

# Catching Up With Sophia Agranovich

BY LYNN RENÉ BAYLEY

When I reviewed Sophia Agranovich's album of music by Beethoven (the *Appassionata* Sonata) and Chopin (the *Fantaisie* and Sonata No. 3), I mentioned, after citing her teachers (Anna Stolarevich, Alexander Edelmann, Sascha Gorodnitzki, and Nadia Reisenberg), that she was "a tigress of the keyboard, yet one who knows just how much to attack and when to pull back (*Fanfare* 37:6)." Not too surprisingly, I later discovered that this is how other *Fanfare* reviewers, such as Jerry Dubins, also heard her, and if you go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyzu1OslpAg>, you can see and hear how she accomplishes this in a stunning performance of Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy*. For her size and build, her hands and forearms are as strong and sinewy as I recall Artur Rubinstein's being when I saw him in recital around 1970, and she has a way of pouncing on the keyboard that recalls to me the extant videos of Annie Fischer.

Thus, when I was asked if I wanted to interview her, I jumped at the opportunity. Some artists you just like; others you love at first hearing; and Agranovich is one of the latter type of artist for me. We didn't have a lot of time for the interview, since I didn't receive the CD for review (below) until November 15, but even that wasn't going to stop me. I wanted to discuss music and piano playing with her because she is, in my mind, a very special artist.

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*Q: If I may, I'd like to start with a general question. What, precisely, attracted you to the piano specifically and not some other instrument? I know that a lot of musicians begin on the piano when young, but often switch to the violin, cello, flute, or reed instrument.*

A: Since my childhood, I enjoyed listening to our collection of classical LPs. My mother was a literature, art, and music connoisseur who started taking me to concerts, opera, and ballet since I was four. I fell in love with the piano after attending a recital of Sviatoslav Richter when I turned five. Under his magical hands the piano sounded like many other instruments, and as rich as an orchestra. I felt you could express anything you want on the piano.

*Q: Were there any specific pianists who inspired you when younger, at least in some particular part of your repertoire? Beethoven or Schumann, for instance?*

A: Yes, definitely. I heard live a lot of the old school pianists, and was influenced by their playing of particular composers. For example: Richter in Beethoven, Schumann, Prokofiev; Oborin in Tchaikovsky; Rubinstein in Chopin (of course); Gilels, in everything he played(!); Horowitz—even if I disagreed with some of his interpretations, to me he is one of the most exciting and interesting pianists.

*Q: And now for the question that I think many of our readers would like to have answered. How did you develop your no-holds-barred approach to piano playing? This is so unusual for a woman pianist...I can only think of a few, like Carreño, Fischer, Reisenberg, Haskil, and Argerich who play with your kind of fire.*

A: When I play, I don't try to do anything unusual or to project unique conceptions. I am trying to produce energy, feelings and thoughts of a composer and atmosphere of his piece. What is interesting, while playing, I feel a complete change in my own personality, like a possession. I push it to the limit until I almost have an out-of-body experience. Nothing can compare to this exhilaration!

*Q: In your previous interview with Jerry Dubins, you told him that Professor Gorodnitzki mentioned that if such legends as Gilels, Rubinstein, and Richter entered piano competitions, they wouldn't win any prizes. But now for the million-dollar question: Why not?*

A: They had too much genuine, not made-for-the-audience, personality. In many competitions, a memory slip or some wrong notes are killers. I think sincere musicality and natural individuality should have much more weight than correctness and technique. There are judges that understand it, but they are few.

*Q: Also in your interview with Jerry, I was stunned to learn that you spent 23 years in the brokerage industry. It must have eaten you up inside to have that much of your life taken away from playing on a regular basis! How did you cope with that, so to speak, performance deprivation?*

A: I actually liked computer technology and was constantly exploring new languages and platforms. I didn't like the business side much, but learned and tolerated it. Being a manager, I enjoyed working with people, but couldn't deal with office politics at all. What kept me sane and balanced was my practicing piano almost every day, even if it was only half-an-hour or 20 minutes. Often I was so tired that I played with closed eyes, especially after nightly production problems. But it was still refreshing. Somehow I never lost hope that I'd come back full-time to music, although it seemed so unrealistic then.

