

MARTIN BERKOFSKY INTERVIEWS PIANIST ALESSANDRA POMPILI



AN INTERVIEW WITH PIANIST ALESSANDRA POMPILI

Some months ago an unexpected package arrived at the Cristofori Foundation. A sampler disc from Vatican Radio and a notably self-effacing letter speaking about the wish to serve others through music introduced the pianist Alessandra Pompili. My curiosity to hear the recording was rewarded with playing of rare and unusual beauty, poetry, and purpose.

A developing correspondence with Miss Pompili revealed a person of admirable sensitivity, imagination, and genuine care for others; a musician setting a singular and honourable example of how music serves and enriches. Miss Pompili has kindly agreed to this interview which we are honoured to print below.

+++++

Martin Berkofsky: "Miss Pompili, critics have praised your playing as "exquisite and sensitive, impressive, expressive, and completely absorbing." Those of us fortunate to have heard you, have found rare and inspired qualities to your performances. I know you to be an artist of great modesty and humility, but wonder if we might beg a brief invitation into your world to learn how and why you became your unique musical self?"

Alessandra Pompili: "My first contact with music took place at home. I remember loving the radio program featuring classical music that was aired in the morning: mum and I would listen whilst I prepared to go to school. As a child I went to a private institution where, on the contrary to what happens in Italian public schools, we were taught music right from the start. It was mainly singing and playing tiny castanets, tambourines and maracas, but it fostered dramatically my liking for music. I loved the lessons, and they made up for all other subjects (which I found a bit lifeless). It was our music teacher, a nun, who noticed that I could sing well in tune, and suggested my mother to introduce me to an instrument. She was my first piano teacher but I did not study long with her, since she belonged to a missionary order and was soon sent abroad.

Since my family did not have any connection or knowledge of music, it was a difficult task to find another teacher. Until I was fourteen I carried on playing for fun. Then mum decided that I might well try to take some exams at the Conservatoire and we searched for a teacher who was willing to prepare me. Fortunately I have always been very quick in learning and was gifted with a flexible hand: thus, although I never had any technical training at all, I passed all my exams and finally graduated in five years (instead of the customary 10) with the highest mark. At that time I was a student of Sergio Calligaris at the Conservatorio Casella (L'Aquila): he was the one who taught me to think and ponder every single note within the score and make it meaningful. At the beginning I found such an approach very traumatic: when I would finish practicing my head was on the point of bursting. With time, however, I became accustomed and the habit of concentrating turned into second nature. Calligaris must have been very patient with me in the two years leading to my diploma. I was an irritating student all the way through, since I studied only three to four hours per week (of course he never knew this). The reality was, I could not be brought to do more. The same was true whilst studying under Marcella Crudeli as a postgraduate at the Ecole Normale de Musique de Paris. Same hours same excellent result, and I got my Brevet with the congratulations of the jury (the President of the Ecole, at that time, was Pierre-Petit, music critic for *Le Figaro*). However great the accomplishments were, I knew that I had to do something in

relation to technique. My hands would run as usual, but I got terrible cramps in my arm and a painful cyst had appeared on my wrist. A specialist warned against complications of an operation. Depressed and crippled at the piano, I finally found a teacher who was willing to help me. This wonderful man, Luigi D'Ascoli, disassembled and reassembled me as you would do with a robot transformer - without ever once losing his patience. I found myself renewed and redefined. Since then I resumed my study with Calligaris, whom I now [this interview was taken in 2009] meet a couple of times per year after my move to England. With his usual generosity, he still gives me suggestions and indications every time I put up a new programme.

Another important figure in my education was Arnaldo Graziosi, with whom I studied for several years. Although quite old he had fire in his veins, and would play with remarkable accuracy and unflinching passion. His suicide left me with a void, and whenever a performance approaches I would say a prayer to ask for his support and to thank him for what he gave me.

In terms of inspiration, I find nature to be a powerful stimulus. I love walking in the countryside and sometimes I find myself solving musical problems when strolling among the trees or in an open field. An inspiration would come uncalled and unexpectedly, like a breeze. When this happens, I feel blessed and thank the Lord for such privilege.

