

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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An interview with  
**Olga Tverskaya**

**ALISON HOLLOWAY**

*On 16 March I went to hear the young Russian fortepianist Olga Tverskaya give an afternoon recital at the Purcell Room. Playing a copy of a Viennese Brodman fortepiano of 1823 by David Winston, she captivated the audience with a sensitive and expressive performance of works by Haydn, Mozart, Schubert and Vorisek, finishing with a moving interpretation of Glinka's *La Séparation*. A few months later, on the brink of the release of her new recording *Music From the Court of St Petersburg* (Opus 111), we met to discuss her musical career over that most English of indulgences, afternoon tea.*

**T**HE FIRST THING that strikes you about Olga Tverskaya, before you hear her play, is her size. At the same time delicate and elegant, she makes anyone over five feet tall feel like an ox; little wonder, then, that *Harpers & Queen* had recently given her 'the treatment' for a feature in an unremittingly scarlet designer dress. When I had finally satisfied her that, no, a regular photograph would do and no, no makeover was required, we settled down to a pot of Earl Grey tea. Hardly had we stirred the leaves and poured the first cup before I was impressed by the second thing that strikes you about Olga Tverskaya: the strength of her personality. After you have heard her play, of course, it all falls into place.

Olga was born in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) and began learning the piano at the age of six. This was at her mother's wish, although her family background was not a musical one, and buying a piano was, for them, a great struggle financially. But she was very keen, quick to learn, and soon developed a good sense of rhythm although, in her own words, "not a genius". She describes the method of teaching music in Russia as quite forceful: if you don't succeed, if you don't practice, you're out: but fortunately she enjoyed learning to play for its own sake and did not have to be forced. She

was much encouraged by her teacher, who organised concerts for Olga and her other pupils throughout the USSR — sometimes as many as two a week. This early experience of public performance was, Olga feels, important in giving a sense of purpose to an activity in which she was already "very determined, very ambitious". Giving everything to it, and carrying it through to the end, is something you can still find in her playing.

#### **The Road to London**

Olga came to the fortepiano relatively late in her studies, five years ago, when she first came to England to study with Christopher Kite at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. She was drawn to the instrument, first of all, through her love of the Classical and (particularly) the Early Romantic repertoire: she felt "it's what I should



be doing". She wanted to play on the instruments for which the music had originally been composed. Finding a good fortepiano and getting to know what it can do — discovering the best of it — is, she found, a bit of an adjustment; but when you find it, "when you understand it, it can be beautiful". Having discovered that playing the fortepiano was "her", she says she can never go back to the modern piano.

Olga found her way to London via Israel where she graduated from Tel-Aviv University. After one year at the Guildhall she was desperate to stay for a second year and was fortunate enough to find sponsors who made it possible: helping with her studies, buying a piano for her and helping with the necessary legal arrangements. Olga feels very much at home in England now and is very happy with the solo and chamber work that comes her way. When I asked her whether she would like to go back to Russia, her answer was unequivocal: "That would be death!" Why? "There are no fortepianos in Russia!"

### Back in the USSR

So doesn't she miss anything about Russia? "Number one: the bread; number two, picking mushrooms; number three, fishing." In describing the system of teaching music in Eastern Europe she had both good and bad things to say. Music is taken very seriously and the aim is nothing less than professionalism: children go to music schools and study for 3-4 hours each day, then to colleges and academies; they are given a strong background in musical literature, history, harmony, counterpoint, sight-reading, accompaniment and chamber work. The flipside of this is that the amateur approach has died and music is no longer made purely for pleasure. Sadly, she feels, while amateurism has declined there are few opportunities for the professional, and many musicians find themselves leaving the country to pursue their careers.

Teaching, and methods of teaching, are close to Olga's heart. She has put a lot of time into teaching herself and now enjoys teaching others, particularly young children because she can train them "from the beginning". Her youngest pupil is seven. From the Eastern European tradition she passes on an education in *how* music is made; that is, not just the sequence of sounds themselves but how they are produced, the technical understanding of the instrument and a familiarity through exercises with how it works and feels.

### A matter of choice

Should a young child begin his or her keyboard studies on the fortepiano? After a lot of thought, Olga has come to the conclusion that it's not a good idea. She feels that the early music movement has not yet developed far enough; there are simply not enough fortepianos around, they are expensive to buy, and there are not enough teachers and opportunities for chamber work. Young pupils would therefore be 'deprived' in these respects in comparison to their modern-piano colleagues. In addition, the fortepiano is a more difficult instrument to learn because it is harder to control and subject to more 'imperfections' in the keyboard and mechanics. Finally, however, she is adamant that players should have their own, conscious reasons for wanting to play the fortepiano, and that children should wait until they are able to make that important choice for themselves.

It is the element of choice, of enthusiasm, of excitement about the instrument which also inspires her work with adults. She does some teaching in Spain, where the fortepiano revival is still in its early days and there is a great sense of appreciation among the musicians she works with for this 'new' instrument and what it can give.

### Keeping out of mischief

By the time four cups of tea had been drunk and the teapot gone cold, one thing I could not be in doubt about was Olga's enthusiasm for performing and her passion for the fortepiano and its repertoire. She is working on a staggering number of recordings with *Opus 111*, from the Russian music on her recent disc to Schubert solo works, sonatas for cello and fortepiano by Beethoven and Brahms (with Peter Bruns), Mozart violin sonatas (with Fabio Biondi) and a variety of works by Mendelssohn. Tours to Japan, Prague, Israel and Spain will also be keeping her pretty busy. What about another piano? "When I'm rich and famous." At this rate, that shouldn't be long.

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