

LITERATURE & ARTS

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Above the Technique

Valentina Tóth: Hungarian Horizon – Début CD

Mysterious harmonies and disharmonies as from the collective unconscious of a small and gloomy nation from the Eastern ends of Europe, archaism and purity expressed with tenderness and premature wisdom – the début CD of Valentina Tóth plays Hungarian piano music of Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, two challenging composers of the 20th century to whom the folk music of the Carpathian Basin represented the main source of inspiration.

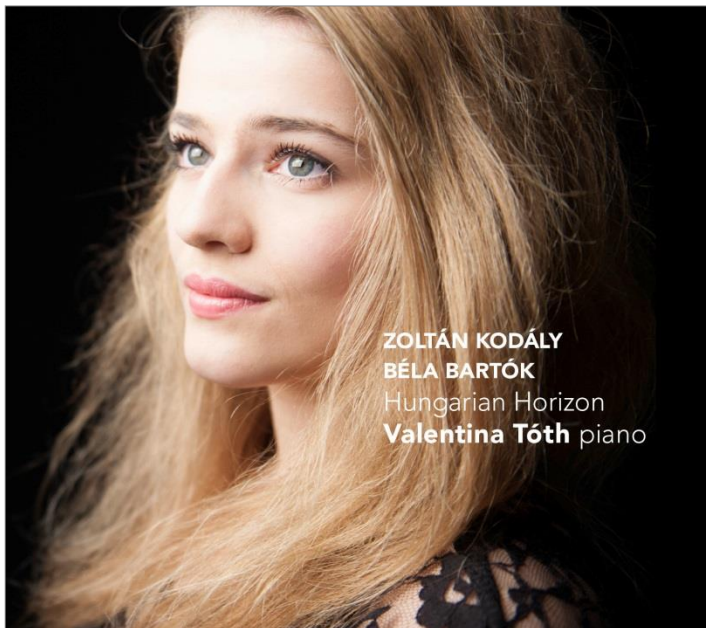
The début CD of the 18 year old Valentina, who is partly (3/8 part – as she likes to emphasize) Hungarian herself, was just introduced to the Dutch audience and the critiques are reacting eager, still she is talking about her emerging career with modesty. “I am very happy to perform music because I couldn't really see myself doing anything else” – confesses with an exceptional perspicacity and sincerity although her pianist career is not an ordinary one. She is not playing since early childhood, and the decision of becoming a piano artist was not his parents' but hers. She decided to play piano at the age of 9 and ever since she is taking her decisions with awareness.

The Début CD entitled Hungarian Horizon was released on 6th April with a concert in the Amstelkerk (Amsterdam), and since that date it receives 'purely positive' reviews, as the record label, the *Challenge Records* states on its website¹. Valentina herself receives a lot of requests and invitations from various media outlets in the Netherlands and at the beginning of July her CD will be released in the USA, too.

The success of the Hungarian Horizon has been deeply rooted in a remarkable marketing strategy and above all in Valentina's adorable personality. As her Hungarian (Tóth) grandfather emphasizes during a personal conversation, Valentina was born to be on stage. She radiates as she plays and talks, captivates and delights with the naivety and naturalness of a child and at the same time with the maturity of a self-conscious artist. But what this CD has to offer is even beyond this 'special'. Just as the grandparents represent the Hungarian origin of the Tóth family in the Netherlands, the mark of a somehow 'primitive' authenticity of an Eastern European folk tradition is incorporated in the music of Bartók and Kodály. Valentina in turn manages to address this music in which **“mere cosmetic and technical brilliance does not give much solace. On the contrary, it asks for internalized and integrated pure musicality without any frills”** as Maarten Brandt puts in his review for Opus Klassiek.

I met Valentina in The Hague on a sunny spring morning. She is just about to finish her first year at the Royal Conservatory. She speaks ambitiously yet with a remarkable humbleness for music. The initially more formal discussion slowly introduces me into the daily life, the joys and struggles of a young pianist just as in a laboratory where the hard work is nourished by boundless dreams.

¹ <http://www.challengerecords.com>



<http://www.valentinatoth.nl>

How did you start playing the piano?

