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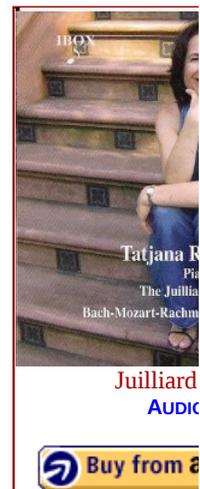
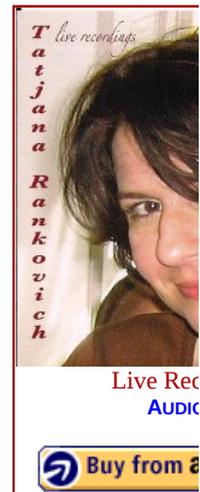
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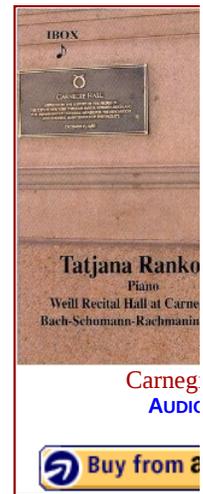
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An Interview with **Tatjana Rankovich**

I was first introduced to pianist Tatjana Rankovich through a mutual friend, back in the early 1980s. At that point she had just graduated with her master's degree from Juilliard. I can still remember the pieces she played that initially so impressed me: the Bach Toccata in C minor and No. 8 of Frank Martin's wonderful Eight Preludes. Both the power and the sensitivity of her performances struck me immediately, as well as her ability to modify her approach to accommodate each composer's style or area of the repertoire. I later began to appreciate the way she highlights the sensuality inherent in whatever she plays. Although she had been trained in the Grand Tradition in her native Belgrade, in the former Yugoslavia, her selection of the Martin prelude pointed to a curiosity and a willingness to explore less familiar areas of the repertoire, and, indeed, when I told her of my interest in bringing to light lesser-known works of American music that I thought were of the highest caliber, she expressed a winning eagerness to delve into them. Initially I introduced her to the piano music of Nicolas Flagello, including his three concertos, one of which had been performed once; the other two, never. She was immediately won over by their emotional intensity and romantic passion, their sense of drama, of tragedy and triumph. She expressed interest in his solo piano works as



well, and eventually learned and performed them. But she felt the greatest urgency about the concertos, that they must be heard, and that she was the one best suited to represent them to the music world. So we developed a plan to record two of them—the second and third (the two that had never been played). We accomplished this in 1995, and the all-Flagello recording was released the following year by Vox, and then was reissued a few years later by Artek, along with two overtures and a work for violin and orchestra played by the great virtuoso Elmar Oliveira. The recording was received more enthusiastically than we dared hope for—in *Fanfare*, as well as in other publications—and further first recordings of American works followed, including Flagello's Piano Concerto No. 1. Today Tatjana has a permanent place in the history of American music, as the first to perform all three Flagello concertos, and the first to record them, as well as his *Symphonic Waltzes*. In addition she is the first to record the sonatas of Paul Creston and Vittorio Giannini, distinguished works that she has subsequently performed throughout the United States and Europe.



During the past 25 years, Tatjana has maintained an active performance schedule, with a wide-ranging repertoire that embraces mainstream European literature and American works of the 20th and 21st centuries, as well as compositions by Yugoslav composers. In 1990 she became a U.S. resident and also joined the faculty of New York's Mannes College of Music. Recently, to supplement her studio recordings she has released three compact discs of mainstream repertoire, taken from her live performances (reviewed below). This seemed like a good opportunity for her to reflect on her career—on what she has accomplished and on the directions that beckon to her for the future. Her comments have been edited for brevity and concision.

Q: First, I wonder how you gravitated toward music in the first place?

A: My mom was the one who first exposed me to live concerts, both chamber and orchestral performances, and piano lessons. She was a piano teacher, and started teaching me when I was six, but it wasn't long before she decided to send me to a proper music school in Belgrade, where I took solfège and piano lessons twice a week. When I was around eight, my mother took me to an all-Schumann piano recital and that was a real turning point. From that time on, I wanted to be a pianist! I was mesmerized by the music in that concert, and I still remember every detail!

