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Rosa Antonelli: The Woman of Magic Fingers

By ROBERT SCHULSLAPER

Anyone fortunate enough to have a conversation with Rosa Antonelli immediately realizes that the warmth, charm, and spontaneity of her performances reflect the innate musicality of a vibrant, sympathetic personality. Lauded as “the woman of magic fingers” by an admiring critic, Rosa, an Argentinean pianist of Italian descent (granted American citizenship in 2006 because of her status as “an artist of extraordinary ability”) is a musician as dedicated to transmitting her love of music to her enthusiastic audiences as she is to encouraging her many students in their artistic pursuits. She has given almost a thousand concerts in a career that has taken her to many of the world’s countries, and she’s also a highly regarded professor of piano who was awarded the eminent position of head of the piano departments at the Alberto Ginastera Conservatory of Music and the Superior School of Fine Arts of the University of La Plata in Buenos Aires after progressing through rigorous rounds of professional and public scrutiny. Her latest CD, *Esperanza: Sounds of Hope*, is at once a celebration of Argentinean composers and an expression of her feelings of nostalgia and, it must be said, melancholy that permeated her early life and that she shared with the many people who over the years have chosen Argentina as their home. These emotions, tinged with sadness, nonetheless coexisted with an unquenchable optimism that’s often found in the histories of immigrants around the world. Rosa enjoyed friendships with several of the composers whose music she plays so lovingly. “What happened is, I grew up in Argentina, and then, of course, I loved Argentinean composers,” she says. “Some of those composers I had the chance to meet personally. For example, Angel Lasala was my teacher at the National Conservatory of Music. He taught composition. By the time I started at the conservatory I was already playing in concerts and one day he told me, ‘Rosa, I have composed a piece many years ago and you are the one, I would love that one day you play and share it with the world.’ He gave me his handwritten manuscript from which I learned the music, and my CD performance is a world premiere. He died in 2000 but I’ve stayed in touch with his wife, who wrote this lovely note to me: ‘Dear Rosita, I am very happy as you have chosen one of the pieces that he loved the most. ‘Romancero’ is the fourth of the *National Preludes* composed between 1974 and ’76. ‘Romancero’ is a piece that shows the composer’s sensitivity and romanticism, expressed in personal language. It’s like a barcarolla and reminiscent of Fauré. I am sure your presentation will be a great success. I will light a candle on the twenty-second.’ When I first performed the piece, I read this to the audience.” Rosa is very moved; she’s close to tears as she relates this. “And she said to tell the people that the only thing she wanted was that his music should be appreciated. Isn’t that beautiful?”

“Guastavino was also my teacher at the conservatory and Ugarte was a very important figure in the history of Argentinean music. He helped to found the famous Colón theater in Buenos Aires and to organize the National Conservatory of Music and the University of La Plata, plus he was a great composer. He studied in Paris; he had a scholarship from the Argentinean government. I also met Piazzolla. He, too, studied in

Paris, with Nadia Boulanger, and she's the one who said to him, 'Astor, you are good for the tango. You have to develop this part.' Later, when he came back to Argentina, he studied with Ginastera. Piazzolla was a genius, and now, after he died, everybody has recognized that genius. He transformed the traditional tango. Originally, it was a mix of habanera and milonga, but he introduced classical harmonies and elements of jazz. We can say that he took the tango from the stage to the concert hall. I chose his *Milonga del Angel* because it tells a story about an angel who came to heal the souls of the Argentinean people. Another important figure was Carlos Gardel, who helped give the tango another dimension. Do you know Gardel?" He was a famous singer, songwriter, and actor whose "El día que me quieras" is still the most popular love song in Argentina. "Nowadays, if I hear one of these old discs, he's still the best. He had something in his voice that runs through the air; it's something that is unique. At first I didn't want to play tangos; I thought they were too melancholic. I wasn't ready to show the depth of my feeling. There was a time when I couldn't play Liszt in public because I would cry in front of the audience. Then one day, I thought, 'I'm going to forget about preconceptions,' and I went to watch a movie, *The History of the Tango*. And it changed my life.

"Alberto Williams was a poet; he was a writer, a musician, and a professor. And everyone knows Ginastera. He was revolutionary in his music. He took the folklore and he transformed this kind of influence, incorporating all the new developments in music; it was amazing. I have something to show you of which I'm so proud. Georgina Ginastera, his daughter, wrote this: 'I was listening to your CD and I think it's marvelous. All the CD is wonderful, the selection of the pieces and their interpretation. Particularly, I like the Guastavino. But the three dances of my father are played with a mix of strength and lyricism that I find impressive.' When I got this e-mail I was so happy because she is coming for my concert on May 7."

