

life

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Life is ten percent what happens to you and ninety percent how you respond to it.

— Charles Swindoll

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Pianist Martha Argerich has been performing in public for almost 70 years.
PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

Martha's all about the moment

World-renowned pianist Martha Argerich practises every day and gets anxious if she misses her time on the instrument



Akshita Nanda
Arts Correspondent

Martha Argerich snorts over her wonton soup. A fellow diner has referred to the "formidable" accomplishments of her early years playing the piano.

"I was formidable? What did I do that was formidable? There were lots of women pianists," says the 77-year-old, a day after her debut at the Singapore International Piano Festival packed audiences into Victoria Concert Hall and ended with a standing ovation.

There are many pianists, but few like Argentina-born Argerich. She has been performing in public for almost seven decades, has three Grammy Awards to her name and exploded onto the international stage after taking the palm at the International Frederic Chopin

Piano Competition at age 24. She helms two music festivals in Japan and Switzerland, has a packed performance calendar with some of the world's most famous names, including her compatriot, conductor Daniel Barenboim, and has inspired legions of young musicians, including Singapore's Abigail Sin.

Argerich has retained the limelight with powerful, elegant performances well into her seventh decade, despite the fact that she has been known to cancel concerts on a whim and avoids the press as much as possible.

This lunch in a private room of the Conrad Centennial hotel, with three journalists from local and international media outlets, is a masterpiece of social engineering. So, too, was the pianist's debut at the annual piano festival here.

Outgoing festival director Lionel Choi courted her for four years via her annual music festival, Argerich's Meeting Point, in Beppu, Japan, before the answer to his question, "Will you come to Singapore?", changed from the non-committal "why not" to "I would love to come to Singapore".

He says it helped to programme Argerich with her old friend and fellow Argentinian Dario Alejandro Naca. He played the piano with her at a June 11 recital, then conducted her and the Singapore Symphony Orchestra two days later in Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3.

"We wanted her to turn up to play with friends, to be with friends," Choi says.

The importance of creating a warm and friendly atmosphere is emphasised before the lunch with Argerich. Questions about her former husband Charles Dutoit are off-limits – Dutoit quit as conductor of the Royal Philharmonic this year over accusations of sexual assault.

The media are warned that if Argerich feels even slightly uncomfortable, she is likely to leave the room.

Yet, the figure who appears slightly after 2pm is no diva, despite her dark glasses. She peers at this reporter over the lenses and explains that the spectacles help her see. "I'm very short-sighted," she offers.

She orders wonton soup and a vegetable wrap and does her best to answer questions, in between checking her cellphone for messages from her three daughters – Dutoit fathered one, as did former husbands Robert Chen, a conductor-composer, and fellow pianist Stephen Kovacevich.

Conversation flows smoothly about her current loves. "I'm absolutely intoxicated by Debussy these days," she says, adding that she will play it in a concert with Barenboim soon.

But ask her how she felt about winning the top prize at the Geneva Competition for young musicians in 1957 – she was only 16 – and she stutters to a halt.

"When one asks me about my

past, it's like it was another person," she says after a while. "I feel things now. It's better to be here now, with things as they happen."

Rather than her past, she prefers to gossip about long-dead composers and how Beethoven met Mozart, but could not afford to study with him.

Beethoven and Mozart played their own work. She says: "It's strange, our culture now, with performers not doing their own work. We are a little bit like museums now."

Beethoven's Fourth Concerto is one of her favourite works and the story of how she thrilled to Claudio Arrau's rendition of it is famous. "It was the first piece I was holding here," she says, touching the centre of her chest. "It was like an electric shock. I still remember the feeling."

Why has she not recorded it? She smiles mischievously and launches into a less-known story, that she fell in love with Kovacevich in her 20s after hearing him play that concerto for the first time.

That same night, they were partnered at dinner, but she felt so self-conscious that she did not dare sit next to him. "You understand?" she says eagerly. "When there's a feeling of respect and love and awe with something, you find you don't want to touch it."

"Martha is all about the moment" is a common refrain among those who know her. She cherishes beautiful moments, but does not feel the need to grasp after them. If the moment is not right, she will cancel concerts.

Creating beautiful moments is also why she prefers to play in chamber ensembles – intimate musical groupings – rather than solo. She has had hardly any solo recitals since the 1980s, touring and recording instead with friends such as Israeli cellist Mischa Maisky and Latvian violinist Gidon Kremer.

Argerich has never felt her gender was a handicap to her success. When she was 13, her parents moved from Buenos Aires to Europe so she could study with Austrian pianist Friedrich Gulda. Their move and their jobs at the Argentinian embassy in Vienna were orchestrated by Argentina's then-president Juan Peron.

"I was talking with a young girl in Vienna and she asked, 'Did you

have any problem – being a woman?' I said, 'No.' She said she did," Argerich recalls.

Gulda made no distinction between male and female students. He called the Geneva Competition "the toilet competition" because when she competed, male and female pianists competed separately.

Unlike male pianists, Argerich was judged for her fashion sense, she admits. "I was always considered to be not elegant at all. Once I got a letter from a woman in New York, 'Your playing is wonderful, but your dress didn't match your shoes. Your hair was dirty.'"

Of her three daughters, only the oldest, Chen's daughter Lyda, is a musician, a viola player. "It's my fault," Argerich says. Anne (Dutoit's daughter) and Stephanie had musical talent, but Argerich did not ensure they kept up their musical studies.

Her career came first, though that did not lessen the affection among the four women, as captured in Stephanie's 2013 documentary titled *Bloody Daughter*. Lyda was brought up by her father, but Stephanie and Anne often fell asleep under the piano as Argerich played.

Stephanie was also often her mother's protector, the pianist says. At one autograph session, Stephanie stood guard with an umbrella to beat off the pushy. "Once, in a concert, someone was talking and she said, 'Shh... Mama is playing,'" adds Argerich with a laugh.

Almost two hours into lunch, she gets visibly anxious. She is ready to get up from the table, but dithers between heading out for a drive around tourist spots like Little India and practising for her next concert. "I have to practise every day. I'm very afraid. You don't know."

Yes, one of the most celebrated performers in the world is prone to stage fright. Even the warm welcome at last Wednesday's concert unnerved her – the applause as she entered was frightening, she says. "I was nervous because when I appeared, they... she claps her hands together."

"I thought, after my performance, maybe not? Maybe they won't clap so much."

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