Q: What was your training like in Belgrade, and who were your teachers?

influential teachers?

A: My mother took me to study with Arbo Valdma, at that time one of the greatest teachers in Belgrade. He had taught at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow before moving to Belgrade in the mid 70s. My mom was adamant that I study with him and no one else, so she enrolled me at the Josip Slavenski Music School, where he had just been appointed. He was very new to Belgrade and I was his first student. Six months after I began studying with him, I won first prize in the State Competition in Serbia, with a perfect 100 (that was the scoring scale). This attracted attention, and many talented students flocked to Valdma for lessons.

I followed Valdma to the Novi Sad Academy of the Arts, the best school in Yugoslavia at the time, as soon as I graduated from high school. I continued with him until I was 19, when I graduated with a bachelor's degree from the Novi Sad Academy. Valdma taught me how to understand musical architecture, the importance of good fingering, as well as some useful tips for memorizing.

Q: What led to your decision to come to America?

A: For some reason I became obsessed with New York, with the Juilliard School, and with the English language—especially as spoken by Americans. In those days Belgrade had a very active concert life with fantastic recitals by such young (at the time) Americans as André James Tocco, and Garrick Ohlson. I found something very special in their playing, which was different from that of pianists who came from Russia and Eastern Europe. Thinking back now, it was the phrasing, lightness, clarity, and humor, all captured with amazing virtuosity. I remember André Watts playing Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* in the piano version. The concert hall was on fire! I was looking for this connection with music. Since he could see that I was becoming more interested, Valdma suggested that I go to Sion, Switzerland, to study with Clifford Matthews at the Tibor Varga Summer Festival. Matthews was one of my most important teachers, and a wonderfully caring person. He heightened my awareness of such aspects as volume, gradation, articulation, tone, and showed me different ways of drawing strength from my playing chords. Working with him was a great experience. Since he was then taught at the North Carolina School of the Arts (and still does), I came to America in 1981 to continue my studies with him in Winston-Salem.

Q: What was your initial reaction to America?

A: The North Carolina School of the Arts was a perfect bridge to American culture and the people were incredibly generous. To this day I have

soft spot for North Carolina. But my heart was in New York and I studied at the Juilliard. Coming from Belgrade, a busy capital city, in a very competitive musical environment, I craved more of that. Months later, I was on the bus to New York to audition for Juilliard, and I was accepted and awarded a scholarship. I was in the city of my dream, and I'm still here.

At Juilliard I studied with Josef Raieff, who was a legend himself. He studied with Lhevinne, Siloti, Bauer, and Schnabel. His playing had a beautiful old style that we hear in the recordings of Lhevinne and Rachmaninoff. After I earned my master's degree at the Juilliard, I went to London to study with Benjamin Kaplan, a music-teaching genius. I've worked with him on and off for many years. Studying with Kaplan was a great gift: He helped me achieve a true legato, and showed me the importance of maintaining a singing melodic line. He also gave me lessons in analyzing a new piece. I apply what I learned from him to my own work, but also in all my teaching.

Q: What made you so receptive to American music? So few American pianists have bothered to explore this repertoire. What was it about you?

A: Even though I was very traditionally trained, I always had a taste for the unknown. Maybe it's my spirit of adventure, but when I was still in Belgrade I would play works that were out of the mainstream, in the context of Belgrade, at least—Poulenc's *Aubade*, for example, as well as lesser-known works of Scriabin and Shostakovich. When I was in Salem, one day in our piano literature class we were played some American composers—I remember Ned Rorem's barcarolles, and I fell in love with them, learned them, and have since performed them. I love the way the undulating fifths and fourths create such a beautiful melodic flow in these pieces. Later I got to know the Barber Sonata, Copland's Variations, and Corigliano's *Etude Fantasy*. I just love the intensity coming out of all these works, which are written so well for the most powerful instrument, the piano. So all this prepared me for Bartók, Giannini and many others to come.

Q: Did you find that your recordings of American repertoire paved the way for opportunities to perform it in concert?

