

What Would You Do For a Chance?

By: Matthew Mayer, SoloPiano.com



It's 1984 in Los Angeles, California, hosting city of the Olympic Games. The media waves flood with news of the Soviet Union and several other countries boycotting the Games. Back in the Soviet Union, stands a six-year-old girl with her mother in the cold. The sun has not been up long enough for any warmth to reach them...they are in a line for a chance to buy some milk and bread.

Standing in line in the morning cold....for a 'chance'.

It's 1993, in the streets of Moscow. A political stand off begins between Russian President, Boris Yeltsin and the Russian Parliament. The 10 days of military force becomes the deadliest single event of street fighting in Moscow's history since revolutions dating back to 1917.

That same girl, now 15 years old, is packing up with her family and leaving the now dissolved USSR to the United States to start a new life.

22 years later to the month, I arrive to meet this girl...stepping out of my rental, arriving to Oksana's home in Beverly Hills, California. Greeted with warmth and hospitality by Alex (Oksana's husband) and 6 year old Alessandro (who anxiously shows off his Mickey Mouse covered ipad), the genuine spirit of Oksana's family is radiant.

After a very pleasant exchange of how wonderful it was to meet face-to-face followed by a comparison of my ipad (with the plain cover on it) and Alessandro's....we jump right into our interview. I am intrigued to understand the life of pianist and composer, Oksana Kolesnikova.

MATTHEW: Oksana, thank you so much for taking the time to share your story with us at SoloPiano.com. It's a pleasure to finally meet you and your beautiful family!

OKSANA: The pleasure is actually all mine. I have been a big fan of yours and of SoloPiano.com for over six years, and I can't tell you how excited I am that we finally met face-to-face.

MATTHEW: Oksana, you were born in Barnaul, Altai Siberia, USSR, and lived there up to the break-up of the Soviet Union. Can you tell us your experiences/memories living there, and how did the piano form your upbringing?

OKSANA: Oh, Matthew...Those were probably the most trying experiences of my life. I remember being about six years old, staying in long lines with my mom in the freezing cold as early as five in the morning just to have a chance to buy some milk and some bread...everyone pushing you in order to get some of the essentials of life we now all take for granted. Really tough times. The piano was an escape, both from the realities of life as well as the very harsh weather. I used to find much comfort in playing it even in the beginning.

MATTHEW: You made the journey to the United States (St. Petersburg, Florida) at the age of 15. What was one of the most exciting and difficult things you and your family had to go through in moving to a new country?

OKSANA: The most exciting thing was the warmth of the American people with how they welcomed us. Even without speaking the language, it was like being reunited with long lost family. Let alone the excitement of walking inside a Publix Supermarket and see all of the amazing goods so available... I had never seen such an abundance, and so easily affordable until I came to the U.S. The most challenging thing was... Communication. I barely spoke any English when I first moved here, so I found myself very challenged. But I'm resilient by nature, so I managed to master the language in a

very short time and so 'fit in' with the rest of my school mates. Even in the infant stage of our interview, I am reminded how easily my own gratitudes on 'the simple things in life' can slip from my mind. As I continue to talk with Oksana, I attempt to put myself in her shoes, on that journey to another country at such a young age, and yet turning to the piano as a continued "non changing" and constant support through her journey.

MATTHEW: When did you know that piano was something you wanted to pursue as a career?

OKSANA: I believe it was when I won the Florida State Young Artists Symposium Competition while studying at Saint Petersburg College in Florida, which granted me a full scholarship to attend Florida State University School of Music. That's when I realized that all the years of hard work at the piano were starting to pay off, and so I caught on the momentum and never let go of it from there on out. Coincidentally, at the same time, I met the love of my life, my husband of 15 years (as of 2015) who embraced my dreams and made them his own.

Getting to speak to Oksana's husband, I quickly can see how he too made Oksana's dream his own.

MATTHEW: In 2003, you became the first Russian-American female pianist to travel overseas to entertain the U.S Troops. What was it like traveling to all of those countries, and sharing your gifts to those sacrificing so much?

