Keeping Momentum with Pianist Blandine Waldmann

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A recent CD issue by French pianist Blandine Waldmann is entitled Momentum, and given that it contains her performance of my favorite piece of music, I jumped at the opportunity to interview her, which I did via email in November of 2018.

Please tell Fanfare *readers a little about your musical background and how you came to have an interest in playing piano. I'd also be interested to know who your teachers were and what were some of the valuable things you learned from them. Were there also other musicians who were influential upon your musical career?*

When I was younger, I played the violin for ten years at the same time I was studying the piano. With the violin, I was fascinated at how I could produce the sound directly myself, and also was impressed by the lyricism possible on the instrument. But what interested me even more than these things was the potential of creating harmony on the piano along with the possibility of polyphony with various colors in the different lines, more or less like an orchestra. I must say that it was very difficult to choose between these two instruments, and indeed, the violin still influences my piano playing in the way I think about phrases—their shape, direction, and sounds.

Most of my professional education has been undertaken outside of France. I worked with Dominique Cornil at the Royal Conservatory of Brussels, and she helped to consolidate my technique. Daniel Blumenthal at the Royal Flemish Conservatory was of great assistance in helping me perfect my ability to play with the range and expression of an orchestra, and I also worked there with Aleksandar Madžar who also helped me avoid technical difficulties by focusing on and anticipating the musical phrases inside a piece of music and mentally to project the sounds I wanted to produce. My training was also enhanced through master classes in Europe, and through listening to musicians I admire. These included Maria Callas and Menahem Pressler, both of whom give so much to their audiences that they effectively bare their souls; Martha Argerich helped me to value the direction of the phrase, while Wilhelm Kempff affected me by the depth of his performances and Boris Berezovsky by the incredible energy he creates when playing.

This will be your first solo CD in the Fanfare *archive. Is it actually your debut solo recording? What led you to choose the works that you included on it?*

Yes, this is my first solo CD, but I also took part as a soloist and chamber musician in a double CD of music by Swedish composer Jonathan Östlund. For my first solo CD, I chose these works mostly because they "speak" to me and it made sense to record them since I've played them many times in concert, something I believe has helped me mature in my playing of them.

What is the significance of its title, Momentum*?*

Momentum was chosen as the Latin equivalent of the French word, *élan. Momentum* in English, honors Scriabin and one of the chief characteristics of his musical language. Moreover, I like the various meanings suggested by this word; even the word itself has "musical" connotations. But it can also evoke the word *moment,* recalling particularly striking moments in my pianistic life. It is also similar to the word *monument,* a word that suggests the musical architecture in all these pieces and the novel structure of their musical forms.

Mussorgsky is quoted as having said, "Art is a means of conversing with people." Do you agree? If so, how do you "converse" with your audiences?

Lots of artists or composers would say "Art is a means of expressing myself to people," referring to the fact that music and art can express things that words cannot. What I find interesting in Mussorgsky's quote is the word *conversing* which introduces the idea of establishing a dialogue with someone. Mussorgsky is an innovator in descriptive music, particularly in *Pictures,* which allows a listener to visualize each of the miniatures almost as if it were animated. In this way, Mussorgsky proves himself a genius in conversing with people by composing music that is easy to understand.

As a performer, I agree completely with Mussorgsky: the artist must create a kind of exchange with the audience during a performance. This can occur by playing with great commitment and then feeling the energy of the audience in return, serving to encourage the performer even more, and create a "virtual circle" between them. To create this phenomenon requires that the performer give a lot of himself.

In the program notes to this CD, you state that Mussorgsky's music is "extremely innovative." In what ways specifically do you find it so?

First and foremost in his idea of the work based on juxtaposed miniatures and how he has linked all the paintings together with the varied Promenades. Schumann's *Carnaval* provided an antecedent for such a linking of small pieces, but Mussorgsky exceeded this example by writing in such contrasting styles. His innovation also comes in the way he induces emotion through his descriptive way of composing.

I would guess that you also see innovation in the piano music of Brahms and Scriabin. How does their originality differ from each other or from that of Mussorgsky?

While selecting the program of this CD, I was thinking of this fantastic era of musical history when two distinctive currents of composition occurred between the "pure music" of Brahms and the "program music" initiated by Wagner and Liszt, who (along with other adherents of that school) composed music based on extra-musical ideas (such as poems, or scenes from life). In addition, innovation was basically linked to the ideas of form and harmony. Brahms was considered the "traditionalist" continuing the pure musical aesthetic of Bach and Beethoven, and became one of the "Three B's," although he may have considered such a label too restrictive. Although he was the king of traditional form in his day, his genius in the Romantic musical language allowed him to produce novel miniatures exemplified by his *Variations* and *Intermezzi*. Compared to many of his contemporaries, his approach may be considered minimalist in that he eschewed their frills and extra-musical devices.

Scriabin, perhaps more than anyone else in his time, "escaped" from the rules, especially during his last period of composition, and certainly by the time of the Sonata no. 9 that you hear on this CD. His innovation surely comes in the inextricable musical form of the Sonata. In fact, his designation "Sonata" is really not referring to any kind of tripartite form as it previously implied, there being only one movement in this work. We know from Scriabin's music that his form follows a very sophisticated metrical system. In this 9th Sonata, the end looks back to the beginning without a clear conclusion, such that the questions posed in the piece remain unanswered. Most of all, his innovation lies in the continuation of the advanced harmonies initiated by Wagner. These include superimposed diminished or augmented quartal chords. Scriabin was also innovative in his use of trills and tremolos. These "vibrations in the ether" had a philosophical meaning for him, and he was certainly one of the first composers whose music could be described as being intended to lead performers and listeners to some kind of ecstatic state.

