the stage and into that storied rite of musical passage, the New York recital debut.



Vitalij Kuprij, who made his Carnegie Hall debut two weeks ago, onstage. Photo by James Estrin

For decades, the New York debut has been a staple of the modern classical music career. Scores of musicians make their New York debuts every season: teachers from small colleges in the provinces, established Europeans, young Asian virtuosos fresh out of conservatory. They come not only to Carnegie's main hall and its two smaller spaces, Weill and Zankel Halls, but also to the 92nd Street Y, Merkin Concert Hall, Alice Tully and Avery Fisher Halls at Lincoln Center, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Frick Collection, which both have concert series, and churches and university auditoriums.

They come because they yearn for notice by New York critics, New York agents and sophisticated New York concertgoers.

The chosen ones are invited, marketed and paid. Most are renters. All hope the debut will help forge big careers, as it did, for example, for the pianist Andras Schiff, who made his recital debut at the Metropolitan Museum in 1982.

For a lucky few, the event will be the equivalent of a finely embossed calling card announcing a glorious future. For the vast majority, it will be like a tree falling in the forest.

Although major musical scenes exist in cities like London, Paris and Berlin, New York as a debut zone offers something special. "That's where the action is," said the

pianist Gary Graffman, who made his debut at Carnegie's recital hall in 1939 at the age of 10. "That's where the managers are."

But the New York debut is not what it used to be.

The number of soloists has exploded, and so has the clamor for notice, particularly in the form of

a review that can be excerpted for a résumé. At the same time, the number of newspapers that regularly review debuts has dwindled from a half-dozen 50 years ago to one — this one. And The New York Times, which used to cover almost all debuts, has sharply reduced the amount of space it devotes to them as it seeks to cover more concerts with a smaller reviewing staff.

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"When you appear in a very special venue like this, you just grow as an artist, very intensely, very fast," Mr. Kuprij said. "It gives you a mission. It gives you purpose. It will give you a chance to really represent who you are — not to mention you get in amazing shape. What you really gain is confidence, self-esteem."

One more thing.

"You don't know who you are going to meet," he said. "The perfect scenario would be after the concert, someone came to me and said, 'Here is my card.' "

### So Much Music, So Little Time

That does not happen often.

Agents rarely attend debut concerts out of the blue. According to David Foster, president and chief executive of ICM Artists, a major management company, it often takes a personal recommendation or good reviews from elsewhere. "Usually," he said, "given the way life is, i.e., that there are 27 things to do musically in New York, why would you go to hear someone you never heard of?"

At the same time, the increasing cost of renting a hall closes the door to many musicians. As Mr. Foster put it, "You can't borrow a thousand bucks from your Uncle Howard and put on a recital, which you might have been able to do in 1948."

Even as recently as the early 1980's, Carnegie's recital hall could be rented for about \$500. Now, the price can reach \$1,750.

The impact of the New York debut has diminished for other reasons. There are more ways to build careers; with the explosion of professional orchestras in America, from several hundred a half-century ago to about 1,000 today, musicians have more chances to stand out with a concerto performance.

At the same time, the sheer number of potential debuts has skyrocketed. In 1953, Mr. Graffman pointed out, the professional journal *Musical America* listed 96 professional pianists, 40 violinists and 7 cellists. The edition 50 years later listed 606 pianists, 315 violinists and 151 cellists.

Mr. Graffman recalls very little about his first New York recital, which was not reviewed in *The Times*. It was a recital two years later at Town Hall that he considers his real debut. "Master Graffman," the *Times* review said, was noteworthy for "the technical accuracy, the limpid tone and the inherent musical feeling that marked his performances." Mr. Graffman went on to become a member of the virtuoso keyboard generation that included Leon Fleisher, Eugene Istomin and Van Cliburn; he is currently the president and director of the prestigious Philadelphia conservatory, the Curtis Institute of Music.

### Where a Star Was Born

It was at Curtis that Mr. Graffman crossed paths with Mr. Kuprij.

Like Mr. Graffman, Mr. Kuprij was a prodigy with roots in the former Soviet Union. Born in 1974 in the Ukrainian town of Volodarka, he began studying piano at age 4 with

his father, a professional trombonist. He left home at 12 to attend conservatory in Kiev and began winning competitions. In 1990, he attended a master class in Switzerland with the pianist Rudolf Buchbinder, who invited him to return and take lessons with him at the Basel conservatory.

