

MIKHAIL VOSKRESENSKY and ALEKSEI TAKENOUCI

Professor Mikhail Voskresensky is leading pianist, judge, and internationally renowned pedagogue. Being Artist-in-Residence at Juilliard School, he splits his time also teaching at Moscow Conservatory and Toho Gakuen, Japan.

Music is the Art, and because it is art, music is not the same as typing on a computer keyboard. Often, students and pianists play notes, and unfortunately, music stays on the level of typing on a keyboard. What makes an artist an artist, is his or her ability to create sounds so that notes are not just keys being played. Notes become bridges that connect each sound to have meaning, and so, give rise to imagination in the listener. A musician should be interested in all arts and seek to understand how other artists express their feelings through their medium. As a musician sees the paintings of Van Gogh or Edvard Munch, he should strive to understand their express their understanding of the world through their paintings. And it is the same with all paintings. Experience takes time...

AT: Mikhail Sergeivitch, to begin, please can you tell us something about yourself and how piano competitions influenced your understanding of music.

MV: I think that my education as a musician was my foremost influence on my understanding of music. I was born to a musical family. My mother was my first piano teacher and she did, what in those times was a very bold move in Soviet Russia. I was born in south of Ukraine during harsh and famished time and in spite of this, she sent me alone to Moscow to study music when I was only thirteen years old. I was accepted to Moscow Music School where I had an extraordinary teacher, Ilya Klechko. He died recently at a very old age. Klechko was an amazing pedagogue who opened for me a totally new world of music, a world filled with feelings, sorrow, grief, joy, and happiness. In essence, he showed me how to experience music. Of course, he also gave me a technical foundation that is necessary to convey one's ideas and feelings. Later in the Moscow Conservatory, I studied with Professor Lev Oborin, a musician with remarkable cultural background and wide knowledge who gave me the awareness of professionalism and metier, the French word for mastery. All this influenced me much more than participation in international piano competitions. I would say that competitions strengthen the pianist psychologically giving him an opportunity to understand what it means to go on stage and what is expected of a concert career. Giving concerts is a highly nerve wracking experience that creates much stress. I remember that when I played for the first time at International Robert Schumann Piano Competition, my eyes could not see anything because I was so nervous. Incidentally, I did win that competition, but the point is that it was a very frightening and stressful experience at first. However, the experience I gained from this was immense. In all, I participated in four international competitions that all ended successfully for me, and with each successive experience, I understood more and more what is expected of a pianist. One of my most memorable competitions was the Cliburn International Competition in 1962. At that time, I had already graduated Moscow Conservatory, had my first child, and was twenty-seven years old. It was a very strong and interesting competition the creative work needed for this competition was very inspirational. In addition, it was graced by the presence of Van Cliburn which made the experience very special. I became acquainted with Van Cliburn in 1958 when

he won the first prize at Tchaikowsky International Piano Competition in Moscow. I remember will how I did not feel well at the Cliburn Competition and he himself prepared chicken soup for me especially so that I would recover and feel fit for the competition. It was very interesting. Of course, piano competitions, and especially during those years, gave a pianist a possibility of a professional career. Russia, or Soviet Union at that time, was a huge country and in each city, there was a fabulous philharmonia and a strong concert organization. This gave me an opportunity to perform a lot and have a solid concert experience.

AT: During these years, perhaps these last twenty years, how have the competitions changed?

MV: Oh, they have changed a lot. And unfortunately, not during the last twenty years, but the last forty years. Please understand that when I participated in competitions, there were very few competitions. There were only the major central competitions. Tchaikowsky was just beginning as was Marguarite Longe in Paris. Leeds International Piano Competition was still a few years away. The most famous was the Chopin competition in Warsaw. And so, when the Cliburn competition appeared in 1962, it was a very big sensation. Then, competitions began to appear in every country, among them, the Tokyo one, which already has died. Literally, competitions were everywhere, being born and also disappearing. I believe that basically, the world is not capable of handling such a huge quantity of competitions and the talent that they create, and because of this, the level of the winners has deteriorated considerably. In big competitions, one still sees high standard talented winners. I remember well my talk with one of the organizers of the Busoni Competition and his remark that not all first prize winners are of equal caliber. During one year, Leila Silverstein was a winner and she was an obvious star, however, at other years, the winners were much more modest and less memorable. I truly believe that most international competitions have lowered their standards nowadays, however, on the other hand, they became a means for a pianist to demonstrate and show their talent. In this way, competitions are a necessary experience for a young pianist. Of course, there are exceptions, like E. Kissin who did not participate in competitions because he was a wunderkind from his childhood. But as to others, they are forced, so to say, to play in competitions.

AT: What advise would you give to a young pianist preparing for a competition?

MV: First of all, I am against young pianists prepare for a competition. I believe that participation in international competitions is for musicians who have already learnt much in their profession. They must have a big repertoire, a huge concert experience, and only then, they should participate in competitions because by then, they would have developed their own personality. Personality of a youth is still being molded and there is no way one can say what the end result will be. I would recommend everyone before the ages of eighteen to study, train, and expand their stage experience. It is very fashionable now to organize competitions for children or even teenagers. This is happening everywhere, in America, Russia, and other countries, but I am not a supporter of such an approach. It is not a method of educating a young pianist. It is not education. A person must study regularly. It is said that repetition is the mother of knowledge. For example, someone at twelve years old wins a prize with some three pieces. Yes, he can play them well, but three pieces does not create a luggage. At that age, one cannot think, cannot contemplate, and cannot feel. All this can be learnt but it takes time. In the conservatory, all