*Q: I know that specializing in the 19th century classics is a safe route for many pianists because it ensures a wider audience, but when I hear you play I can't help thinking how you might sound playing Bartók, Stravinsky, Rzewski, perhaps even Sorabji, whose music seems to me perfectly suited for your style. Are any of these composers in your active repertoire, and if so, which pieces?*

A: Yes, modern compositions are perfectly suited and natural for me to play. I have in my repertoire Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and other 20th century and living composers' pieces. I think it is easier to play and get audiences for contemporary music. It is culturally closer to us. If a performer is mediocre, new pieces are at least more interesting than a boring rendition of "Moonlight" Sonata, for example. In a way, traditional repertoire is more challenging: it is a competition against generations of great musicians! But I love that music so much, I don't care about comparison! 19th century composers are further in time from us and are more refined, intriguing and challenging. It makes me "transport" to another life. Nevertheless, I do plan to include more modern music in my concerts.

*Q: Since I have written several reviews of the reissues of Nadia Reisenberg's recorded legacy, and enjoy her approach so much, I was wondering if your studies with her included some of her approach to these same composers you play so well? In other words, did any of her approach rub off on you, or do you think you were pretty much settled in your own style by the time you worked with her?*

A: Nadia Reisenberg helped me to polish nuanced sound production, better understand stylistic differences in each composer, control playing logically without losing expressivity, and to play always with passion. She often beautifully demonstrated what she demanded. Besides being a great musician, she was an exceptional human being. At her lessons I was never worried or felt criticized. She taught by offering an advice, with utmost respect of the student. Amazingly, while playing for her, even before her feedback, I felt all-enveloping kindness, intelligence, optimism, and heard music differently, changing interpretations on the spot!

*Q: I should also mention a young Polish pianist, Katarzyna Musial, whose playing has fire similar to yours. In my interview with her, she told me that she simply can't and won't play*

*any music without complete emotional involvement, that she can't hold anything back. I get exactly the same feeling from your recordings. A question, then: how does one get so deeply involved in the emotional side of the music?*

A: It is natural. I just try to reproduce what I feel without fear of being wrong. I lose my own personality and ego and become just a medium for the amazing music. Being able to do this requires a lot of technical preparation and analysis.

*Q: I've watched you play on YouTube, and noticed two things: 1) You don't have any scores on your piano, which means you've memorized the whole piece, and 2) You almost seem to plunge your whole body forward into the keyboard. It would seem to me that there is an element of risk involved in both of these things. Do you wear yourself out by the end of a recital?*

A: 1) I find it easier to play without being bound to the score. Memorization and making the piece “your own” is necessary for the freedom of expression. Of course, it is more risky not to have a score as a backup during a recital, but at the same time it adds some element of excitement. Also, most of my repertoire is virtuosic and requires looking at the keyboard. 2) “Plunging” my body forward actually helps to produce a deeper, better quality sound with less effort. During my concerts I get many “second winds,” and at the end I feel the best: got used to that particular piano, completely warmed-up, concentrated, of course—physically tired, but at the same time energized, and I can go on and on!

*Q: Regarding your new release, what led you to select these two sets of variations in particular? Was it at the request of the label, or your own idea?*

A: It was my idea approved by the label. I thought it is nice to include couple of sets of variations in one collection. Brahms's and Schumann's styles are different, but complement each other. After all, they were best friends, and both were inspired by a love for Clara. This is why I also included on this CD the *Widmung*, dedicated to her.

*Q: Do you have any immediate project or plans that you'd like to share with our readers?*

A: My immediate project is recording the Schubert “Wanderer” Fantasie that you liked so much and four Ballades by Chopin.

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