Опубликовано на Швейцария: новости на русском языке (https://nashagazeta.ch)

Elisaveta Leonskaya: “We were taught to look for music within ourselves”

24.04.2014.



Elisaveta Leonskaya Photo © N. Sikorsky

In all the photographs, Elisaveta Ilyinichna Leonskaya, whom the French-language press refers to only as a *grande dame*, is dressed in black, without a smile. I too imagined her as strict, unapproachable, withdrawn. Yet upon meeting her in person, this image dissolved within minutes. The main feature of Leonskaya’s face is her eyes. Large, blue, radiant, drawing one in. Next comes the smile, which hardly ever leaves her face. During our conversation another important human quality became evident: modesty, which, yes, does her credit, although among artists it is a great rarity. But judge for yourselves.

Elisaveta Ilyinichna, let us begin at the very beginning. You were born in Tbilisi and received your higher musical education in Moscow. How difficult was it in

your time for a student from one of the Soviet republics to enter the Moscow Conservatoire, and how did it happen in your case?

In principle, it was not difficult at all, students from all the republics studied at the Moscow Conservatoire. It was just that there were different routes. For young people from certain republics such as Kazakhstan or even more remote ones, there were special quotas at the Conservatoire. It is unlikely that such conditions existed for Georgia. But my story was somewhat different, since while still living in Tbilisi I received a prize at the Enescu Competition in Bucharest and at the same time entered the Tbilisi Conservatoire. When I arrived in Moscow, I simply met the Dean of the Piano Faculty of the Moscow Conservatoire in the street and told him that I would like to study in Moscow. And he replied that this was not a problem. That is the whole simple and short story.

You studied with the outstanding pedagogue Yakov Milstein, the author of numerous books on music theory. Were you placed in his class, or did you ask to study with him?

The fact is that I had consulted him before the competition. Afterwards, when I went to thank him, I also told him that I would like to study in Moscow. He was confused, even frightened, and said to me: “Liza, think about it, discuss it with your parents,” and when I walked out, I met the Dean. It was fate.

What were the distinctive features of his pedagogical method?

They lay in his particular nobility, in that old culture, in the convictions he possessed. It is difficult for me to compare him with other teachers, since I did not attend other classes. But I remember that it was a time when prize-winners were being churned out, there was a race for awards. In our class there was nothing of the sort. We simply worked on compositions, and prepared for competitions as necessary, for example, I was simply forced to take part in the Paris Competition, it was in a way revenge after my defeat at the Chopin Competition. But in general, we worked on Music.

His son Sergei is now teaching at the Geneva Conservatoire, and I know that you are in contact with him. In your view, has he inherited his father’s pedagogical gift?

He works with his students in a far more emotional way, I see how he reacts to music. Yakov Isaakovich was a reserved man.

In the USSR you had a brilliant start to your career, victories at three international competitions while still a student, the patronage of Sviatoslav Richter himself. And yet in 1978 you left the country. Why?

I think that for every person at that particular age some kind of picture of life unfolds. Why did I leave? It did indeed begin well, but then, for reasons that were unclear, travel abroad was closed to me for five, six, seven years. This began in the second half of the 1960s. The fact that I was Jewish was, of course, a factor. But the general tendency also had an influence, the intelligentsia then began to strive to leave.

Do you regret the decision you took then?

No.

And how do you think your life would have turned out if you had stayed?

Well, of course it would have been different.

You were friends with Sviatoslav Richter until the end of his life in 1997. Yet he was an extremely complex person. How did you manage to preserve this relationship for so many years?

I was, of course, terribly shy, afraid, and I idolised Richter. But there was such an extraordinary possibility of communication. I do not even know how to describe it so that it does not sound vulgar or dramatic. It was, of course, the most important episode in my life, which left an enormous mark. And light.

And why do you think he singled you out?

It just happened. I was married to the violinist Oleg Kagan, with whom Sviatoslav Teofilovich worked a great deal. We came to this house together, we communicated a great deal. And even after Oleg and I separated, I remained a friend of the house.

Another outstanding personality connected with your biography is Joseph Brodsky, who dedicated two poems to you. How did you meet? What inspired the poet?

Indeed, he dedicated a poem to me, which interests everyone and to some extent places me in a false light, since people think that we were in close contact, whereas in fact we were not. He was simply a friend of some of my very close friends, for example Alexander Sumerkin and Veronica Shelts. And when I was in New York, we communicated through them. However, the first poem, “Bagatelle”, was dedicated to me even before our personal acquaintance simply because Veronica gave him the idea. At first even the dedication was written incorrectly, L*i*onskaya instead of L*e*onskaya. So I did not really deserve it.
As for the second, from the *Christmas poems*, it was indeed dedicated to me: the day before I had given a small solo recital in New York as part of one of the oldest series. Not in a central hall at all, but in a hall with wonderful acoustics, People’s Symphony Hall on Fourteenth Street. And Joseph was at that concert. It so happened that on that day I was returning from somewhere, I fell, sprained my foot and barely reached New York. I came to the concert with a sort of wooden sole. I think he felt sorry for me and dedicated the poem to me.

In a few days you will perform Chopin’s *First Piano Concerto* in Geneva. What emotions does it evoke for you?

I have sentimental associations with this concerto. It was one of the first concertos I played when I was still very young, not in its entirety, of course, but only the first movement. And later, throughout my life, I returned to it several times. It seems to me that the First Concerto is far more difficult than the Second, it is a kind of pianistic Paganini of incredible beauty and purity.

During your artistic life you have performed with conductors of several generations. In Geneva you will play for the first time with the young maestro Vasily Petrenko. Does anything change for you in preparing for a concert depending on the age of your partner?

I am always interested in working with conductors who are new to me. When a conductor is

professional it is completely irrelevant how old he is, one can always find a common path.

You give the impression of being a very modest person, which is confirmed by many musicians who know you and whose opinion I have sought. In one interview you quoted Heinrich Neuhaus, who said that one should not seek oneself in music, but music within oneself. Is this your creative credo?

Yes, such a search will enrich one greatly! (She laughs.) You know, that is simply how we were taught. When one reads Neuhaus's book, one thinks: my God, what simple but brilliant words! Everything he advises is the pure truth, one only needs to know how to follow that advice.

You perform in Switzerland quite often. What are your impressions of this country?

Switzerland is a country of contrasts, despite the general well-ordered life and the existence in luxury, in what is called the Swiss quality of everything. But when you arrive in Ticino or Locarno, you see that it is a slightly different country, in Basel you find yourself in Germany altogether, in Lausanne or in Geneva there is also a particular mentality.

Previously Geneva was for me some abstract place where, it seemed to me, there was a smell only of money. But in March 2013 I was invited to the Geneva Conservatoire to sit on the jury of a competition of Russian music, where all the pupils from 7 to 17 played only works by Russian composers. And I was moved almost to tears, sensing this pulsating life: mothers, aunts, sisters came, it was evident how many different nationalities live in this city. Ii was as if visited another floor of it, a floor which is much closer to real life. And that was very pleasant.

And to play in the hall of the Geneva Conservatoire is wonderful, it is small, but the acoustics there are magnificent.

Russian musicians in Switzerland
Russian piano school

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