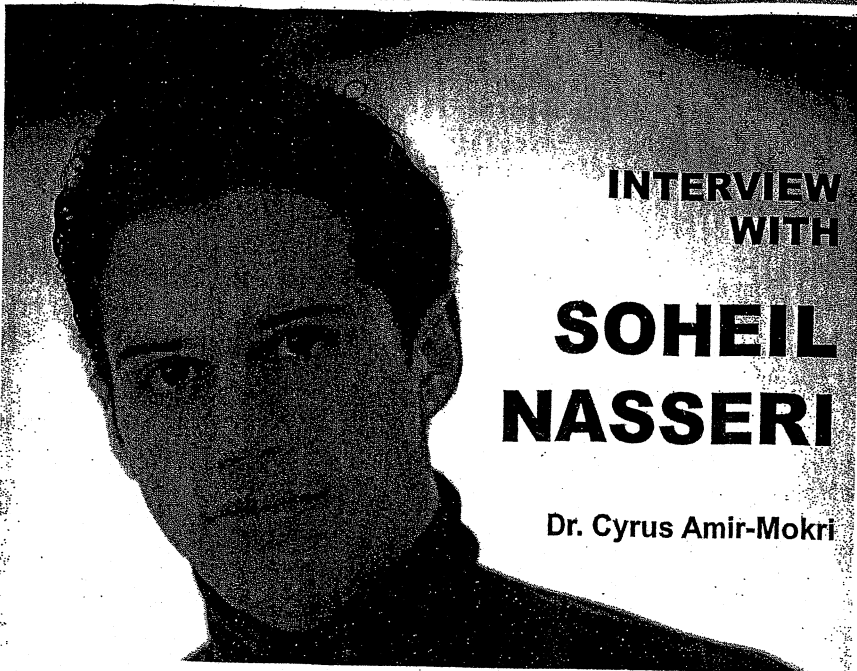


YOUR PERSIAN HERITAGE

Photo: Stephanie Fox



INTERVIEW
WITH
**SOHEIL
NASSERI**

Dr. Cyrus Amir-Mokri

I first met Soheil Nasserri a little less than a year ago. As is the custom at the beginning of all such encounters, I perfunctorily asked him what he does for a living. Without hesitation, and in a confident tone, he responded that he is a concert pianist. I fancy myself as someone who is somewhat acquainted with classical music, but I was certain that I had not heard of Soheil Nasserri. So I asked him if he was a student. Maintaining the confident tone, he looked me straight in the eye and said, "No, I'm a concert pianist." Just to make sure that I clearly understood how serious he was about his profession, he added, with emphasis, "And I just had a recital at Weill Recital Hall." We then began a lengthy conversation – certainly lengthy by the standards of the social function that served as its backdrop – about the piano, pianists, music, and music history.

I was surprised to find Soheil. It is not everyday that one meets a concert pianist, let alone one of Persian heritage. But the surprise was certainly pleasant. It was refreshing to see a young man have the courage to pursue his passion, particularly given that it is so much easier to follow our conservative instincts, which directs us to build our futures by becoming physicians, lawyers, bankers, or engineers. I was even more encouraged when, during our conversation, which translated into this interview, I learned about his determination and perseverance.

In the months since our first meeting, I have heard Soheil perform on several occasions, both public and private. I have been impressed not only by his technical skill and his attempts to penetrate the emotional depths of the music that he plays, but also by something audiences in formal settings do not experience, the change in the musician's expression that occurs between the first experimentations in the practice room to the final product delivered in the concert hall. It was this latter experience that persuaded me that Soheil works very hard at his art.

Indeed, he must. If nothing else, his programs show that he is dedicated to promoting the music of contemporary composers and that he programs their works as parts of long recitals in which he plays some of the most difficult pieces in the repertoire. He already has had two recitals at Weill Recital Hall this season. His recital in November featured, among other things, a world premiere by Behzad Ranjbaran. Soheil has two more this season: at Weill, one in February and another in March, 2003.

Let's start by you telling me a little bit about your family background.

My parents came to the United States in 1977 as students. They attended UCLA, from where they graduated and earned their PhDs. I was born in 1978. My parents had intended to return to Iran after completing their studies. But after the 1979 revolution, the government of Iran, which previously had awarded them scholarships to study in the United States, announced that it would no longer be supporting their studies. My parents decided that they would stay in the United States and continue their studies at UCLA, and they have been in the United States since. My mother is an immunologist, and she is an associate professor at Johns Hopkins University. My father is virologist, and he works at the National Institute of Health.

Tell me a little about your childhood.

