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Right now it's a bit like a jungle – you can end up not even knowing where you are." Kiev-born pianist Valentina Lisitsa is talking about the internet – and specifically, the path that a budding musician might just about be able to hack through it towards success. It can be a scary place, she accepts. "But for most people it's beneficial – the benefits massively outweigh any dangers or drawbacks."

And Lisitsa should know, having herself cut an astonishingly effective pathway through the internet's teeming undergrowth. In 2007 she was a little-known pianist who'd moved with her partner, also a pianist, to rural North Carolina, wondering how to kick-start her flagging career. Now, countless YouTube videos, tens of millions of views and hundreds of thousands of followers later, she's one of classical music's starriest names.

And, despite the "internet sensation" tag that still follows her more than a decade later, she's hailed very much as the real thing, a powerful, distinctively individual player with prodigious pianistic skills to match her talent for attracting online fans. And she's refreshingly honest about

her original online intentions: "For me, YouTube was about getting myself known. We can all sing in the shower, but for a musician, it's all about getting feedback from an audience. And getting an audience is probably the most difficult thing that any musician does."

It's through this innovative route (well, innovative for the classical world) that Lisitsa has found herself – perhaps ironically, perhaps inevitably – back in the more traditional environment of classical concerts, with performances right across the world. Scottish audiences get their own chance to sample her remarkable pianism at Edinburgh's Usher Hall on Sunday, when she performs Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto with the Russian State Philharmonic Orchestra under Valery Polyansky, part of a ten-stop UK tour.

You get the feeling, though, that she's still not entirely comfortable with old-fashioned concert traditions. "Somehow classical music lagged behind with new advances," she says. "It became very calcified in some ways. There are certain people who want to keep classical music for the privileged, for those who can understand and appreciate all its small details.

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More importantly, however, she feels these kind of rigid conventions can simply be alienating. "For people new to concerts, it's a shock, because they don't know how to behave – it's like travelling to a different culture and not knowing what to do, and feeling like everyone is watching you."

Lisitsa seldom holds back with her strong opinions, and there's plenty in her criticisms of traditional concert etiquette that should prick the consciences of anybody who's tut-tutted at a newbie. Behind her refreshing directness, however, Lisitsa is also an astute, driven businesswoman – even if she's been surprised by her own online success. "I'm a very unlikely torchbearer for these new platforms," she says. "If you'd asked me ten years ago if I'd ever become so famous on YouTube, I'd have said: zero chance. But of course there's a business side to the music business. And communicating with fans is simply part of customer service. An airline will have a Twitter account to interact with passengers, for



↑ Valentina Lisitsa, main and above after a concert at the Royal Albert Hall in 2012 which was live-streamed

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example, and it's the same for me."

Talk of Twitter ushers in discussion of a more controversial side to Lisitsa's online activities. She makes no secret of her political views, her vocal support for Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine, and her vilification of the Ukrainian government, sometimes in incendiary and even hair-raising terms. It famously got her dropped by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra from concerts in 2015.

Why does she even voice these opinions? Why not go for a quiet life? Surprisingly,

she gives a nervous laugh.

"Looking back, many people have told me: just shut up!"

So why doesn't she? "There are some musicians who are purely musicians, and others who are engaged as human beings." You might guess which camp Lisitsa feels she falls into. "Someone like Richard Strauss always said he was just about pure music – but he was still accused of passively collaborating with the Nazis because he didn't speak out against them. On the other hand, a composer like Shostakovich could have just shut up and worked with the Soviet state. But he didn't – and he had trouble all his life as a result. He wasn't afraid of saying what he felt in his music – and when people heard it, they understood."

It's perhaps not surprising that Lisitsa identifies with one of Russian music's iconic figures – and it's another, equally iconic Russian composer that she explores in her Edinburgh concert. With Rachmaninov, however, Lisitsa admits to having a complex relationship. It was with a self-financed CD of his four piano concertos with the London Symphony Orchestra that she launched herself onto the international stage. But equally, she's posted a short YouTube video entitled "I Hate Rachmaninov", in which she explains how she resented narrow perceptions of his music as a student under pressure to compete in music competitions. "I thought I understood him early on," she explains, "but with age and

life experience, everything changes."

Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto, which she plays in her Usher Hall concert, is notorious as one of the piano repertoire's most challenging pieces. "Yes, but its difficulties aren't just in the notes – although there are so many of them, and so many big chords," Lisitsa explains. "It's more difficult emotionally – it's like a whole life in a piece of music. It's like one of the big roles in the theatre – like every actor dreams of playing Hamlet. It's important for musicians to see how they measure up to this larger-than-life masterpiece."

And how does she feel she measures up herself? She points to her long and ever-changing relationship with the Concerto, and with

Rachmaninov's music more broadly. "As you go through life, you realise that you don't only play the composer – the music becomes part of your own history, so there's always part of you in it too. The piece will change for me throughout my life. Very close to the end of his life, Rachmaninov himself said it was a pity because he'd only just figured out how to play his own music, and now he had to go. I can agree with that too."

● *Valentina Lisitsa performs Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto with the Russian State Philharmonic Orchestra under conductor Valery Polyansky at the Usher Hall, Edinburgh, on Sunday, 3pm. For tickets from £12.50 see www.tickets.usherhall.co.uk*