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Feature Article by Christopher Brodersen

A Conversation with Pianist Daria Rabotkina

Your bio says that you received a D.M.A. from the Eastman School of Music. I'm wondering if you knew a pianist who recently retired from the Eastman faculty named Rebecca Penneys.

Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, I was just reading your recent interview with her in *Fanfare*. I enjoyed that very much.

Great. Did you happen to study with her at all?

Not really. My teacher there was Natalya Antonova. Somehow our paths never crossed while I was at Eastman. But what she was talking about really made sense.

She's very dedicated to pedagogy, as I imagine you are, too.

Yes. Quite a bit.

Reading your bio, it says that you were born in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan. I confess that I had to look that up in order to understand where it is.

This summer, I think, people were a lot more aware of Kazan, due to the FIFA tournament being held there.

Ah, yes.

And I was there during that time! But yes, my native city is just an amazing example of how science, business, and the arts can coexist.

One fact that comes to mind right away is that our wonderful Opera and Ballet Theater and the Kazan Music Conservatory, both opened in 1945, right at the war's end. If you think about the war and what state Russia was in at that time, it's really incredible that the city pulled off this kind of project. I still don't understand how it was possible, but they did it.

It said in the Wikipedia article that Kazan is the sixth largest city in Russia. Is that right?

Yes, it's quite large. It's also quite independent, compared with other cities in Russia.

When did you leave Russia?

I wouldn't say I ever left Russia. I do live in the U.S. most of the time, but I still feel myself being a part of Russia. I really cannot think in terms of having left. I did come to the States to study, in 1999. Since then, I've spent most of my time here. I feel at home in both countries.

That was when you came to study at the Mannes College of Music, correct?

Yes—now it's called the Mannes School of Music, I believe. I came to study with Vladimir Feltsman and spent five years in his studio. That was quite a change for me; I was quite sheltered before that. The liberation of being alone and making my own decisions, and especially discovering music in my own way, was fantastic.

I imagine so. Was that the first time you had been outside of Russia for any length of time?

Oh, no. I had been concertizing outside of Russia since I was 11. But I was never on my own.

So this was the first time that you went to study abroad, entirely on your own, without any parents or family behind you. You were living in New York City by yourself, then?

Yes. I have to say that it was at times overwhelming, dealing with the language and everything. But I never felt scared or in danger. I loved being in the city. Maybe this was just the silliness of youth, but I felt very comfortable in that position.

Good for you. New York City is quite a place for such a leap.

Yes. But I was busy with the things I had to learn: acquiring new language skills in a very short amount of time and studying new music.

When we think of Russian pianists, we tend to think of the "thunder and lightning" of such performers as Sviatoslav Richter or Emil Gilels. Looking at your new CD titled Humoresques, which by the way I enjoyed very much, the genre of humoresque is not something I would normally associate with Russian pianists. What prompted you to record a disc of humoresques?

Well, I like thinking about interesting works and how they can fit together into a program. This CD pushed me a little outside my usual boundary—not completely, but enough to enjoy the challenge. For a long time, I've been combining pieces that you wouldn't ordinarily find on the same program. For example, I played a recital that combined John Dowland, Bach, and Couperin with one of my father's pieces, so that was a program of "the old and the new."



After I had the Schumann *Humoresque* solidly in my repertoire for a number of years, it became a very special piece for me. I feel that it's a kind of diary of Schumann's life. I had the feeling in a way that it was my *own* diary, because it resonated so well with me.

After a while, it was just time to record it! It had ripened enough to be shared. The next question was, what to pair it with? I didn't want to detract from the piece, nor did I want to record a "monochromatic" CD, using the music of a single composer.

A disc of just humoresques for piano—I thought, "There is no way that anyone has done this before!" I looked around and couldn't find any previous recordings with that particular combination. And so that's how the idea came about. I have to say, I didn't know much about Dvořák's humoresques, other than the famous one, number seven. I became aware of Reger's humoresques when my husband played them a while ago. And of course, the Rachmaninoff *Humoresque* I knew from a long time ago. They all just sort of fit together perfectly. It also turned out to be a great combination for a recital program.

So you presented this live before you recorded it?

Well, yes. I have performed this program numerous times live, because I don't believe in recording "dry," without testing it in front of an audience. My goal is to deliver and preserve that precious sense of a live performance. I want to achieve the feeling of spontaneity, even unpredictability.

Right.

That's why I needed to know how audiences would react to this program first, so that I could shape it in the right way.