I was born in Santa Monica, California. The story that I tell most often is that, apparently, right after my birth, as my parents were driving back from the hospital, the Blue Danube Waltz was playing on the car radio. My parents were, and are, passionate about music, so I grew up with music around me. I remember that, at my daycare center, there was a piano and I would try to play on it melodies I had heard, which included melodies like the famous theme from the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. I suppose from that point I somehow knew that I would channel my love of music through the piano. We left California at the end of the summer of 1984, and we spent the next year and a half in Rochester, New York. I started to play the piano in Rochester, at the Eastman School.

So your first formal piano lessons were at the Eastman School?

At the prep division of the Eastman School.

And after a year and a half in Rochester, where did you end up?

Menlo Park, California. My parents both were engaged in post-doctoral fel-

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lowships, first at the University of Rochester in New York, and then at Stanford University. When they went to Stanford, we lived in Menlo Park, and that was for about three and a half years.

Tell me what you remember about life in Menlo Park.

The first summer in Menlo Park I went to summer camp and I hated it. The next summer, I refused to go to summer camp. So my mother decided that she would take me with her to Stanford every day. She would leave me at the music library, where the librarians were kind enough to allow me to listen to music all day. In fact, they even gave me the scores so I could follow the music that I was listening to. And you'd be interested to know that I would often take breaks from listening to music, to play video games at the Stanford arcade. But this is when I first became familiar with a lot of the standard repertoire of classical music, such as Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* — this is where my love for *The Magic Flute* began. I also listened a lot to Beethoven's *Fourth Piano Concerto* and to his piano sonatas.

How old were you then, and did you have a piano at home throughout this time?

I was about eight years old and I had a piano.

What else do you recall from the Menlo Park years?

An odd thing I remember is that, after my first year at school in California, my teachers recommended that I be held back a year. Specifically, they wanted me to repeat second grade. I think the reason was that I was a shy kid and spoke very little. Maybe that, together with my name, led them to believe that I could not communicate well enough in English. I say this because, a year later, I saw the teacher who had recommended I be held back and, when she heard me speak, she said: "My, how much you've improved in a year; a year ago, you could barely speak English at all." That was odd because the only language I had ever spoken throughout my life was English.

Have you ever thought of

learning Persian?

Yes. I spent a lot of time with my grandparents, none of whom spoke English, when I was a younger teenager. They would spend a good part of the year with us in the United States. I picked up things from them and I wanted to be able to speak the language. Also, there were other Iranian kids at my high school that I would have liked to speak to in Persian. But, I've always had a problem with time, and of balancing between the piano and academics. My commitment to music has meant that I've never really had the kind of free time I need to devote to learning a language, especially one that was not offered as part of our high school curriculum.

Of course, there was a period of time when I began taking Persian lessons in the Washington, D.C. area, and I started to read and write. This was when I took a break from playing the piano, and it lasted about four months. But, when I once again began devoting myself to the piano, I unfortunately did not have sufficient time to continue with my Persian lessons.

Why did you take four months off from playing the piano?

That is a long story. I was seventeen years old. Building up over a period of years, I was feeling pressure to achieve a lot as a young pianist. I previously had been enrolled in a high school that had the International Baccalaureate program, which was a very rigorous high school program that did not leave me a lot of time to practice. In school, as the pressure grew on me to achieve success as a pianist — because I had reached the age when, according to conventional wisdom, one is supposed already to have achieved success as a concert pianist — I knew I had to practice more and to learn a lot of repertoire. This belief and this pressure caused me to stop going to certain classes.

In fact, even though my academic strengths were in math and science, I failed my physics class because of insufficient attendance. I tried to work something out with the school. For example, I wanted to put together a schedule that would allow me a part time schedule, but that was not acceptable to the school. At this time, my parents started saying that I should set aside the piano for one year, get my IB diploma, and then come back to the piano once I had my degree. But, in those days, the big story was Evgeny Kissin's debut

as a concert pianist at the age of twelve. The question I was asking myself was how many years older than Kissin would I be when I entered the concert stage. This was a tremendous amount of pressure.

And so you left school?

And so I left school, yes. And I immediately started devoting 20 hours a day to the piano. I rejected the notion that there had to be 24 hours in one day. In order to get more work done, and to maintain the intensity of marathon practice sessions, I would practice for about 20 hours straight and sleep for about 10 hours. With a few hours of leeway, I was basically living 30-32 hour days. Each time I woke up, it would be 6-8 hours later than the previous day, and so I might wake up at 10 p.m. one day and 4 a.m. the next.

Your parents must have been concerned that you had left school.

Yes, very much. When I left high school, it caused a lot of tension in our household. My parents and everybody that I knew spoke to me to advise me against leaving. I made the decision over everybody's advice. But still, I think that it is the best decision I've ever made, and my parents are proud of me for making it. You only have one life and you have to do what you have a passion for doing. I really love classical music and wanted to be a concert pianist.

What did you do once you left school?