Bizarre as it might seem, however, it is the sky, the element within nature that never fails to inspire me. What is the sky, one might ask? Nothing but a blue canvas. Not true to me. Whenever I look at it, especially when the horizon is clear or with few clouds, I feel completely overwhelmed. A smile appears on my face and I feel totally belonging to this world, as if I could embrace it within my arms. In the sky I can clearly see everybody who is dear to me: my parents, my family, my friends, those who have already left us. At that moment they are all there with me, in the same place. I love them unconditionally and they love me for the imperfect person I am. It is truly a marvellous sensation, almost beyond belief. How powerfully that this relates to my music is almost impossible for me to express in words.

Faith is the final key. When I put my mind on the way I started playing and the remarkable easiness accompanying my study, I sense that I was given a gift. As I said before, nobody in my family is musical. I am therefore brought to conclude that I was freely presented with a gift I never asked for. This awareness is also crucial to my approach to the audience, since I always feel the desire to transmit joy in my music. I was given something that brings me joy, and the minimum I can do is to share this joy with my fellow humans.”

+++++

Martin Berkofsky: "You are remarkably accomplished and rounded. In addition to your musical diplomas, you have a Doctorate in Art History. Has this given you a broader look and more universal understanding of your music? Would you advise young music students also to expand their knowledge in this way?"

Alessandra Pompili: "Absolutely. I believe in education and the power it instills into people. Power to look more deeply into reality and into ourselves from different angles and different perspectives. Power to understand what surrounds us. Power to be inspired by apparently uninspiring elements. And this naturally reflects into your playing, even if one not always realizes it.

I do not think it matters what you study alongside music: it may be mathematics, medicine, diplomatics or any other subject. The important point is to study anyway, for the broadening horizon it provides cannot be replaced by anything else. Some might think that further education is a dispersal of energy and it is better to focus on your chosen subject only. But we waste time in many ways: watching awful programs on the telly, talking to annoying people, going to boring places. Study is extremely fun if it is taken with a sense of humour, and it does not necessarily turn people into hermits. Through study you also meet many interesting characters and can make friends for life."

+++++

Martin Berkofsky: "Many young pianists still spend their formative years trying to win victories over each other. We joke that Europe's summer trains have no more room for vacationers, that they have been taken over completely by the swarms of competition-bound pianists. It appears that you have not chosen this path. Have you not wished to be famous and to wear the laurel wreath?"

Alessandra Pompili: "Although I can be a competitive person, I always felt that music competitions were not for me. Not so much because of the little time I spent at the piano (by the way, nowadays things have considerably changed and I practice much more), but because of the focus that competitions risk to instill in participants. If music comes first, then I want to think of music only: I cannot worry about juries, participants, rounds, awards and so on. I prefer to concentrate on what I can do on the instrument - and that is already difficult enough - rather than becoming the bad copy of myself for the sake of winning a prize. Of course I had my chances and was encouraged to take part in competitions, but I always turned them down with some excuses. If the inevitable implication of my choice is never to become famous, fair enough. I never wished to be a superstar performer anyway, so I would not be disappointed. On the contrary, I would be seriously disappointed if I did not become a good one."

Martin Berkofsky: "Sinistre Disastro" and "La Lugubre Gondola," are some of the late works of Franz Liszt which you are performing. You are now planning some rather unique multi-media performances of Liszt's "Via Crucis." Liszt has been criticised by some as a crowd-pleasing virtuoso, but many others see him as philosopher, visionary, and finally Abbe. Could you share your thoughts about Franz Liszt?"

Alessandra Pompili: "I regard Franz Liszt as one of the most extraordinary pioneers in the history of music. Apart from "inventing" the recital, creating the form of the symphonic poem and fostering the music of names such as Schubert, Schumann, Weber and Wagner, Liszt truly paved the way to 20th century music. His late compositions already belong to it.