I confess that I'm not familiar with the piano music of Dvořák, and I imagine audiences aren't either—other than his chamber music with piano, of course. Are you perhaps drawn to Dvořák because he's a Slavic composer and there's some affinity there?

Well, there's that, of course. But I'm primarily drawn to the colors he achieved in his chamber music with piano, and especially in these little pieces. It's his sense of the perfect miniature that amazes me. It's how warm and nostalgic he can make you feel inside, within a short time.

Judging from his musical markings, Dvořák was a very precise composer. Rarely is there anything accidental in his writing. It all makes sense—you know what I mean? It feels quite natural, the way he conceived these images. They're so realistically drawn that they seem to be right in front of you.

Could you imagine how Dvořák composed these pieces, perhaps follow his compositional thought process?

Just before he composed the *Humoresques* he was quite immersed in his duties as the director of the National Conservatory in the U.S. He was travelling back and forth a lot between New York, Bohemia, and the Czech settlement in Spillville, Iowa. From what I understand, he really missed the natural beauty and the calm of his homeland. When he finally returned home in the summer of 1895 and composed the *Humoresques*, this was the inspiration that he drew upon.

So by writing these pieces, perhaps he was "rejuvenating" himself?

Exactly. He really missed that aspect of his life, the countryside. You can hear that in the music; you can hear bird calls, silence. It's very intimately written.

I'll have to listen to them again with that in mind. What jumps out for me when listening to this CD is the sense of personality in your playing. That's very hard to achieve, especially on a CD. So many piano CDs sound rather anonymous, but here I get a real sense of your personality, of who you are.

Thank you. I have to say, this has not always played to my advantage.

Why is that?

I would say that when you go through all the years of studying, learning to be objective as well as personal in your playing, it can become challenging. I think many musicians will admit to having that kind of struggle. Exactly how much of yourself do you put out there and still remain true to the composition? For me, the balance was the hardest part. Competitions, for example, don't always welcome what you are talking about, the "personal touch." But now I'm glad to be free, to be choosing my own repertoire based on my own convictions, my own strong feelings. I don't usually perform music, by the way, that I don't feel strongly about.

Are you saying that if I were a young pianist and I played, let's say, a Beethoven sonata at a competition and put my "personal stamp" on it, that the judges might actually downgrade me for it?

It depends on a lot of things. Many of the interpretations I'm hearing lately from the veteran competitors are pretty "safe," the kind of playing that doesn't raise too many eyebrows.

Some teachers feel that competitions are bad, and some are in favor of them. Where do you fall?

Somewhere in the middle. I'm relieved not to be doing them as a performer. At some point, you have to step away, you have to draw the line between tailoring yourself to the specific demands of competitions or trusting your own judgment above all. Competitions can have a very positive effect on building the consistency in your playing, almost how an athlete builds endurance and precision with the idea that the result will be judged. Music is not a sport, of course, but you can benefit from the environment of the competition. On the other hand, it can limit you in terms of your creativity, in terms of choosing the repertoire that you would really like to play.

So as a student, once you've done the usual round of competitions and maybe won a few prizes, that's the time to step away?

I don't think that competitions are for everyone to begin with. But they are a good tool for getting noticed; if you show yourself well, you can make some valuable professional and personal connections that will last for years.

How big of a studio do you have typically at your university?

Ten to 12 students currently, at varying levels. In my studio you have to be a hard worker, and that's what is encouraged the most.

How do you feel about the general educational level of American piano students? Are they coming from high school with enough preparation to begin their musical studies?

You've touched on a raw spot for me. I have encountered so many talented and driven musicians coming into the program, and yet I wish I could "reverse" the time and take them back to their childhood so that someone could provide them with a solid and systematic education in piano. There's a lot of talent here—there's a lot of talent everywhere! But it has to be honed; it has to be nurtured from an early age. This profession does not wait for you to mature.

Are you saying that they need a more thorough training in technique?

It has to be training in music, not just piano. A classical music education should prioritize music from an early age, just like sports, and I am just not seeing this yet. That's the reason that I've just started a brand-new project called FunKey at Texas State University. I am doing this in the hope and with the strong conviction that we will be able to train many more young children through systematic lessons in music, so that when they have to make the decision about what to do next, they are "armed" with something real—so that they can make that decision and not be limited with their lack of skills.

Interesting. What age are we talking about?

Grades K through 12. Technical and musical—it's all intertwined. This is a skill set that you cannot gain in a couple of years before entering college. I'm at a loss for words when I see kids who obviously have an enormous amount of talent and admiration for music, but haven't been introduced to the basic concepts and techniques.