Although Rosa plays many kinds of music, she's especially drawn to the Romantic style. "When I was young the walls in my room were covered with pictures of Chopin and Liszt, so much so that my mother used to joke about not being able to find the light switch. I was always reading books about them and my CD *Romantics Forever* was the fulfillment of a childhood dream. As an adult I had the privilege of being invited to perform at Chopin's home in Poland, in the village of Zelazowa Wola. Because of scheduling conflicts I was unable to do so—I was giving a concert at the Ostrovsky Palace, sponsored by the Chopin Society—but eventually I did visit. What a beautiful experience. I couldn't stop crying. The house is kept just as it was when he lived there. There are acres of grounds with a lake where he would walk with his teacher as they conversed about philosophy and Chopin's private life. You almost feel that he's there. The rapport he shared with his teacher is rare today. Teaching is not only about technique, it's about life.

"I had an amusing experience in Poland. I was on tour and was booked for many concerts. These tours were for anywhere from one to three months and I would play a concert every day in different cities. Sometimes I didn't get to play the pianos in advance. In my schedule I had the name of the city where I was going to play and the time they were going to meet me. On this particular occasion they picked me up at the airport and I thought they'd drive me to the hotel to dress. But the driver said we were going directly to the theater. There had been some miscommunication with my management and the

concert was to start in 20 minutes! I had to change my clothes in the car. After the concert, people came backstage for an autograph, so naturally I would ask them their name before writing something personal. When I asked the first girl's name, she said, 'Graciella,' which is a Spanish name, so I said to myself, 'OK.' Then another came, and she said her name was Beatriz. The next, Clara, and this went on until finally the 10th person in line introduced herself as Susanna. Earlier I had been in such a rush to get ready for the concert that I had been somewhat disoriented and now hearing all these Spanish names made me wonder if I was dreaming and had never left Buenos Aires. I said 'Oh, my God' under my breath and my face must have shown my confusion, because everyone started laughing. What had happened was that these were students from a nearby university who had taken the trouble to translate their Polish names into Spanish equivalents. When they saw my expression they said, 'Oh, Rosa, don't worry, you really are in Poland!'

"Another anecdote you'll enjoy concerns a competition in Santiago de Compostela. I was living in a hotel not far from the hall where the competition was to be held and every day I would walk there to practice. When I won, the media wanted to interview me, and our conversation was broadcast internationally. Toward the end the interviewer asked me how I liked the cathedral. (As you know, there's a very famous cathedral there.) I said, 'What cathedral?' He was very surprised and asked me about my daily routine, even to inquiring about which side of the street I walked on en route to the hall. Finally, he said, 'Rosa, you passed the cathedral every day but you were so focused on your music you didn't see it.' Everyone got a big laugh out of it even as they admired my concentration.

"On a more serious note, sometimes performers are confronted with events that try their courage. Nowhere was this more evident than in connection with one of my concerts in Israel. I was in Europe, in the middle of a four-month tour, when the first Gulf War broke out. As luck would have it, my next scheduled concert was in Tel Aviv. My manager, all my friends, and even the embassies told me to stop my tour and certainly not go to Israel. I felt then, and still feel now, that we artists have a mission to give a message to our audience. I went to Israel. When I arrived at the airport in Tel Aviv I received a welcoming gift, but it was not a fruit basket. I was presented with a box containing a gas mask, injections for biological attacks and many other items that I did not even want to know about. So I took my 'welcome package' to the hotel; I think it was the Hilton. The next morning, the day of my performance, I was having breakfast at the hotel and I suddenly realized I was alone. The concierge informed me that there was only one other person staying at the hotel. It was then that I realized how dangerous the situation might be. Since the performance was that night, I had to decide what to do. It was actually an easy decision; I decided I would rather die performing for my audience than stay in the hotel alone and frightened. The concert that night was in Fastlich Hall, sponsored by the Rubin Academy. The embassy warned me that there might only be two or three people in the audience and I said fine, I'll play for them. As it turned out, the concert hall was full with courageous music lovers, mostly other artists of all kinds from Tel Aviv, who also wanted to send a message. That night was an extraordinary experience for all of us. I received beautiful letters for many years from those appreciative artists who refused to be afraid, even in the face of danger.

“One more story, if I may. This reflects yet another side of a performer’s life, one that I find immensely gratifying. After a concert I gave in New York at Barnes and Noble—significantly, this was around Thanksgiving—a young opera singer wrote to me explaining that she chanced upon the poster advertising my concert at a particularly dark time in her life when she was tempted to give up her career. The title, *Sounds of Hope*, seemed to her like the hand of fate urging her to attend, and so she did. She was so moved by my music and by my explanations of the title that she told me she cried almost throughout the concert. This experience helped give her the courage to persevere. And *she*, in turn, inspired me to continue to perform.”

