

Интервью**Interview**

Oleg Polyansky: About Piano Technique and Pedagogical Work*

Oleg, you are a winner of many competitions and a concert performer. You were born in Kiev and studied in Moscow. For the first time you achieved renown particularly in Russia as a winner of the P. I. Tchaikovsky Competition. Why did you, nonetheless, move to Cologne?

It turned out that way by chance! I had a girl, a violinist, who had studied at the Moscow Conservatory with Professor Maya Glezarova. She went to Leipzig to the J. S. Bach Competition. I also went there as an accompanist. We did not pass onto the finale, we played only on the second tour of the competition. But the jury included Sashko Gavrilov, a Professor of the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz Köln, who invited my girl, Susanna Grigoryan, to study in his class. I came to Cologne in 1993 for company. I also enrolled into the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz Köln, into the class of Professor Pavel Gililov. This is how we ended up in Cologne, where I still live.

As a performer do you establish contact with the audiences in the hall during your performances? Do you feel the reaction of the public, and does it inspire you?

The process of establishing the contact with the audience in the hall during a concert is very difficult to explain. But without this mastery over the hall, which implies a certain magic, cannot have a good concert. I had experience of performances in China. I tried to play in a concentrated manner, to exert influence emotionally and spiritually, as if by means of hypnosis, but nothing came out of this. The audiences in China in most cases are not prepared for perception of a culture alien to them, notwithstanding the fact that there is an immense

interest in European music, and the government invests a great deal in culture. In other words, it must be acknowledged that the public must be educated, prepared, or else there would be no contact with the hall.

You tour a lot around the world, have been to various countries, and you frequently come to Russia. What can you say about the audiences attending concert halls? Where are the most grateful listeners?



The best listeners are those who come to concerts to receive a supersensitive charge and human warmth from performance of music. It is impossible to substitute alive concert with listening to recordings of various compositions at home. Thankful listeners may be present in different countries of the world, but most often these comprise educated listeners. I would not like to single

out any countries, but, nonetheless, I must mention Europe, USA, Japan, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in this regard. Usually these countries have a very perceptible audience, many people having a good grasp of music, who do not necessarily have to be musicians.

I love to perform in concerts in Russia. In Russia there is for the most part an educated and intelligent audience with high artistic and musical demands, so there do exist people who have the capacity of being “hypnotized” by a performance. My most fortunate performance in my life was the performance at the second tour of the Tchaikovsky Competition in 1998. I was especially pleased with the second movement of Schubert’s Sonata in A major, and my rendition of it even extracted applause after the slow and tragic movement. It was there that the most intensive conquest over the hall in my life took place!

* Translated by Dr. Anton Rovner.



How is the repertoire for your concert tours formed: do you have any particular professional strategy?

Usually my program includes four different styles: Classicism, Romanticism, Impressionism and 20th century music. I especially love playing Debussy. I always try learning new repertoire, love to remember previously learned repertoire and always interpret it somewhat differently.

Only twice during my life I performed a program of compositions by a single composer: it consisted of the most popular Sonatas by Beethoven – the “Patethique,” the “Moonlight,” the “Tempest” and the “Apassionata.” And there was also a program of compositions by Franz Liszt: 6 Transcendental Etudes, the Don Juan Fantasy, the 12th Rhapsody and a few other pieces, performed in commemoration of the bicentennial from the composer’s birthday.

How many hours a day does a concert pianist laureate, who in addition has to deal with students of the most different ages and levels of preparations practice?

I taught at the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz Köln in 2007–2012. Presently I am trying to perform as many concerts as possible and give master classes.

I practice 3–4 hours a day on the average. During an intensive concert tour, I can play up to 6–7 hours a day, frequently practicing at night, when it is possible to concentrate easier.

Piano technique in the conditions of mass professional musical education (intermediary and advance) to a certain degree reminds a conveyor. How do you evaluate the Russian academic education?

Piano technique, whenever it is present is always a very good thing! Upon the possession of “piano technique” it is possible to pursue artistic goals in music, but piano technique is not only dexterity of fingers. I remember myself at the first course of the Gnesins’ Institute: all the piano students of the first course had to perform a Partita or Suite by Bach. During the process of preparation of a concrete complex composition, namely, the Sixth Partita, they were able to acquire at one an entire aggregate of skills of playing the piano: Bach’s articulation,

playing in the Baroque style, as well as contrapuntal hearing. I am very grateful for these revelations to my teacher Alexander Alexandrov. He led me in the many things I had to know in order to learn such ingenious music. I find such a “Soviet” method of tests with concrete musical subject matter to be very useful for the development of young musicians!

Can you name any distinctive features of teaching piano technique in Germany, Europe, in Asia?

In the pianistic upbringing of performers from Asia – Japan, Korea, China – I practically never have to engage in technical issues, but they do have some problems with perception of European musical culture in general, the problem of awakening human emotions during the performance of the music. In Germany and in Europe in general some students encounter problems with piano technique, sometimes even certain defects in their technique, but at the same time their perception of music is diversified and without clichés.

One of the steadfast traditions gaining considerable dynamics each year in the whole world is the mania for competitions. What is it – an illness, a drug supporting self-esteem and vanity, or a necessary form of upbringing for the performer?

Competitions discipline young musicians. Without them there are few chances to take a hold on the concert stage. But in the West many musicians manage to make their careers without competitions. This requires support of other factors: certainly, musical talent, luck, connections in the musical world, finances for public promotion. During the last few years I myself have worked as a member of the jury of piano competitions in Russia, Korea and Greece. I am for fair adjudication on competitions!

An important question is the one concerning development of technique. Have you been taught dexterity of fingers in some special manner, or have you acquired your mastery through your work on the repertoire?

Unfortunately, in my young years as a pianist I had not exerted enough attention to physical difficulties, being quite lazy in terms of playing scales, arpeggios, etudes and other constructive



compositions, and only towards the age of 30 I understood that this was a mistake. One must deal with technique on any musical instrument seriously. But in my childhood I was simply very busy: concurrently I studied the cello and also became involved in football and table tennis. At the same time, I put a lot of time into sight-reading – this also greatly develops technique and musical intuition. So it could be said that virtuosity developed by itself in my playing. Professor Alexander Alexandrov demanded from me first of all physiological freedom. With any kind of physiological impact it becomes impossible to play in a virtuosic manner and with a good, warm and speaking sound.

When working on articulation with students, do you involve demonstration of your own playing during your lessons? Does this not form imitateness, lack of independence of actions and thinking?

I love demonstrating performance at the instrument. I love explaining questions related to pianistic technique, at the same time attempting to develop musical logic and thinking in my students, so that they could perform music on the piano as if in an orchestra.

What are your impressions from international competitions? What would you like to wish to their future participants?

The most important thing in competitions is to be well-posed, technical, to play within the frameworks of the style, not to try to strike a line for oneself, – all of this presumes a certain amount of uniformity of performance, but real talent will always stand out in this case.

Among my wishes to young participants of competitions: to love music, to learn to influence the public musically, to expand your opportunities for performances on stage.

And the concluding question: what do you think, what determines to the greatest extent the destiny and the bright future of a young performer: what comes from God, or, among things, from the teacher?

The teacher, of course, presents a very important element; frequently the teacher must sacrifice a lot in order to bring up a great artist. Talent is also extremely important. Otherwise, the public would not attend the concerts of this artist.

Usually those musicians concertize and play on stage who cannot live without this!

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