A set of skills that should have been taught at an early age.

Right. That's when you observe and learn the best. When you think of classically trained ballet dancers, they start very early, because a lot of the skills are fundamental.

So this is in addition to general musical knowledge—familiarity with Beethoven symphonies, Mozart sonatas, and that sort of thing?

That too. But let's just imagine hypothetically that you are part of this environment from an early age—and not so hypothetically where I grew up in Russia—you are going to gain this musical knowledge one way or another. To what extent will depend on the curiosity of the individual.

And the availability of this sort of thing. Whether these kids can attend concerts or listen to music at home.

Or receive instruction in music theory or musicology along with their piano lessons.

I imagine that things are a bit better in Russia, considering how strong the educational system is there.

It's not just a bit better, it's completely different. Let me tell you something about the school I attended, which was not at all unique for Russia. It is actually called a "special music school." You had to audition to be admitted. At first, you go through the two years of preparatory work where you become comfortable with the basics—rhythmics, recognizing pitch, intervallic relationships, a little bit of theory. And then from the first grade through the 11th grade, you are focusing on musical subjects and performance. The non-musical subjects are taught at the same school, but the emphasis is on music.

There are schools in the U.S. like that, but they're few and far between.

Right.

And it costs money. I imagine that in Russia, these kinds of schools are free.

Yes, as they should be, in my opinion.

I suppose that in scheme of things, that's the least of our problems. But in this country, it concerns me that we're not doing enough to educate young people in the arts. We're not doing right by our young people.

True. In terms of talent, it's all there. It just needs to be nurtured. Another thing that we're doing at Texas State is bringing in young pianists during the summer for the Texas State International Piano Festival. We introduce them to a rigorous week full of masterclasses, private lessons, and performances. We have a couple of competitions going on during that week, and of course they're welcome to socialize during their free time. Founded by my colleagues Dr. Jason Kwak and Dr. Washington Garcia, it will celebrate its 10th anniversary this coming summer, and we have lot of meaningful and exciting surprises prepared for the young musicians.

Very good. As with so many artists, I imagine that you have plans for more recordings. Anything you care to share with us?

Shifting from one program to another takes a lot of time. I'm happy to be sharing a new program this season; the main piece is an insanely beautiful sonata by Paul Harvey Aurandt.

A contemporary piece?

Well, you could call it that; it was written in the 1970s. The language of this piece is so uber-Romantic. It is just sweepingly beautiful. Are you familiar with the radio personality Paul Harvey? That's his son, who composed the piece.

Really? His son?

Yes. I don't think he's aware of this, but I would love to record it.

Do you actively seek out music from composers? Have you commissioned any new pieces?

I know I should, but I don't usually. I have such plentiful resources to draw from....

There's just so much music, isn't there?

Right. So far, I've searched for things which are important to me and always found them in what you would call a fairly standard repertoire. But this sonata was a complete accident; I found the work and fell in love with it immediately.

I assume that it's been published. Did you happen to come across the piece in a library or a music shop?

No—actually, the composer sent me the score.

So you must have heard it somewhere.

Yes. Initially, I heard a recording of it on YouTube. Paul Harvey Aurandt himself also recorded the piece, which is a very powerful performance.

Interesting. I didn't know that Paul Harvey had a son who was a composer. We'll be on the lookout for the CD.

I like this idea!

Any musical travels coming up? Are you travelling to any place special to perform?

This fall semester for me is centered around taking my new program to several universities around the country. I'm scheduled to perform at UNC Chapel Hill and UNC Greensboro, Houston, Dallas, and UCLA, among other places. Also, performing this program in Kazan for my home audience will be significant in its own, very special way.

Very good.

I would like add one more thing about the new CD. You mentioned the aspect of my personality, which comes through. I would attribute that in large part to the wonderful atmosphere during the recording sessions. I had an *awesome* producer and sound engineer, Richard Price, who made it all possible for me. Also the head of MSR, Robert LaPorta, who has been a delight to deal with.

Yes, that's quite a pioneering label; they've put out some great things.

Yes, and I am looking forward to more of those releases.

■ **HUMORESQUES** • Daria Rabotkina (pn) • MSR 1662 (67:55)

DVOŘÁK 8 *Humoresques*, op. 101. REGER 5 *Humoresques*, op. 20. RACHMANINOFF *Morceaux de salon*, op. 10/5: *Humoresque*. SCHUMANN *Humoreske* in B♭, op. 20

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