In Basel he began making a series of fruitful contacts. Through his host family, he came to the attention of the flutist James Galway, who was impressed enough to recommend him to Mr. Graffman. Mr. Kuprij was admitted to Curtis in 1995, one of only four piano students accepted that year, and Mr. Graffman became his teacher.

At Curtis, the pianist was a star, possessing both talent and what Ann Diebold, then the vice president for communications, described as a "really magnetic personality."

"The only name anyone talked about was Vitalij, Vitalij, Vitalij — 'You've got to hear Vitalij,' " said Thomas McCarthy, a Curtis board member. Mr. McCarthy and his wife, Sandra, were so impressed that they invited the young performer to play for a fund-raiser in Reading, a city about an hour's drive from Philadelphia, where they live.

Mr. Kuprij graduated in 2000. Then, Mr. McCarthy said, he just "fell through the cracks." As is often the case with career trajectories, it is hard to say exactly why. Perhaps he faltered because he failed to win a big competition soon after graduation, or did not acquire a prominent manager.



Mr. Kuprij at the sponsors' home in Reading, Pa. Photo by Ángel Franco

Whatever the reason, the McCarthys, a music-loving couple who had owned several gymnastics academies and sponsored young gymnasts, came to the rescue.

In effect, they adopted Mr. Kuprij. He now lives in an apartment in a town house the couple own across the street from their own Federal-style brick house. He eats many of his meals in their antiques-filled home and practices on a \$30,000, nine-foot-long Baldwin in their living room, under an oil of Enrico Caruso. The McCarthys are helping him buy the piano.

One January day, over slices of Mrs. McCarthy's homemade apple pie, the couple sat in their breakfast nook and talked about their devotion to the pianist.

"We just believe in him," said Mr. McCarthy, who calls his youthful-looking charge "Coop." "We believe in his talent. This guy can do anything."

His wife added: "We're kind of like his American parents. The classical world is a tough road out there."

Mr. Kuprij is grateful. "It's just amazing what they've done for me," he said.

Despite the stuttering of his progress, Mr. Kuprij did not give up. In 1999 he played the Liszt Concerto No. 1 with the New York Youth Symphony in Carnegie's main hall. He acquired management—a small agency in Rome—and continued to perform. He played a dozen engagements last year, and several with orchestras in Italy and Mexico are scheduled for this month and next.

Like many classical musicians starting out these days, he has expanded his boundaries, partly to make money. Mr. Kuprij began playing keyboard in rock bands with names like Ring of Fire and Artension, and composing songs for them (he also writes classical music). He released a string of CD's and became a hit on tours in Japan, where a dedicated group of fans includes a woman who sends him handmade jewelry.

The Weill concert had been arranged by MidAmerica Productions, a concert presenter that serves as a middleman between performers and halls. Mr. Kuprij had come to the company's attention because his manager and sometime bandmate, Chris Catena, also represents Peter Tiboris, the conductor who is MidAmerica's founder and director.

Often, as in Mr. Kuprij's case, MidAmerica will rent the hall, help promote the event and take half of the revenue from the box office; the rest goes to the artist.

## Upstaged by the Snow

On the day of his debut, Mr. Kuprij faced plenty of competition for audiences. At least 17 other classical music events were scheduled in New York. But the weather was a worse problem. That day, more than two feet of snow fell on the city, the largest recorded snowstorm in New York history.

Speaking from Reading that morning, Mr. Kuprij put on a brave face. "We're going to make it," he said. "I'm always positive."

After three hours on the road, he and the McCarthys pulled up at the Buckingham Hotel on West 57th Street. The Buckingham had special resonance; it had been the last residence of the legendary

pianist Paderewski, who made his Carnegie debut in 1891, the hall's first season. Mr. Kuprij proceeded to Central Park for his customary preconcert run, then stopped on the corner near the hall to smoke a cigarette.

At 7:30 p.m., the elevator doors in the hotel lobby opened. Mr. Kuprij held Mrs. McCarthy's arm as they picked their way through the snow to the stage door at 56th Street, and from there to his dressing room. It was 7:43 p.m.