A: To some extent yes and to some, no. I've been including American works on all my recitals—both in the United States and elsewhere. I like to experiment with building an interesting program around well-known works, little-known older works, as well as unknown recent works in various combinations. I have found this the best way to introduce new pieces. People seem to love hearing new works in a context with

familiar pieces, rather than a whole evening of unfamiliar works. It can be difficult on an audience. I find that in general people like to hear the composers and pieces they can recognize. This gives them a sense of confidence that makes it easier for them to be receptive to new work. Programming this way, I have had great success with so much American music, even when I present it in the smallest towns and places.

Now, with the Flagello concertos I haven't been so successful in finding opportunities to perform them. I just don't understand this aspect of the music world. I have recorded all three concertos, as you know. They are incredibly challenging virtuoso works, written masterfully for the piano instrument in a traditional style, romantic yet modern, with great energy—passionate and intense—rhythmically exciting—simply fantastic. I am certain that audiences at Avery Fisher Hall or elsewhere would go for any of these. Why are conductors so reluctant? Is it political, financial? Can't anyone listen with an open heart and hear that these concertos need to be heard over and over?

Q: Do you feel that your adventurousness about repertoire has affected your career?

A: Yes, I have received a certain degree of recognition and interest, with a number of invitations and projects, as a result of my many performances and recordings. But these invitations usually come through specialized venues or concert series dedicated to presenting new work, and, maybe most often, from networking connections I've made over the years. At the same time, I think audiences follow their favorite performers and it doesn't matter to them what's being performed, it's more about the performer and when. I am sure that if Horowitz had had a chance to perform the Flagello concertos, they would be famous today. That's what happened with the Barber sonata, after all.

Q: Who are some of the younger composers whose music you have championed?

A: I would start with the music of my husband, Ionel Petroi. I've performed several of his works and have presented them in this country, in Canada, and in Serbia. He has two piano concertos that we are planning to record, and hopefully will get some live performances. I am learning them now, and they may happen soon.

Besides Ionel's works, I've presented many other premieres. At the *Keys to the Future* festival in New York City I've introduced many new works. Also close to my heart are the works of Bruce Stark—and Robert Muczynski, whose piano works are just fantastic!

Q: How do you decide what pieces you'd like to play? What are t

that go into your decisions?

A: Very important to me is that a piece have good structure—and direction; it should also have an impulse and a story. I like my stories intense, even when they are quiet; but I need to tell a story through the music. Much of the music composed today that tries to sound “experimental” involves gimmicks, which are there to hide the lack of something that seems to be thrown around without a clear sense of conviction. And often I show little understanding of how to draw the most from the instrument. Of course, once in a while there is a jewel that I can fall in love with and it feels like such a great discovery and I am forever grateful to that. I like when a piano piece sounds like a piano piece, when the composer really knows how to exploit the full technical range of the instrument. Great harmonies, interesting inner voicing, melodies with a sense of direction, and focused development of motifs.

Q: I imagine that your versatility must be a great asset for you, as your career has evolved.

A: Yes, it keeps me musically alive and active. I am also very aware of the fact that we performers must continue to present new works that challenge us. Clara Schumann premiered the works of her husband and also works of Brahms. Those pieces still live on, as do the piano works of Mozart, Schumann, and Rachmaninoff, to name a few. They are a part of my repertoire. The traditional school of piano playing and so much of the mainstream repertoire have given me an indispensable understanding of how to go about learning new music. I believe that if I can approach today's works with that kind of clarity, I will have a story to communicate, and the music will be more accessible to the audience. The music that I play calls for great passion. I never want my playing to convey a flat affect.

Q: I know that you have been teaching at the Mannes School for many years. Do you enjoy teaching? How important a role does it play in your life?

A: I do love teaching. I love the giving and the receiving aspects. One of the most wonderful feelings is to see a student develop a love for music. In my own learning process, one of the most important things to learn is how to actually understand the written score. Where does a phrase begin and where does it end? What happens in between those two? What is the rhythm of a melodic line and what are the inner voices doing? That is the important skeleton. If we don't have this skeleton, we can't really understand the atmosphere, voicing, and tone. Then there is a great deal to be learned about understanding technique and what makes certain passages so demanding—observing the hand and realizing that the thumb is pulling back

sabotaging the rest of the hand, or that by eliminating unnecessary movement the hand can be better prepared for the next upcoming passage. Then one must be taught to do a certain type of thoughtful listening. I am very direct in my teaching. I don't do much talking sunsets and sunrises.