What fascinates me most about Liszt is his inexhaustible inventiveness and the multiplicity of his inspiration. You find the gypsy in the Rhapsodies, the poet in the *Année de Pèlerinage*, the salon-player in pieces like the *Valse-Improptu*, the virtuoso in the *Etudes*, the mystical in his religious works, the lion in the *Ballades* and the visionary in the *Sonata*. You could not wish for more variety in the production of a single composer. Admittedly, within this production not everything is of the same quality. But the beauty and the charm of the greater of Liszt' works make up for the few lesser ones."

+++++

Martin Berkofsky: "You are now recording and producing programmes for Vatican Radio in Rome. Could you tell us about your work and plans at Vatican Radio?"

Alessandra Pompili: "I have just finished preparing a seven-week series on the life and music of Franz Liszt. The recording will take place in late September and the broadcast will cover November and December. In January 2010 I will go back to Vatican Radio to record my own recital with the late music of Liszt, among which are compositions like *Schlaflos! Frage und Antwort*, *Nuages Gris* and *Sancta Dorothea*.

It is also my intention to prepare a series of programmes on Alan Hovhaness to celebrate the centenary of his birth in 2011. Hovhaness is little known in Italy, and 2011 could be a great opportunity to introduce his work through Vatican Radio. Whether I will work on another program to be broadcast in 2010 between Liszt and Hovhaness I have not decided yet."

+++++

Martin Berkofsky: "You have been performing works by Sergio Calligaris, a fascinating composer whom we should all know better. Could you tell us something about him?"

Alessandra Pompili: "Calligaris was my teacher at the Conservatorio and is the one with whom I never lost touch. As I said before, we still manage to meet during the year to talk and make music. In L'Aquila he taught piano, but the composer's side was never completely overshadowed by the performer. Thus I remember witnessing the composition and the rehearsals of the Piano Concerto op. 29: Calligaris would play fragments of the work in the breaks between students. I really already knew the concert by heart when the time came for the actual performance. Now that I am a performer of his music I feel grateful for all his work and teaching of the past years.

Calligaris is an extremely meticulous composer, and this is reflected in his music. Nothing is improvised and unplanned: although his inspiration is extemporaneous, this is then channelled through a very rigorous and complex compositional technique. Whatever work you pick from his catalogue you find that the attention to the form is always there (and it could not be otherwise, since he was taught composition by a student of Paul Hindemith). I find one of the most fascinating characteristics of his music to be the balance between the freedom and liberty of inspiration and the logic and rigor of the form. The two blend and mould each other without constraints, and the final result is absolutely captivating.

Contrary to what sometimes happens with contemporary music, I find his works to be received enthusiastically. Although his music is atonal it often gives the impression of leaning around some sort of gravitational centre, and this - I think - is another key element which is much appreciated."

+++++

Martin Berkofsky: "Which new programmes and new composers are you planning to present in future concerts?"

Alessandra Pompili: "This is a very difficult question. I am fascinated by so many styles and composers that I often have the strong instinct of reading every single score that passes through my hands. On the other hand, the rational side within me asks for order and organization. I try to combine rationality and irrationality when building a programme. I search for unusual yet meaningful combinations (I guess this comes from my University studies); programmes that resemble a salad are not really for me!

In any case, Hovhaness is certainly on the list for future recitals. I will put in my repertoire other music by Calligaris as well. As for the “old masters” I hope to expand on Chopin, Liszt and Prokofieff.”

+++++

Martin Berkofsky: "I have been particularly touched to learn of your wishes to devote more and more of your performances to the benefit of charities and good causes. Could you tell us of your ongoing work in this direction, why you are choosing this path?"

Alessandra Pompili: “The answer to this question is partly linked to the desire I have to transmit joy to my fellow humans. On the other hand, we live in a world that seems to offer a solution for everything (illnesses, depression, poverty, hardship), yet there are so many people suffering that one is prone to ask whether such solutions are really at hand or even possible. The next question is what music can materially do towards the many problems surrounding us. For sure it can provide a spiritual and psychological help, but I believe that it can work in other ways too. We have the proof that music is extremely successful towards raising funds for charitable causes. So, why not investing one’s skills for such enterprises? It is to everybody’s benefit: the musician’s, because he/she is doing something of social consequence, the audience’s, because they are contributing to the charitable cause whilst taking pleasure from a performance (for which generally they have to pay anyway), and finally the charitable cause itself, which enjoys the fruit of the performance. Really, there is no loser in playing for charities. Plus I believe that it is the moral imperative of each of us to help the others, in every way we can. Musicians can do a lot in this respect.