Thus, the innovations of Brahms and Scriabin differ considerably from that of Mussorgsky, who was chief among the Mighty Five in promoting Russian nationalist romanticism and rejecting occidental ideas at that period of time. In addition, Mussorgsky chose

a modal system for his composition of *Pictures.* Both of these ideas are *a priori* a step backwards.

All three of these composers were themselves pianists, and good ones. Do you in general find it more rewarding to perform music by composers who also played piano well?

Not particularly. The music itself is more important that its pianistic difficulties, and in some manner, arises from an inner song within the composer. As a performer, I believe that I must be as close as possible to the composer and his music as he wrote it. If a piece "speaks" to me, it will resonate in the core of my being, and I must open myself up to reveal the emotion that lies within me. This is the way a performer will create something very person—something that will reveal one's own personality.

What differences and similarities are there in your approach to performing the music of these three composers?

Performing the music of these three composers, requires finding a very different range of states within oneself. For Mussorgsky and Brahms, one must locate stability and centering, and in Brahms's music, a rounded sound without brutality in order to extract its deep and intense message. The sometimes brutal music of Mussorgsky requires playing with extreme variations in sound production, whereas in Scriabin's music, one must seamlessly depict the complexity of the harmonic and melodic strata and his change of emotional state, always searching for the emotional peaks.

In the Mussorgsky, I don't think he wanted his piece to be a "show" piece, where virtuosity is on display. I conceive of the piece more in the framework of Stravinsky or Prokoviev than of Tchaikovsky or Borodin. For my part, I have sought to create great ranges of fortissimo and pianissimo. The *"*Great Gate" must have a massive sound, describing great heroism. So I wanted to find a way to make the instrument sound at maximum volume while avoiding brittleness. However, in "Baba-Yaga," a description of a witch, you have to find a sound as ugly as possible. I also like the idea of describing the emotion that a visitor to the exhibition might have had after having looked at the painting. The Promenade after "Bydło" cannot be played as if it would be if it were placed elsewhere in the piece. The listener is still in the emotional state of "Bydło" at the beginning of this Promenade, and the tension must still reside in the silence that follows. It is easy to miss this because the only links between the individual pictures are the Promenades, during the visitor's (and composer's) walk through the Exhibition. Thus the Promenades must include both the reaction to the previous painting and the anticipation of the next one.

In Brahms's *Variations,* I think I have a very lyrical and expressive way of thinking about this work. Of course, this is a difficult piece, but it is more interesting to show the message of the composer as deeply as possible. The theme by the Italian Paganini is cast in a light mood, but is immediately transformed from the first variation to a much denser style of writing, and of course also some very lyrical passages. In my Brahms performances, I seek to bring out his massive compositional style through intensity rather than weight. Also, I try not to confuse sensitivity with sentimentality, which should be banned from his music entirely.

Regarding the performance of Scriabin, I think the mystical mood of the piece is something that should absolutely be captured. To play this piece, I think you have to know how to transition suddenly to another emotional state or to reach a culmination point without any transition. The alternation in Scriabin's music between the suspension of time and fulgurance is a particularly defining characteristic of his music, in fact.

Do you find it helpful to get to know something about the lives of the composers whose music you perform? Do you find their music linked with aspects of their lives?

Yes of course. I find it helpful to know that Mussorgsky based his *Pictures at an Exhibition* on his desire to restore the epic greatness of old Russia in a context of skepticism

regarding Western artistic currents. Knowing this will assist the performer in understanding better how to play the "Great Gate of Kiev" or "Baba-Yaga," for example. With Brahms, we can't ignore his acquaintance with Carl Tausig (who published many piano exercises), a friendship that precipitated his composition of the *Variations on a theme by Paganini,* or that the late *Intermezzi* were inspired by his deep friendship with Clara Schumann whom he had just lost. The late period of Scriabin cannot be separated from the philosophical system of Theosophy that he developed during his stay in Brussels, or the mystical metrical system that greatly influenced his composition, not to mention other oriental philosophical systems which were prevalent in Russia at that time.

Do you listen to other pianists' recordings of a piece before you perform or record it yourself?

I played these pieces many times in concerts without listening particularly to performances by other pianists. After maturing in my conception and performance of the Mussorgsky *Pictures* and Brahms *Variations,* and before recording them, I purchased a good number of different versions of them, just for curiosity.

I don't believe one has to play a work according to performance tradition where one exists. In fact, I think it's very difficult even to know what the tradition associated with a piece is. There are so many different ways to play a work, according to one's cultural background or the particular time of the recording. For example, I listened to Friedrich Gulda's version of the Brahms *Variations on a theme by Paganini,* and I must say that it's the one I like most, even though it's very old. I do think you have to respect the composer. It would be nonsensical for me to play the opening Promenade of the Mussorgsky differently just because listeners have never heard it like that before. A performer also has to be authentic to himself, so that his performance can convince the listener. We must, as it were, *defend* the pieces we play. If you play according to what you really feel inside and you believe in your performance, you'll be convincing and different.