OKSANA: Performing for the US troops was an amazing privilege. I cherish and respect the brave men and women who protect my newfound home, so you can only imagine how special I felt every time I had the opportunity of taking their minds away from their tough days and give them an hour or two of joy. I traveled as far as Guam, Singapore, Rota, Spain, Okinawa, sometime in a 7-person military aircraft, but let me tell you, those are among my fondest memories that make me so proud of contributing to those who give me so much.

MATTHEW: You moved to Los Angeles in 2006. How did you get your piano music out to others in a town and industry that can be known to be hard knocks on those who may not have an "in" or "connections"?

OKSANA: Los Angeles is an amazing city but is equally unforgiving. Anyone with some kind of talent flocks to this metropolis in search of fortune and fame. I was no different.

My husband and I packed our van with the essentials, put our beautiful home in Florida for sale, and set sails towards LA, not knowing a soul and without any financial backing, other than the one generated by our own efforts. The beginnings were very tough, and only we know what we went through. We knocked on every single door looking for opportunities to play, and I can't count the times those doors were closed on our faces. But going back to Florida was not an option. We kept knocking on doors until some finally started to open. We somehow managed to get an agent who secured a five days a week gig at the legendary Polo Lounge at the Beverly Hills Hotel, and that's when things started to take a more positive turn.

As I Reflected on this part of Oksana's and my interview, her insights provided a valuable nugget to anyone that wants to

know the "How to make it" in the music industry. People want to know "How did you get this gig?" "How did you manage to do that?" Was it a person, was it luck? How? Oksana's story unfolds to me as one of hustle, one of very hard work, one of getting up when getting knocked down, and one of.... 'chance'.

MATTHEW: You were a regular performer at he Polo Lounge at The Beverly Hills Hotel. I understand you had a "special exchange" with Sir Elton John during one of your performances:)? Can you tell us about that?

OKSANA: Meeting Sir Elton John was as special as it was coincidental. I'll never forget it.. Especially since I have been an

Elton John fan since my Russia days. One day I was playing "Your Song" when Lo and behold right in the middle of it, I look up and Elton John himself is walking in toward the piano. We look at each other being aware of the total coincidence, he graciously smiles, walks up to me and says "Nice song, isn't it?". I'm nervous but smile back at him and say "it sure is", as he decides to sit at the table right next to the piano. I had one more hour to go before the end of my shift so you can only imagine the pressure in hoping to appease such a refined musician. But being brave by nature, I decide to finish my set with his gorgeous "Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word", one of my personal favorite Elton John songs. As I was leaving the piano, he stood up, gave me a hug and told me "You played beautifully, love". I was in the seventh heaven.

MATTHEW: For 7 years you performed regularly at the Polo Lounge. What valuable things did you learn during

I learned that people are people, regardless of their celebrity status, and that most are receptive to the arts, my music especially



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that time working and performing at such an iconic place in Hollywood?

OKSANA: I played at the Polo Lounge daily since mid 2006 until 2013. During that time, I performed for just about every Hollywood A-lister, from Oprah Winfrey to Angelina Jolie, to Arnold Schwarzenegger to White House officials. I learned that people are people, regardless of their celebrity status, and that most are receptive to the arts, my music especially. It was not unusual to get compliments on my music (and my hair!) from hardcore critics such as the late Joanne Rivers, or get a high five from an accomplished producer such as David Foster. People are people, and I love everyone regardless of their status.

MATTHEW: You do much more than just performing. You also are the Founder and Owner of the Oksana School of Music in Beverly Hills. Can you tell us how the Oksana School of Music came about?

OKSANA: Oksana School of Music came about as a direct result of my seven years at the Polo Lounge. More and more Polo Lounge clients started asking me for private piano lessons, so one thing led to another and Oksana School of music was born. Now, a few years later, we count about 40 amazing teachers in our team, teaching primarily piano, voice, guitar and violin.

MATTHEW: You have been a piano teacher for several well known Actors and Producers. Can you tell us those who you have taught, and who has been your favorite "student" so far?