During the time of the 20 hour days, I was looking both to apply to conservatories and enter competitions. But the whole time, my ultimate priority was the concert career. I think conservatories and competitions are devices for kids who do not have a particular strategy for a concert career and they in fact may not necessarily be of any help in developing a concert career.

For example, one of the most important requirements of a concert pianist is to have a vast repertoire. With competitions, the number of pieces can be very limited. Giving priority to the idea of pursuing a concert career, in my applications for competitions and conservatories, I listed a large number of pieces that I intended to learn, many more pieces than

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what the competitions required. But it was too much music to learn all at once and I was unable to learn all of the pieces that I had stated on the various applications. So when the time came for performing at the competitions and auditions for conservatories (Juilliard, Curtis and Peabody), I was not sufficiently prepared and had to withdraw from all of them. I tried to do too much too fast.

So things were not going as well as you had hoped.

Well, for at least a few months, things were very intense, I was practicing intensely and I was developing very quickly, and I was making huge progress. But then, the pressure started growing to reach the level of a concert performer, and that was too much. I wanted too much too soon; I had taken on too much at once. I had decided to leave school so I could have more time to practice.

I thought — mistakenly and immaturity I might add — that, with all my time devoted to practicing, I could quickly begin concertizing and start my career as a performer. It turned out not to be the case, of course. I put too much pressure on myself to succeed quickly and I was not leading a normal life. As the pressure grew, and as I began to realize that what I thought could be achieved in a few months would take a few years, there was a point where I got off the high of practicing 20 hours a day. When the quick success that I had hoped for did not materialize, I became very depressed.

This was when I stopped playing the piano. At that point, I needed a break to regain my sense of time, both in the sense of the 24-hour clock, and in the sense of how much time it would take to become a concert pianist.

What did you do during those four months?

For the first couple of months, I would just watch television and movies, and I would hang out with people with whom I had nothing in common. My parents had become very worried about me, because I was out of school, I was not playing the piano, and I was doing nothing at all. So then I went to Seattle to stay with my cousins. I had visited them before and I enjoyed their company very much. My father's cousin, Majid, who is like an uncle to me, said that I was wel-

come to stay with them. This time, I went for an extended visit. I went there to stay. After a while, however, I was ready to come back.

What did you learn from this experience?

I tried to have more social contact and to lead a more balanced life.

What made you return to the piano?

There was never any doubt that I'd return to the piano. When I was seven years old, I knew that I wanted to be a concert pianist. So, even the time off and the depression did not change my conviction that I would succeed. It was just a question of doing it on my terms and deciding what path I should take to achieve that success.

How did you pursue your career after this difficult period?

I came back to Washington and I started practicing again, but at a relaxed pace, three hours a day at first. And I got more involved in social activities at this point.

What next?

We moved to Baltimore when my mother became a professor at Johns Hopkins and the Peabody School of Music is in Baltimore. At Peabody, I found a group of people, especially young musicians, with whom I had a lot in common. I was eighteen years old at this time. I was a non-degree student at Peabody, the only such student, but I spent all my time at the school.

In the fall of 1997, I started studying with Ann Schein. Under Ann Schein's watch, my technique, and my playing generally, improved dramatically. I played nearly fifty recitals at the Peabody Elderhostel, at one point even giving thirteen concerts in six weeks, and that is where I learned to play recitals. Before Peabody, I had never played the same program more than a couple of times. Now, I was playing the same program sometimes five times. And for a while, I was learning a big new piece every two weeks.

Who else have you studied with?

I played for Leon Fleisher, and he recommended that I play for some teachers in New York. Among those that heard me were Richard Goode and Peter Serkin. And that led me to Artur Schnabel's son, Karl-Ulrich. This is how it happened. Richard Goode was giving me a lesson on a Beethoven sonata when I noticed something in his technique. I asked him where he learned it. He said from Karl-Ulrich Schnabel. When I went back to Baltimore, I called Schnabel in New York and asked if he would accept me. He invited me to audition. I auditioned and he accepted me. I studied with him for the next four months. I was 20 years old at this time. What was very interesting about my time with Schnabel is that I would play something for him and then he often would remark that the first time he played that same piece for his father, it sounded the same way that I had played it. But then, he would explain the advice that his father had given him on how to play the piece. So, it was as if I was also receiving a lesson from Artur Schnabel himself.

And after Karl-Ulrich Schnabel?

I took a class at Juilliard. I had not moved to New York yet; I was staying in New Jersey with my father. I finally moved to New York in January 2000. It took me a year to come up with a concertizing strategy. My New York debut was in 2001. For the year after January 2000, I was just practicing and playing at retirement communities, which I still do. I was at the same time just trying basically to get acquainted with New York. My New York debut was on May 12, 2001, at the Liederkrantz Foundation. I played pieces by Beethoven, Leon Kirchner, and Schumann. During this time, I also got the opportunity to spend five days in London and to play for Alfred Brendel.

