

---

**August 3, 2008****DVD**

## **Once-Shy Pianist Tells, Um, Not Quite All**

**By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER**

WHEN the reclusive Argentine pianist [Martha Argerich](#) performs, her long, thick hair cascades over her shoulders, often entirely obscuring her face from the audience and affording a glimmer of privacy even onstage.

Ms. Argerich, who for almost two decades gave very few solo recitals, has always felt uneasy in the spotlight offstage as well. "I just saw a program called 'Big Brother,' " she says at the beginning of "Martha Argerich: Evening Talks," a 2002 film by Georges Gachot newly released on DVD by the Medici Arts label. "All those exhibitionists who like their private lives filmed. Not me."

But Ms. Argerich, a brilliant musician whose playing combines prodigious technique with uncanny musicality, overcame her shyness and granted Mr. Gachot a three-hour interview. It was shot one evening in 2001 between a rehearsal and a performance of Schumann's Piano Concerto with the Württemberg Chamber Orchestra in Heilbronn, Germany.

According to the DVD booklet Mr. Gachot had been trying to obtain such an interview for more than 20 years. "Evening Talks," in which Ms. Argerich, 67, chats candidly in French and English, is billed as the first film about her. Intimate, close-up interview shots are interspersed with archival footage, from her teenage victory at the Geneva International Music Competition in 1957 to solo, chamber and concerto appearances as recent as 2001.

Ms. Argerich recalls her first musical epiphany. She was 6, at a concert with her mother, listening to Claudio Arrau play [Beethoven](#)'s Piano Concerto No. 4. The trills in the second movement gave her goose bumps. "I was dozing off, and suddenly," she says with a sharp intake of breath, experienced "an electric shock." Ms. Argerich refuses to play the concerto, she says, because "I'm afraid what would happen, it's so important to me."

At 9, before performing a [Mozart](#) concerto, she knelt down and thought, "If I hit one wrong note, I'll die." That sense of perfection stayed with her.

"I always doubt," she says. "I'm always groping. If you're too pleased with what you've done, or you get into a routine, that's the worst. Sometimes I go out on a limb, so it doesn't happen."

Ms. Argerich candidly recalls the crisis of loneliness she experienced in her midteens after winning both the Geneva competition and the Ferruccio Busoni International Piano Competition in Bolzano, Italy. "I was terribly shy," she says. "It was dismal. I was in quite a state. Then when I was 19 or 20, I went through a crisis." She spent a few years in New York watching late-night television.

Ms. Argerich, whose last-minute cancellations have disappointed fans, describes her first cancellation, at 17 in Florence. She was not unwell, she says, but thought she "didn't want to play." So she sent a telegram to the concert organizers saying she had hurt her finger. She then took a knife and cut her finger, so "it would be true." The wound was so bad it also prevented her from playing a concert the next week.

Like other legendary performers, including the cellist Pablo Casals and the pianist Vladimir Horowitz, Ms. Argerich has suffered from stage fright. "Sometimes I was in terrible panics," she says ruefully. "I'd imagine the worst things, imagine a full hall. It's terrible." Her knees would tremble so forcibly, she says, that her feet would inadvertently bang on the floor, and she suffered chills and runny noses.

When she was young, Ms. Argerich's nearsightedness was also problematic. She didn't have contact lenses at the time and didn't want to wear glasses onstage. So the piano looked "like crocodile's teeth," she says, and the bright lights made her feel "like an insect." The film doesn't touch on other aspects of her personal life, like her marriages to the conductor [Charles Dutoit](#) and the pianist Stephen Kovacevich, her three daughters or her recurring bouts with cancer, which began in the 1990s.

The film offers footage of Ms. Argerich, who often laughs during the interview, performing the composers she discusses. During a rehearsal of Schumann's Piano Concerto she vociferously argues in German with Jörg Faerber, the conductor, dismissing his suggestions.

"I prefer not to fool with Schumann," she says. "But I think he likes me." She describes performing Liszt and Chopin in the same recital: "The Liszt Sonata would be fine but not the Chopin Preludes. So I'd say, 'He's a little jealous.'" As for Prokofiev, she says with a laugh: "He's very fond of me. He's never played any dirty tricks on me." A night owl, Ms. Argerich claims that she learned Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 by osmosis, while sleeping during the day in the same room where her roommate practiced.

[Daniel Barenboim](#) once told Ms. Argerich she was "like a beautiful painting without a frame." This film offers fans an insightful, unguarded portrait. VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

---

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)