OKSANA: Oh Matthew... All of my students are my 'favorite'. As long as they have a genuine passion for music, I welcome everyone. Sure, some highlights such as teaching piano to Kim Kardashian come to mind, but overall I can honestly say that I enjoy teaching each and every one of my students.

As we continued to chat, I couldn't help but notice a beautiful baby grand piano in the corner, which I was sitting next to. It was not like any other I've seen so had to inquire about it.

MATTHEW: What is the story behind this stunning red baby grand piano you have here in your beautiful home?

OKSANA: That's a really cool story... About six months ago I was introduced to Nicolas Cage's ex, Christina Fulton. We hit it off extremely well and became close friends in a very short time. Christina confided that for years she had been trying to find a good home to her Ferrari-red grand piano, a gift she received for her birthday by her then fiancé Nicolas Cage. When I saw the piano, I immediately fell in love with it. That's the same piano that was played by Nicolas Cage himself, as well as stars such as Johnny Depp, Jim Carrey, her own son Weston Coppola Cage and many others. While it was appraised at \$75K, Christina was kind enough to practically donate this beauty to Oksana School of Music, where it's continuing to be played by celebrities and their children.

MATTHEW: What is your advice for anyone who has a "passion" and wants to pursue that as their life work?

OKSANA: Never Give Up. No matter how tough things may get, you need to have the persistence to push through any and all barriers. There's always the light at the end of the tunnel.

MATTHEW: What is your most favorite composition, and tell us the story behind it?

OKSANA: The Voice of Life. That's the song I wrote in 2000 for my husband, and premiered it at my wedding, right after we exchanged our rings. Funny enough, my husband surprised me this year with an EDM version of it, skillfully interpreted by Arielle Peri, a wonderful singer and songwriter. Most everyone who heard it said it could be the soundtrack

to a James Bond movie. Both versions are on my YouTube channel, 'Oksanabella'.

Of course, we always like to do some speed round questions!

MATTHEW: Favorite Book?

OKSANA: I have too many favorite books to list, but to give you an idea of my preferences, I am a big fan of Anthony Robbins and Robert Kiyosaki, I think I read all of their books.

MATTHEW: Favorite Food?

OKSANA: My husband's Italian cuisine. I am treated to fine dining meals every single night.

MATTHEW: Favorite Movie?

OKSANA: The Matrix



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MATTHEW: If you could have dinner with one person in the world, who would it be and why?

OKSANA: Probably Donald Trump. I'd like to personally 'grill' him on all the issues he's so controversial about, and so form my own idea if he's indeed full of it or maybe just maybe he can back up his 9 billion net worth with equal value in human matters. I learned to sense 'baloney' from miles away, and if I were able to meet with him face to face, I would know exactly where he stands.

MATTHEW: Thanks so much for your valuable time, Oksana and welcoming me into your home!

OKSANA: Mi casa es tu casa. We have to do it again!

As we wrap up our time together, Oksana, her husband, and little Alessandro walk me out to the car. Their goodbye was as warm as their welcome.

I start up my car with a 15-minute destination to the Pacific Ocean for a sun setting jog. I get to the coast, park at Gladstone's Restaurant, change into my running gear (yes in the car) and plug in the headphones as the ocean smell takes me back in time. During my run to the Santa Monica Pier (the exact run I took the very first weekend I had first moved to LA over a decade ago, but that's another story....) there was a question that I kept repeating to myself from my time with Oksana. That question was this...

What would you do for a "Chance"?

There are still people in our world that have to stand in a cold line for a "chance" to buy that milk and bread.

There are people of all kinds getting in their car giving up their comfort zone in travels to their dreams for a "chance".

Essentially, much of life is....taking chances. And the beauty of our life is we have the choice....to take that chance.

There was a beautiful young girl who travelled to a new country for a "chance"...and her choosing to take that chance has led to the sharing of talents to people around the world, and a life of dreams only the mind of a 15-year-old girl can have.

Thanks for taking that chance, Oksana!



To touch lives on a universal stage

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