

## Shelter

by Toni Schlesinger

### Music Room

She plays, the squirrels come, and the birds gather on the tree branch

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Katya Grineva  
(photo: Cary Conover)

**LOCATION** Yorkville  
**RENT** \$1,009 [rent-stabilized]  
**SQUARE FEET** 335 [studio in tenement]  
**OCCUPANT** Katya Grineva [concert pianist]

**Your piano is half your apartment.** For a while I had two pianos here. I had another Steinway. It was white. It was kind of a gift. But the people wanted it back. I play Chopin, Mozart. I invite people here before I play big concerts at Lincoln Center. I'm playing November 30. They sit on the floor. It's everybody's favorite thing. I make borscht, something creative. I have a special sponsor, Bellefon. I play a lot in France. It's a kind of French champagne.

**Champagne and borscht.** No, *caviar*. I will play for you Chopin, "Fantasie-Impromptu." It's the piece I play for the encore of every concert. I give you my encore. [*She plays.*]

**There's really not much to say. [Pause] But then there is. When you play, the walls disappear and the sound takes you away, beyond the room into a music dream, a huge rolling space, a musical infinity.** It's true! I'm playing also "Andante Spianato," so uplifting and full of life and it takes you to a completely different realm.

You know when you experience ecstasy and freedom. That's what people want to feel all the time but it's difficult. Before Carnegie Hall last year, I invited 15 people over and they said they actually felt they had been on a trip to the Pacific.

**Do your neighbors mind that you practice or are they happy?** Most people work. I always practice in the morning. My apartment faces the garden. I have squirrels in the backyard. There is this big tree. Very often I see tons of birds sitting on the branch. I wonder if it's the music that attracts them.

**They feel the emotion.** I used to be in the front of the building. My friends Lily and John, they loved it. They used to invite friends over for cocktails. We would open the doors. We were always joking that we would break down the wall. They moved to Guam and that's why I go to play concerts there. It's a big American base. People are from all over the world. I won an award in Guam, all because of my neighbors.

**When did you come from Russia?** I came here 15 years ago. I was living here for five years with an American family who kind of adopted me. By accident I met this lady who invited me for dinner. At the time, I thought I should move. I said, I wish I could live here and be your neighbor. She called me the next morning and said someone in the building was moving out. I've been here a long time. It's a charming neighborhood. I come home and my landlord will always come out and give me a kiss and say, Are you making money? Are you making money? I am away and they fix my bathroom. The landlord does a better job than any doorman. He's an Italian guy from Sicily. He holds packages for me in the barber shop. His brother came to my Carnegie Hall concert last year.

**I was just thinking about the puce, ah, mushroom-colored walls in the hallway here, not unlike the hallways of thousands of people and artists in tenements in the city. Such a contrast to the glamorous concert halls. You have a stuffed dalmatian. [We pat its head.]** My father brought it for me after my dog died. My parents visit twice a year. I studied piano by accident. It was because of my neighbors. They were taking their children to register in the music school. They asked my mother if she would let me go for the walk. I went along. They accepted me into the music school. My parents bought for me a German upright. I loved that instrument. There was something so mysterious about it. My mother said, Now, don't worry. If you decide you don't want to play, we'll sell it. I played all the time. I didn't want them to sell it.