When I was younger I played in a musical 'The Sound of Music'. The fact that I got in was a big thing in that time in the Netherlands and everybody liked the performance. Besides, I always wanted to play the piano, so I asked my parents. My mother started to look for a good teacher and it took really long. My parents always supported me but it had to be my own idea.

And that was when you were 9, a bit later than usual in this career.

Everybody at the Conservatory started at 4 or 5. Sometimes I felt it too, that I am a late starter, but on the other hand it has the advantage that it was always my own idea. Just as moving to The Hague. I told my parents that I want to come to this school, so they really helped me to get here.

You define yourself not only as a piano artist but also as a theatre singer.

I think it's possible to combine those two things: the piano with theatre. I like creating a moment live, on the stage, creating a sphere and making people feel something at the moment.

Are you doing this consciously?

Of course. Every music has a story behind it, and I think every musician will try to create feelings when he plays, just like actors and singers do. Everyone plays differently, so everyone creates a different story. This is what I enjoy most in making music. For example, now I'm playing a piece, a Prélude from Debussy and the title, Brouillard means fog or in the 'mist'. He created beautiful sounds and you can do almost all of it very soft, calm and delicate. You have to use a lot of pedals. I try to see the mist in front of

my eyes and to create a mysterious sound. It works more with pictures or feeling. Like, if something feels very happy, you can imagine it as a summer breeze.

When you're practising do you work also on these images and pictures?

First you have to work on the piece itself: the notes must be right and the technique must be good. When you have all the notes and it sounds nice, then it starts this part of the work. When I can really play the way I want it, as a story, only then is the music living. When you are above the technique you can do a lot with the musical part.

Do you make up stories as well?

Sometimes I have stories like: there was this little girl and then the mother came... It is fun also because you can play with the imagination. In the 'Mist' for example there is a wave, and I see it as if the wind would blow the leaves up and down. Or when I was younger, my mother used to tell me a little story from the time she was a child. She lived in a big house with a lot of sisters and brothers and they had a lot of mice. But the children liked them so much that they were feeding them. Once when I played a piece which was very mouse-like I was thinking at this story.

You are also introducing your pieces by telling a couple of words to the audience.

Yes, I like to tell the people what is the piece about. Sometimes you play pieces and there is so much to tell about. Everybody likes to hear why or how the piece was written or what the composer meant or said about it. It doesn't have to be long, but it also makes you to listen differently. At the beginning I was quite shy, looking everywhere while talking, but now I'm a bit better at it.

That sounds like a lot of work. Where do you have the perseverance from?

You really have to want it for yourself, and you have to keep the image in your head. If you quit, nobody will think, That's a pity, because there are so many more good musicians. Sometimes the pieces are really difficult, things are just not working out with your piano, and then you ask yourself: Why do I do it? I'm never going to be good enough! But in the end I'm not giving up and I keep trying.

And meanwhile you released your debut CD...

Yes, that is true. I was really lucky that I had the chance to make this CD, and I have learned so much with it. Of course, it is nice to have your own CD. If things are going well you have a way more motivation. But there is still so much I need to learn.

On your first CD you play 'Hungarian' piano music. What does that mean to you?

One of my grandfathers is Hungarian, and I was always quite proud that I was not only Dutch. I kind of grew up with Hungarian music because my parents were listening to it often, and I loved it a lot. When I was 12 I played Hungarian music for the first time. It was a Sonatina from Bartók. It wasn't that hard but I liked it so much. So when it came to the CD I proposed that maybe I could do Hungarian music and the record label also liked the idea. This is how we did it.

The Hungarians are told to be 'eerlijk' (nl.) which means fair or straight in English. How can you identify yourself with this?

Well, I try to be honest and fair myself, but I think the fairness is also in the nature of the music. It is 'oprecht' (nl. honest, true), there is nothing behind it, it is very straight, very to the point. That is its strengths, that is what makes it so pure.

Bartók is not the easiest music and the Hungarians feeling is also a bit darker.

Yes, that's true, the Hungarian music is always a bit 'naar' (nl. unpleasant). I tried to understand it and get the feeling but it was a really long trip. There is already so much in the music, what you have to do before you can make it on your own. It took me about one and a half year to get to this result.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3uzD1ks2338>

And wasn't it hard for you to play Bartók at age of 16?