What did you play for him?

Beethoven's *Appassionata*.

What are your impressions of Brendel?

Meeting him was a very impressive experience. He has a very large number of books in his studio. Each book has pieces of paper inserted in it on which Brendel has written notes. He is very well read, very intellectual. A commanding

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personality. Very tall. We talked about music. I played through the first movement of the *Appassionata*. He made a couple of comments. He asked me about my teachers. We talked about musical philosophies, composers, pianists. I remember that he recommended that I look for recordings of Dinu Lipatti and Alfred Cortot.

What next in New York?

I performed four solo recitals last season (2001-02) at Weill Recital Hall. My four recitals last season meant that I was the only performer to perform four recitals in New York City. This, I believe, was made possible by my earlier struggles to learn a vast repertoire. This season (2002-03), I have another four recitals at Weill Recital Hall. This means that, in two seasons, I will have performed eight major recitals, lasting approximately 90 minutes each, and each with a different program.

Your programs this year contain a good number of world premieres. Tell me about them.

I have realized that a popular view, even among many musicians, is that classical music is over, that it is dead. There is a perception that there is nothing new to add to it. I myself was one of the people who thought so until, when I moved to New York, I met Lowell Liebermann, who is one of the most famous composers of his generation. I had heard of him before, when one of my friends had played a piece of his for me.

When I met him, my perspective changed. I decided I wanted to become personally acquainted with his music. I learned one of his pieces and I really loved it. So I learned another one. When I would play the pieces for others, I would receive a very enthusiastic response. My own outlook changed as a result. Here was a young man of 40 years who I could hang out with and who is writing his own music in his own style. He writes beautiful music that touches the soul.

My experience with Lowell Liebermann persuaded me to do everything possible to disabuse people of the idea that classical music is dead. I now try to learn as much new music as possible and I program them in my recitals. For example, this season, I am playing 13 premieres, counting Kaikhosru Sorabji's

unpublished sonata. This means that my recitals this year feature twelve premieres by living composers. The oldest, Haskell Small, is 54, the youngest, Martin Kennedy, is 24. The premieres include pieces by Behzad Ranjbaran and Richard Danielpour, both of whom are of Persian heritage. Even Sorabji, of course, was of Parsi heritage.

My view is that, if I don't perform the works of the younger generation of composers, who will? I should add that one of the great joys of performing the music of this generation is that most composers of this generation have rejected the prevailing ideas of the previous generation of composers, who perhaps took avant-gardism to an extreme that began to alienate the general public and many music-lovers. I think the music of that previous generation may have made classical music an overly intellectual exercise at the expense of its emotional content.

Which other 20th century composers are you drawn to?

I've played music by David Del Tredici, Samuel Barber, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Sergei Prokofiev, Aram Khachaturian, and Bela Bartok. There are others that I would like to play, such as Aaron Copland, Charles Ives, George Gershwin, Igor Stravinsky, and Dmitri Shostakovich. I would like to learn Pierre Boulez's sonatas because of their difficulty. But Arnold Schoenberg and Boulez have many champions. It is the younger generation that needs someone to champion their music, so that's why I focus my energies on the younger generation of composers.

You're also the president of 21st Century Classical Corporation. Tell me about that.

The basic purpose of 21st Century Classical Corporation is to refashion the current image of classical music. In the 1960s, a counterculture came about that selected rock and pop as its chosen music. It marginalized classical music and gave it the reputation of being antiquated and irrelevant. While there are a lot of great things in popular music, I think classical music should be just as popular. To build the future audiences for classical music, we want to approach kids when they are in their teens. At this stage of their lives, many have played a musical instru-

ment, but they are also at a point where they may lose interest in classical music because there are so many other cultural stimuli. We would like to convince these kids that classical music should be a major part of their life, that it will help them explore their emotions and discover their new world. Part of the difficulty is the image of classical music.

Classical music, with its reputation as an antiquated style, has to compete with Britney Spears and Mick Jagger. Our challenge is to find a way of making classical music convey and mean something that will resonate with young people in the way personalities in popular music do. There are many indications that we can do this, not the least of which is the power of classical music as an international language that inspires peace and camaraderie among people of different backgrounds. For example, Daniel Barenboim, music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and an Israeli citizen, despite a travel ban this past summer, went to the West Bank to teach master classes and perform for and meet with Palestinian children.

What has your experience been communicating with young people?

Before every major recital in New York, I go back to my old high school to play the same program. I've never seen a more enthusiastic audience. The respect and interest that they give me and the art form is unmatched, sometimes even in New York City. Many have musical training and classical music is close to them. My challenge is to make sure that they don't lose what they already have. With others who don't have that background, my challenge is to introduce them to classical music in a way that intrigues them to become more active listeners. ■

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