Q: Are there other areas in music that interest you, beyond just piano?

A: Yes, I am very involved with a non-profit organization called Performance Wellness, which is dedicated to treating many of the psychological and behavioral problems that afflict musicians and performers. The approach was developed by a psychotherapist, D Montello.

You know, it isn't discussed much publicly, but a great deal of damage is inflicted on young students and performers, leading to all sorts of performance-related disorders, especially among classical musicians. There are various types of addictions, anxieties, debilitating stage fright, and a host of mental and physical injuries. I've wanted to get involved in this for a long time, so several years ago I went back to school and received a degree in music therapy. This led me to Performance Wellness, and I am using this technique in my work with musicians. I find it to be a very effective approach to overcoming the stresses of musical performance, by which students use their essential, innate creativity to bypass the limitations of the rational, conscious mind. The approach integrates techniques from the fields of music therapy, behavioral medicine, and yoga science. I want to spread the word among schools, universities, and orchestras, to encourage them to incorporate this approach into their curricula.

Q: What are your thoughts about the role of classical music in our world today? As a teacher, do you see an enthusiasm for classical music among young people? Does the future of classical music concern you?

A: There will always be young people who are drawn to the world of classical music. They will expend great effort, just as we all did before them. Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven have lived with us for so many centuries and I do believe that their music will live on. But it seems to me that the group of young people who love classical music within this tradition is becoming smaller. Times are different, technology has taken over, and the influences and values of young people are in flux. The pace of life is so fast and young people can be easily distracted by gadgets and toys that modern technology has made possible. Many of my students are very enthusiastic, but they are also interested in other things as well. Classical music is very possessive. Becoming a professional musician takes a tremendous time and often requires one to sacrifice other interests.

demands patience, a fanatical sense of ambition, emotional stamina, tenacity, and self-awareness. This is just the beginning; then you find good teachers, a means of financial support, and a whole lot

Another thing that really concerns me is the lack of emotion in live concerts. There is so much concern about “perfection,” or about some “new” way of approaching this or that piece. And I don’t like the way music is marketed. To me it is “marketing on steroids.” I have many concerts that leave me unmoved and indifferent. Why would I care about a “new” approach that is drawing a lot of attention or about “perfection,” if I feel an absence of joy, enthusiasm, sincere emotion, or a little intensity of artistic communication? There must be an authentic feeling of sincere feeling that can touch us and arouse us in the depths of

On the other hand, every once in a while there is a live concert that turns out to be a real musical journey. Performances like this I remember

 **MOZART** Piano Sonata in a, K 310.¹ **RAVEL** *Valse et sentimentales*.¹ **SCHUMANN** Fantasy in C² • Tatjana Rankovich (pn) • IBOX No number (59:58) Live: ¹Mannes C Music, New York 2/22/1997; ²Mannes College of Music, New York 5/31/2005

 **BACH** Partita No. 6 in e, BWV 830.¹ **MOZART** Piano Sonata in F, K 332.² **RACHMANINOFF** *Etudes-Tableaux: in c* 39/1, in b, op. 39/4; in e_b, op. 39/5.³ **SHOSTAKOVICH** Concerto No. 1⁴ • Tatjana Rankovich (pn); ⁴Bojan Sudjic, c⁴ Novi Sad CO; ⁴Mladen Djordjevic (tpt) • IBOX No number (Live: ¹Juilliard 2/15/1985; ²Belgrade 5/24/1995; ³Merkin Hall New York 3/13/1996; ⁴Novi Sad Synagogue, Serbia 10/2/2003

 **BACH** Toccata in c, BWV 911. **SCHUMANN** Kreisleriana. **RACHMANINOFF** Prelude in E_b, op. 23/6. *Moment in b*, op. 16/3. **CHOPIN** Ballade in f, op. 52/4 • Tatjana Rankovich (pn) • IBOX No number (61:05) Live: Weill Recital Hall, Carnegie Hall 11/5/1989

This article originally appeared in Issue 34:2 (Nov/Dec 2010) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

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