The recording was really hard because you're really alone on your own in this room only with the piano and a technician. That was pretty new for me. I've never done anything like that before, because most of the time you have the audience. But actually I did enjoy it. It is only you and the music which thus can get to a different level and it becomes more introvert.

What is different when you are playing in front of an audience?

It's really very different from the CD recording. When you're on the stage and you play, you just lock everything else. You play as good as you can and you try to make beautiful music. And than afterwards you will see what the audience thought. The amount of applause is usually a good indication.

And what about the stage-fever?

Sometimes I'm very nervous and that hears in the play: your hands are shaking, sometimes you can't make a nice sound because your breathing is so heavy. Now I'm a bit more used to play on the stage, but it also depends on how important something it is, or how important you make it for yourself.

Sometimes out of blue you get very nervous before a concert which is not even that important, but it just happens. Now that I have more experience I can control it a bit better but still, it's something you have to learn how to cope with.

Who would make you nervous?

Well, there are a lot of good pianists and good musicians. I also find scary to play in front of other students, or to play piano for my teacher or other teachers, because everyone knows your piece very well and everyone has a very good level of playing.

And what about your parents or your Hungarian grandfather?

... (after a moment of thinking) No! My grandfather is quite proud of me and he would never judge me because of a mistake, so that doesn't make me extra nervous.

What was the worse stage experience you have ever had? Or should we better talk about the best?

No, no, let's talk about the worse! (She laughs.) Once when I was 13, I had a concert at a semifinal of a competition. I knew I can play my piece well because I already played it in the first and second round, but somehow I got so nervous. I thought, now that I'm in the semifinals I have to make it clear that I belong there. I was playing around 5 o'clock in the afternoon so I had the whole day to stress myself, and I really played bad. I was nervous and tensioned, everything was too loud and I lost it and afterwards I was very mad with myself. But actually you learn a lot from the bad concert experiences.

And did you get in the finals?

No. I got a special diploma but I didn't get in the finals, and that was the right decision from the committee.

Back to the CD. When I first saw it, I thought, it's really perfectly designed, the cover, the pictures, your age, the Hungarian identity you have. Everything fits so well that it made me wonder, who is behind it?

Thank you! (And she laughs flushing.) It had to be a cover and the label was making the photo-shoot. There were a few pictures I could choose from. There were a lot of pictures I didn't like but at the end I am quite happy with the final picture. Regarding the booklet, we were brainstorming and we thought of better doing an interview instead of long descriptions. It proved to be a good idea.

The CD is not only music but also a cover, pictures, your face, which has to be marketed.

Well, yes. This is quite difficult, because of course I would like it to be about the music and not about me. There are a lot of people who are very good in having connections, to click with lot of important

people, but I am not very good at that. I just try to do my job with my music. But you are right, you really have to promote yourself. If I'm at a concert I'm going to put on a nice dress but not only because of the image. I also like it, and if you look good, you also play better. But unfortunately I'm not much of getting myself into the market.

Does it make you uncomfortable that the CD is not only about music but also about your face?

Well, yes. My record label for example, they just want a nice picture and they expect you to look in a specific way because that sells. Just like a CD with a story behind sells better, and of course that is their purpose. You can not only think about 'I have to play this, because the audience likes it' or 'I have to look or to act like this'. I get a bit uncomfortable with that because it's not all about that, but it's certainly part of it. But this is difficult for most of the musicians. Every job has its nice and down sides and the musicians have to face these kind of problems.

In most reviews of the CD the same adjectives show up: melancholic, passionate, romantic or dramatic. How can you fit yourself in this image?

Sometimes I don't know what to do with the reviews, beyond the fact that it is a nice review. About the romantic, of course, the music itself is very romantic and passionate, and I am happy if they say that, but I never really know, how to fit it with myself or the person who I am. Besides I am only 18.

How do you see yourself in the future?

That is always a difficult question because you have your dreams, but you can never know if you are going to succeed or not. I really like making chamber music and I think I would be really lucky to have a successful ensemble. I'm thinking of a piano trio: piano, cello, violin. And I would like to have a lot of concerts with the ensemble and maybe combine it with a solo piano career. I also see a lot of people in the music business that combine the classical music with theatre, and I'd love to do that: to perform all my life.