Last year [2008] I have taken part in a huge concert in Carlisle to raise funds for charity. On the near horizon, a benefit for a new school in Marlborough. It has been wonderful to see so many people working towards the same goal with enduring passion and with the sense of doing something of consequence. You feel part of an enterprise that goes way beyond the “small boundary” of a performance. You feel fulfilled and joyful to see your efforts turning into a tangible help to others. It makes music count.”

+++++

Martin Berkofsky: "In a memorable interview with Bruce Duffie, the great Romanian baritone Alexandru Agache was asked about the purpose of music. He replied: "To enjoy and to make more happiness and to make us think. What the human being cannot say, there is the music which can explain or give hope to the people." Speaking softly but with deep emotion, he continued, "When I

was younger and living in Romania under dictatorship, the music was the only hope sometimes for me and for other people."

How do you feel about music and its meaning for the people of the world?"

Alessandra Pompili: "It is impossible not to agree with Agache about the purpose of music. I always felt strongly about the subtle yet forceful power it has on people's lives and emotions. I must apologize for the randomness of my answer, but the topic is so huge that I cannot but touch on a couple of points only.

A silly story to start: I remember that one of the best gifts I received when I was a kid was a walkman. I spent hours listening to classical music on scratchy cassettes, and I would bring the walkman with me wherever I could. I loved walking whilst my mind wandered from one thought to the other as the music suggested. I soon found out that I had to stop playing on the walkman whilst I walked on the road, since the music had such a powerful effect that I was not able to control myself. If the music was exuberant and on a fast tempo I would walk at super speed, hitting any unfortunate pedestrian who came my way. If the music was sombre and melancholic I would slowly wobble my way around, taking at least twice the time to reach my destination. In both cases I would make even more a fool of myself, swaying my arms and rolling up my eyes as if I was in the presence of a supernatural apparition. In a sense nothing belonged to me anymore, because my mind was totally captured and transported into another realm and the body reacted as a consequence. Whenever I reflect on the force of music, the walkman story comes back to my memory.

In ancient times, music emboldened by the sound of trumpets. Music is pivotal to charge us with courage, even courage to endure under a dictatorship, as Agache surely meant with his words.

In the same way as it provides strength, music dispenses hope and comfort. This happens even at the level of everyday life. Despite that we live in an age of apparent wealth people have many problems: problems at work, within the family, struggle against poor health, solitude or depression. We are all affected by one or the other concern at some point in our existence, as happens to a good many who attend performances. Whenever I am on stage, it is my primary goal to give those who are in distress two hours when they can forget their problems and not be burdened by them. Call it a comfort bubble, if you wish. I would like to say to each of them: "Breathe in the soothing and encouragement that music can provide. Put aside your concern and do not think about it. Enjoy the present moment at the best with the help of this great art. It will not solve your problem, perhaps, but it may help towards finding a way out. Just make the most of it".

In my simple mind, this is the meaning and purpose of music in our lives. Music is there to help us becoming better in whatever we do and endure. As Agache said, no word is able to give the same result as music, which talks to the heart of people whilst being intelligible by everybody.

I find the responsibility of the musician towards his fellow humans to be, in this sense, enormous. It is a mission to spread hope, strength and courage to those who do not possess them, and to revitalize these feelings into unsure hearts. If a musician can look at his/her professional life in this way, he will realize how much is at stake during a performance. At the very end, the power of music to make us better people is what counts: strive to pass it to the others.”

+++++

Martin Berkofsky: "Thank you for sharing with us, Miss Pompili. Our most sincere wishes that you may continue to bring beauty and inspiration to those whom you touch with your music."

Alessandra Pompili: “It has been my pleasure to reply to your questions. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to express my thoughts and feelings. I will try to make the most of your wishes: a promise is a promise!”