advanced students want to participate in competitions. Personally, I do not stop anyone from trying. If one wants, it is up to him to try and prepare himself for the competition. It gives a person an experience, gives him a chance to try out his strengths and weaknesses, and above all, a psychological training that is so necessary for a concert career. Competitions do give a pianist an opportunity to show himself to the world. The advice that I would give to someone preparing for a competition, well, is to have a big repertoire from which he can choose the required pieces that are best suited for him. I am very against the approach that for example, a pianist has four etudes, one by Chopin, Rachmaninoff, Liszt and Scriabin and he plays them at each competition. This is nonsense. In the long run, there will be never a true success. One must have several etudes by each composer so that he can choose what he feels more comfortable in and what is suited for that event. A pianist must have several sonatas by Beethoven, several large romantic works, several piano concertos, that desirably, have already been played with orchestras. It often occurs that a talented pianist reaches the finals, but does not have the experience of playing with an orchestra, and as a result, does not win. There are many difficulties and problems. Luckily, my students have fared quite well in competitions.

AT: What are the differences between competitors of different countries, for example, between a competitor from Russia and America?

MV: It used to be that in Russia, one first had to go through national competitions, and only after winning them, he would be allowed to participate in international competitions. Often, these competitions were more difficult than international competitions. So, always in those years when I participated, only those who were pre-chosen, having won national competitions, could go abroad to compete. Usually there were not more than three competitors going. Nowadays, there is democracy in Russia, and if you want to go, nobody stops you from going. As a result, many participate, including very weak pianists. Unfortunately, there is no more national pride and the mystique of being a Russian pianist has disappeared. However, I would say that still the preparation for pianism is very high in Russia. In Russia, pianists are very advanced in a professional sense because the system of musical education is very strong. From elementary school, there are special music elementary schools. Moreover, the teacher works with the student three times a week, an hour each time. In comparison, in France, the teacher works only twenty minutes each time. Children must receive a good, solid training. Please don't misunderstand me, I do not want to lower music education in other countries. In England, Germany, and even France, there are many good musical traditions and there are many pianists from those countries. In Japan, there are more and more wonderful young pianists. I have been in Japan many times, and when I first visited Japan as a pedagogue in 1981, I had many students who consulted with me. Unfortunately, many would not understand me when I would explain to them about the content of music, specifically that music expresses the feelings of the person. It was very difficult to explain about passion, sorrow, joy in music. All the response I would get from the student was, "Is it louder or is it softer?" Their solution to music problems was very simple, either to play louder which was better, or softer which they thought was worse. When I visit Japan nowadays, I do meet young pianists who understand the meaning of music. I think that Japan did a great service by inviting foreign musicians to teach and promote music, and I feel that I had also a part in this work..

AT: I have heard that you will be judging the Rachmaninoff Competition here in Los Angeles next year. Can you tell us something about it?

MV: Unfortunately, I do not know anything about the competition. I received invitation to judge only recently and only know that it is hoped to have a very prestigious jury panel. There will be two co-chairmen, one from America, Byron Janis, and Nikolai Petrov from Russia.

AT: I know that Byron Janis was very famous for his Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 3...

MV: Yes, he cause a sensation in Moscow when he played it. Also, his rendition of Chopin's Black Key Etude for encore was extraordinary. Petrov is also a musician of very high caliber, who incidentally participated together with me at the Cliburn competition. I want to say that recently in American there was a very interesting happening. The winners of the first Van Cliburn Competition, Votapek from United States, Nikolai Petrov and I were invited to give a concerto appearance...

AT: Was it for the opening of the new hall in Dallas?

MV: Yes, it is a fabulous hall and a first class orchestra. The conductor was Ian Hobson, a very gifted conductor.

AT: Isn't he a pianist who used to play the Chopin-Godowsky Etude transcriptions?

MV: Nowadays, he concentrates on conducting and is a very good conductor.

AT: Returning to the Rachmaninoff Competition, is there anything else you would like to add?

MV: ...well, among the judges, there will also be Maria Tipo who recently recorded the entire set of sonatas by Scarlatti, imagine, all 600 or so sonatas. The age limit is 30, and what I think is correct is that if a competitor studied with any judge member during the past three years, one cannot participate in the competition. This is good. In Moscow, I am the representative of International Scriabin Piano Competition, and there, the rules are even more severe. The judges of the competition are not allowed to have any students, irrespective of when they have studied, participate in the competition. For example, even if the student studied thirty years ago, he cannot participate in the competition. This rule gave a moral foundation to the competition and gave it a good start. It is in sharp contrast to the Tchaikowsky Piano competition, which really is just the opposite!

AT: What are your future plans and how do you prepare for your concerts, because you always include new repertoire in your programs?

MV: I have many plans and I will prepare as usual. Frankly, I am myself surprised where I found the time to learn new pieces. I don't like to play old repertoire over and over because the imagination gets tired. That is why when I was preparing for the Los Angeles concert, I included Schumann's Davidsblunder Dances and three Schubert-Liszt songs for the first time. I have to confess that I practiced seriously for the whole last summer, and played the program to relatives,

then to friends, then in smaller halls and then, at the Moscow Conservatory Hall. I like to renew my program all the time. I try to practice everyday, even though I am very busy with teaching schedule at the conservatory. In the close future, I will go to Mexico to play Brahms' Second Piano Concerto, a piece that although I have played my whole life, still needs a lot of attention and preparation. Now, I will return to Moscow and practice it seriously during all my spare time.

AT: It was very interesting to talk with and I thank you very much.

MV: Likewise, I enjoyed talking and thank you for your interview.