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“The Georgian Mozart” will perform in Geneva

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Tsotne Zedginidze Photo © Evgeny Beleninov

It is impossible not to smile when seeing this charming face! The Georgian pianist Tsotne Zedginidze, who will turn seventeen this year, is the very embodiment of charm. Outwardly. Inwardly, he is a prodigy. Or “simply” an extraordinarily gifted person, which is perhaps better for him, especially since those who know him say that he is far from being “out of this world”. And as for his talent, that is only natural, given the boy’s remarkable lineage. He is a descendant of one of the founders of Georgian choral music, Niko Sulkhanishvili, who studied at the Tiflis Theological Seminary where Stalin would study a little later, and of the pianist and pedagogue Anastasia Abdushelishvili-Virsaladze, a postgraduate of the Moscow Conservatory in Yakov Zak’s class, who passed on her profession not only to her granddaughter Eliso Virsaladze but also, among others, to Lev Vlasenko and Dmitri Bashkirov. It was clear that only one path lay before him, music.

Sadly, Tsotne Zedginidze’s life began with tragedy. He lost his mother in early childhood, which probably contributed to the early development of his sensitive inner world. The first teacher of the “Georgian Mozart”, as Tsotne is called in his homeland, was his grandmother, Nino Mamradze, a professor at the Tbilisi Conservatory. Under her loving

guidance, by the age of six he was already, as every published biography notes, “playing sonatas by Clementi, Scarlatti, Mozart and Beethoven, Bach’s inventions, and pieces by Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Grieg and Prokofiev”. At the same time, he became interested in opera and began composing music himself, including *Paraphrases on Themes from Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelung*. Tsotne gave his first public concert in Tbilisi in June 2019, performing works by Berg, Bach, Shostakovich and Janáček alongside his own compositions. Other appearances followed, including in Switzerland, where he caused a sensation at the Verbier Festival in the summer of 2022.

But before that summer came winter and spring. An online search for information about Tsotne Zedginidze leads to a booklet from a festival marking the 150th anniversary of Alexander Scriabin, held in Moscow from 6 January to 1 March 2022. The booklet contains photographs and biographies of musicians from different countries, many of whose paths have since diverged. Some, like Valery Gergiev and Boris Berezovsky, remained in Russia. Others, like Mikhail Voskresensky and Ekaterina Bonyushkina, left. Still others, like Lucas Debargue, have not performed there for several years.

Naturally, Tsotne, who took part in that festival, was still a child at the time, and even now he is unlikely to make entirely independent decisions about where to perform. Yet events have unfolded in complex ways around some of the musicians who supported him early on. The outstanding pianist Grigory Sokolov, who after hearing the boy in Germany said that “Tsotne’s compositions belong to the monumental world of Bach and Brahms”, and who has lived outside Russia for decades, found himself included in a list of a “cavalcade of Russian artists repeatedly supporting the Russian military machine”, compiled by the Ukrainian ambassador to France. The equally distinguished bass Paata Burchuladze, founder of the Iavnana charitable foundation, with whose support Tsotne gave a solo recital in the Grand Hall of the Tbilisi State Conservatory in 2019, is now in prison in their shared native city, allegedly for attempting a coup d’état. The conductor Lahav Shani, who invited Tsotne to attend rehearsals of Mahler’s Symphony No. 2 in Rotterdam during the 2022–2023 season, has recently faced repeated hostility in Europe simply for being Israeli and/or Jewish. How is someone so young, even one so gifted, to make sense of all this? And perhaps he does not need to yet, but should simply devote himself to what matters most, performing and composing music?

The upcoming concert in Geneva will be Tsotne Zedginidze’s first appearance in Geneva, my adopted city. The programme includes three landmark works of the piano repertoire linked by a single chain, a chain of Romanticism: Beethoven’s Sonata No. 28, Schumann’s *Davidsbündlertänze*, and Brahms’s Sonata No. 3. Anyone with even a basic knowledge of music history will recognise the logical structure of a programme that “sets off with Beethoven”. Written in 1816, in the composer’s late period, Sonata No. 28 was perceived by Romantic composers as an intimate musical diary rather than a public statement, so evident is its distancing from demonstrative virtuosity. Schumann wrote of late Beethoven’s music as music that demands attentive listening rather than external brilliance. A similar approach, even more radical, can be felt in his own *Davidsbündlertänze*, composed twenty-one years later, in 1837. These are not dances in the usual sense, but rather dances of the soul, a sequence of psychological states, inner monologues and hints instead of declarations, a rejection of unified form in favour of a chain of fragments reflecting fragmentation typical for Romanticism. Sixteen years later, Brahms, proclaimed by Schumann as “the chosen one”, the heir to Beethoven in music, would write his Sonata No. 3. No musician enjoys being compared with another, even if that other is Beethoven himself, so Brahms accepted the “laurel wreath” with hesitation, yet accepted nonetheless.

In his Sonata he seemed to move against the Beethovenian current, choosing a monumental five-movement structure and heroic scope, yet one cannot fail to hear in this music both Beethoven’s idea of fate, Schumann’s nervous poetics, and an attempt to give form to the fragmented Romantic consciousness.

I suspect some readers will smile sceptically, and others may even be outraged by the audacity of seeing, between Schumann and Brahms, a “Suite” by Tsotne Zedginidze himself. Yet my intuition tells me that both will change their minds if they attend the concert. In anticipation, I suggest listening to the piece *Bells*, recorded in 2020, which the then eleven-year-old composer dedicated to the memory of his mother. Come to the concert and form your own impression of this undeniably gifted musician, whom we are watching transform from boy into man. The remaining tickets are easiest to order here.

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