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THE CHEMISTRY OF SOUNDS

By Larissa Mikhalchuk

*A well-known U.S. pianist John Robilette recently gave a recital at Minsk Philharmonic within the framework of the "Minsk Music Spring-2007" festival. Mr. Robilette is not only a distinguished touring pianist but also a dedicated music teacher. During his stay in Belarus, he gave a master class for piano students at the Belarusian State Academy of music. **Belorusy I Rynok** cultural correspondent Larissa Mikhalchuk discussed with the U.S. visitor the peculiarities of music education in the United States and Europe as well as the specifics of being a musician...*

Q – Mr. Robilette, you have got an extensive teaching experience both in the United States and around the world. What is your impression of the Belarusian piano students and their proficiency in comparison with other young musicians?

A – I have met wonderful students! They have got masterful skills and their proficiency allowed me to work with them on a very high level. As for juxtaposing musicians, I would rather not compare artists, including the young ones, as their essence is international. An artist is first of all an artist, and it is true in Belarus same as in America. It would suffice to say that the students I met were extremely good and I enjoyed working with them.

I cannot make a major assessment of the Belarusian system of music education, as I worked with just three students. However, I would dare to say that your roots lie in the Russian musical culture and Russian system of training. This is a great school that gave the world such musicians as Prokofiev, Rakhmaniov, Musorgski, Rimsky-Korsakov, etc.

In comparison with Europe, the United States has got a different tradition of music education. Its development was largely influenced by the events taking place in the 20th century. World War I, World War II, as well as the end of the "cold war" brought to the United States a great number of immigrants trying to escape from the chaos. There were many great musicians among them and they influenced our music school. They were establishing new traditions based on the music traditions of their home countries. We are lucky to be able to absorb the best from all those who came to the United States. That is the reason we are having an excellent system of music education these days.

We have two approaches to training musicians: at conservatories they focus predominantly on music disciplines and at numerous music schools, which are part of universities, they provide students with a broader spectrum of knowledge. I think that conservatories should be placing an additional focus on humanities as well. In fact, these days it is common practice at the best music schools in the United States. I find it natural because an artist should possess a general level of culture allowing him or her to have a broad vision of the world. In my opinion, such an approach has received a more intensive development these days, as opposed to the tradition of the old French School focusing exclusively on music, although it is still competitive as well.

What happens to students who study music? Most of their efforts are aimed at mastering the technical skill. Then at some point one should leave that focus (fast enough!), as music is not just a set of dots. It is what is behind the dots and between the lines. One should not just play the instrument but recreate sound images that touch upon people's hearts, arousing such feelings as joy or sadness... It is important to have a good understanding of melody, harmony and rhythm, but this is just a first step, as music is first of all an emotional kind of art. To develop solid artistic consciousness one needs to encourage personal development.

Q – In other words, musician's general culture affects his or her performing skills?

A – In early 20th century, a famous Italian pianist Ferruccio Busoni enjoyed working with students from all over the world and many of them later became famous performers. How did he work with them? He was taking them to museums, encouraged to study fine arts and read books on philosophy and history. What was behind it? Busoni wanted to expand their perception of the world so that they could reproduce in music what they have absorbed from the outside world.

I know some musicians who were the students of a famous French pianist Alfred Cortot. He required from them to know the life of a composer whose music they performed as well as a political, social and cultural context of the time when the music was created. I agree that a cultural context can say a lot about music but at the same time melody, harmony and rhythm – I mean music itself – can say a lot about the context.

Q – You were the founder and head of the Artistic Ambassador Program for the American Government in the 1980's. How important was this program for the American musicians who participated in it as well as for music lovers from different countries of the world from the perspective of broadening their horizons and understanding modern world?

A – I think one can learn a person by understanding him or her with one's mind or by communicating directly with an individual. To read about the United States or Belarus is to understand these countries with one's reason. But when we have a live communication – e.g. you invite me for a coffee – we understand each other based on the mutual experience coming from communicating. I think the latter is much better and more efficient. When music is added to communication, people get an even deeper understanding of each other. The Artistic Ambassador Program was based exactly on such principles.

We used to select U.S. musicians who were taking part in national competitions and sent them with free concerts to various countries of the world. The concerts were usually followed by master classes for music students as well as anyone interested. We did not place any high requirements on the American musicians participating in the program. We just wanted them to be themselves. Some people liked it, some did not, but it was true learning through communication. In fact, the range of the established contacts was quite impressive: under the auspices of the subject program American musicians visited 63 countries of the world.

The program was funded by the U.S. Government, i.e. American tax payers. After the collapse of the Soviet union and the end of the “cold war,” there was less need in public diplomacy. There came an understanding that there were no more enemies and funds could be saved on programs of such kind.

As for myself, first of all I am a concert pianist. What I had to do within the framework of this program was taking me away from my own agenda. I worked hard for seven years having to deal with bureaucracy on various levels and giving concerts at the same time. It was quite difficult at times and could not last forever.

Q – Mr. Roiblette, during a recital an artist shows an accomplishment of the previous hard work. What stays invisible in this case?

A – A pianist spends most of his/her life alone with a black box with white keys. Hour after hour, day after day. Do not you think it is foreign to a regular human being? Then you do a concert and it is again the same “black box.” It is hard not to feel some kind of “funeral” mood... At the same I have enormous respect for the instrument I have been playing all my life. Any orchestra, any chamber ensemble, any music group needs a pianist and a pianist needs no one. A pianist is self-sufficient.

I think there is a kind of a Buddhist moment in the performing arts. Any other creative personality – a painter, a writer, etc. – leaves something behind him/her. With us, it is different. You can be in a deep depression, beloved could have left you, you are suffering from a bad cold but there is no choice when you are up stage: at this particular moment you are playing the music you feel in your blood and in your flesh. It is not easy at all...

Q – Do you think a recording can actually show the state of a musician during the performance?

A – It is impossible to repeat your feelings in each new performance but you always feel the unity with the audience and its understanding of what you are trying to convey. Each time it is different but there is always a collective mind which affects you and you affect it. This is what I would call “chemistry.” You cannot hear that when listen to a recording...