

When he was 6-years-old and living in Chernihiv, Ukraine, Illia Ovcharenko's mother took him to hear a performance of Tchaikovsky's first piano concerto. After the concert, Illia told his mother he wanted to be a pianist when he grew up.

Today, just a dozen years later, Illia Ovcharenko is one of the world's most celebrated young pianists, playing concerts all over the world.

Most recently, he won the Honens International Piano Competition in Calgary, Canada—a competition that seeks to identify the “Complete Artist”—someone who demonstrates technical mastery, perseverance against adversity, and an understanding of musical text that is both intellectual and emotional. He's also won top prizes at the Busoni and Horowitz competitions.

There wasn't a lot of music in Illia's household when he was growing up. Mom is a computer engineer, and Dad is an athlete and coach. But, there was an old upright piano in the corner of the living room, and Illia started plunking away as soon as he could reach the keys. He took singing lessons at 6-years-old, began formal piano studies at 9, and gave his first concert at 12 on the stage of the National Philharmonic of Ukraine.

His parents weren't sure music was a terrific career path, but they encouraged his success. At 13, Illia went to study in Kyiv at a special high school for gifted musicians and later moved to Tel Aviv. He's currently living in Hannover, Germany, where he's finishing a master's program with his longtime mentor, Arie Vardi.

For Illia, the piano is a real friend, sometimes filling him with joy, sometimes serving as a painkiller. The piano reveals who he is, to himself and to an audience.

He thrives on live performance, feeling as if two souls—his and the composer's—are united together on stage. He's most at home playing romantic repertoire.

Off the stage, Illia loves athletics (Roger Federer is an idol) and practices origami.

In the future, Illia hopes to combine teaching with an international touring career. He's played with La Monnaie Symphony in Brussels, Jerusalem Symphony, and l'Orchestre National d'Île de France. Highlights of the 2023/24 season include debuts with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Liechtenstein Symphony, and Haifa Symphony, as well as return engagements with the Calgary Philharmonic. Illia is scheduled to perform at Koerner Hall in Toronto, Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, Sendesaal in Hannover, Robert-Schumann-Saal in Düsseldorf, and Salle Bourgie in Montréal in the upcoming season.

“I'm so happy when people hear me play and say I brought something new to their life or let them forget about their current troubles,” he says. “Playing the piano is usually a much better way of communicating since there is something intimate involved in this process.”