Good news greeted them: about 240 tickets in the 268-seat hall had been sold. But how many people would show up on such a snowy night? Out of Mr. Kuprij's earshot, the MidAmerica officials were pessimistic. The audience in the main hall, for the Berlin Staatskapelle conducted by Daniel Barenboim, a far glossier event, was sparse.

In the dressing room, Mrs. McCarthy removed his concert outfit from a U.S.A. Gymnastics garment bag and polished his black loafers with a chamois cloth. As she buttoned his cream shirt and smoothed out the ruffle she had made to take the place of a tie, the five-minute warning sounded over the loudspeaker. "I'm good with the rest, Sandy," Mr. Kuprij said, signaling that it was time for him to be alone. "Thank you so much. Love you."

Mrs. McCarthy kissed him on the cheek. "Love you, too," she replied.

At precisely 8:30 p.m., Mr. Kuprij walked on stage. Mr. Graffman and his wife, Naomi, were sitting near the back, the McCarthys one row in front of them.



Mr. Kuprij made a preconcert run in Central Park. Photo by James Estrin

Surrounding them was a surprisingly large audience for such a snowy night: at least 155 people, mostly elderly couples, young musicians and a few families.

Mr. Kuprij plunged into his first piece, the Sonata in D minor, Op. 40, No. 3 by Muzio Clementi, a Horowitz favorite. This was followed by a Chopin nocturne — Op. 27, No. 1, in C sharp minor — and a set of Chopin etudes, their poetry and brilliance on full display in Mr. Kuprij's hands. After intermission came a wild, virtuosic rendition of the piano arrangement of three scenes from Stravinsky's "Petrouchka." Mr. Kuprij then performed two of his own works, Chopin derivatives, closing with Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 8 in F sharp minor.

On stage, Mr. Kuprij looked the part of the virtuosic pianist, at times gazing dreamily toward the ceiling, lifting his hands and head with a flourish at the end of a movement, and pursing his lips at intricate passages. A lock of hair dangled over his brow. The final applause was enthusiastic, and Mr. Kuprij returned for an encore.

Just after leaving the stage, he announced, "I guess we did it."

Back in his dressing room, alone, he sat slumped in a chair, his shirt soaked through, his hair matted with sweat. With his head down and his elbows on his knees, he looked like a boxer after a 10-rounder.

He wasn't alone for long. The first to congratulate him was Mr. Graffman, who embraced his former student and spoke to him in Russian.

Later, in the lobby, Mr. Kuprij greeted friends, about 10 of whom had come from Reading. "Unbelievable job here," said John Macaluso, a drummer from one of his bands. Marianne Scaduto, a 23-year-old fan who had traveled up from Florida, asked him to autograph a DVD from one of his rock concerts.

After fans and friends had dispersed, the McCarthys and the Graffmans took Mr. Kuprij to the Carnegie Deli, around the corner. Little was said about the performance. But as they got up to leave, Mr. Graffman hugged his former student. "Bravo," he murmured in his ear. "It was a wonderful concert." Later, Mr. Graffman suggested that Mr. Kuprij's nonclassical interests might have been a distraction, and that he tended to be a lazy practicer, a judgment Mr. Kuprij politely disputed. But this concert showed that his former

student was on the right track, Mr. Graffman said. "I think things are really falling into place," he said. "As soon as he played the first note of the Clementi, I saw he was in very good shape."

Mr. Kuprij also had positive feelings about the evening. "I was able to see as an artist where I am at after I performed, and what progress I made, and what I have to continue to work on," he said over the phone a few days

later. "My foundations are established, through a lot of work. I'm in a position to capture the deepest spirit of what music represents to me."

In the end, there was no review, no overture from an agent in the audience, no sign, at least immediately, of the big career break that a New York debut can provide. Mr. Kuprij earned \$1,475.50, minus 4 percent state unemployment tax.

But there was an audience. And moments of the concert, like the tumultuous cascade of sound in the Stravinsky, when Mr. Kuprij's shoulders heaved as if in sympathy with the syncopated chordal stomps, seemed to drown out thoughts of managers, or reviews, or careers.

"If I get a couple of phone calls from some big guns, some agency or whatever it is, that would be very helpful," Mr. Kuprij said. "But I'm just as happy because I feel powerful today. This whole thing gave me a lot of hope."



"The perfect scenario," Mr. Kuprij said, "would be after the concert, someone came to me and said, 'Here is my card.'" Photo by James Estrin