Rosa has received some lovely accolades in response to her heartfelt music-making—the aforementioned “woman of magic fingers,” and another from a Swiss critic who likened her hands to birds flying over the keys—but for her, perhaps the most poetic and meaningful phrase stems from her childhood. I’ll let her tell it in her own words: “It was not easy for me to pursue my love of music as a child. I did not have my own piano to practice on until I was 14 years old. Even though both my parents were from royalty back in Italy, because of the war and moving to Argentina my family lost everything except hope. My mother and I somehow always found a way. My piano teacher saw what a passion I had for the piano and was an angel to me. She had a little guesthouse in the back yard with a piano. The first piece I learned by Liszt was the Consolation No. 3, and it touched my heart so much I wanted to learn it as fast as I could. My teacher allowed me to practice it in her guesthouse until late at night. To see that I was OK she would look out her window and see a little light and hear the piano. She named me ‘the musical light of the back yard.’ That was my ‘secret place.’ My mother didn’t know where I was and often worried about me. One night when it was particularly late she searched for me and, knowing me, went to my piano teacher’s house. My piano teacher pointed to the little light in the back yard and my mother was relieved and happy that I was safe in my ‘secret place.’”

In addition to the works of Chopin and Liszt, Rosa has a special affinity for the Scriabin Piano Concerto. “The Scriabin concerto has a beautiful story. When I was in the Conservatory of Music I had a friend whose family used to travel to Europe. One day he said to me, ‘Look what my parents brought.’ It was a disc of the concerto. He said he was sure I would love it because I was such a romantic. Scriabin, too, must have been a romantic—he used to sleep with Chopin’s music under his pillow. So I fell in love with it and my dream was to perform it when I finished at the conservatory. I found out that nobody played it in Argentina, nobody played it in Cuba, nobody played it at all. And so, when I was giving concerts in Germany I ordered the music. After a long time I got the full score, I studied my part, and went to conductors to ask if they liked it. They loved it and wanted to perform it with me and so I got to give the premiere in many countries.

“There’s a funny story connected with this piece. A conductor, who shall remain nameless, was accompanying me in a theater and you must remember that this was a new piece for everybody. I, however, had by that time been playing it forever, I loved it, I knew every instrument’s part, I knew everything. And so, we were in the middle of the concert with 2,000 people there and suddenly he skipped two pages. Luckily I caught the place, I knew where he went, and when the concert ended, I was shaking. Actually, from the onset of the mishap to the end I was shaking. After we finished the concert, the conductor came to the green room and said, ‘Can I get on my knees? Thank you so much.’”

You saved our lives!” Laughter ensues. “Of course, nobody noticed because it was a new concerto and nobody had listened to it before.”

One of the pianists most associated with Scriabin was Vladimir Horowitz. His piano was almost as famous as the man himself and has often been thought of as having a lot to do with his unique sound. “After he died, his widow, Wanda, would send the piano around the world to be played by selected artists,” Rosa says. “Steinway suggested my name to her and accordingly they shipped the piano to Buenos Aires, directly to the theater where I was giving a concert. After three days it went on to Brazil, where I think Nelson Freire played it. It was a beautiful piano; the action was wonderful; it was such a pleasure to play on. That was a very big honor for me.”

Teaching is very important to Rosa, perhaps because she realizes how much she owes to the many fine pianists who generously shared their artistic vision with her. One of her teachers was a disciple of Scaramuzza, a famous Italian teacher who emigrated to Argentina. Another was Alfonso Montecino, who still is very dear to Rosa; she will be attending his 80th birthday party in October. He was a disciple of Claudio Arrau, who is Rosa’s favorite pianist. “I love him. He understood about relaxation and the concept of having the sound inside of you. The keyboard shouldn’t be considered as something foreign; you have to make it part of your body. This is why the best compliment anyone can give me is to tell me, ‘Rosa, I saw you play, and you and the piano are one.’” Rosa also studied with Daisy Luca, a disciple of Magda Tagliaferro (the famous Brazilian pianist) and she participated in many master classes and seminars to expose herself to new ideas. She’s studied acting, ballet, philosophy, and even the Alexander technique (a method of using the body efficiently, practiced by both musicians and actors) to enhance her musical culture through an infusion of the affiliated arts. All these influences were important, but it is Roberto Caamaño with whom she spent the longest time. “He was my teacher for 15 years and followed the teachings of Martin Krause,” she says. “He helped me because I was very shy at first; he used to call my mother and say, ‘She’s so musical, she’s so musical.’ He always encouraged me, because I was always very demanding of myself. Once I was playing Beethoven’s 32 Variations in C Minor for him—I was supposed to perform it—and after I finished I made some sounds indicating that I was dissatisfied with my playing. He said, ‘Rosa, who is the teacher? You have this within you; now go and perform.’ He gave me something important, that inner conviction that I have something to say. Sometimes, artists don’t trust themselves, which is natural, because if you’re sensitive you’re always pursuing perfection, and of course, you can never attain it.”

Rosa, for her part, constantly encourages her students. “Rule number one, I always start with something they do well. To respect them and not to criticize. Then I teach them about the power of music. I say, these notes, this is like a language, a new language you are going to communicate through your fingers and through your heart. It’s a dialogue, it’s a universal language. I try to get them to listen to music, to go to concerts, to hear the difference between playing with feeling and without feeling. And always to use their imagination. With my advanced students, some of whom study at famous conservatories and take part in competitions, I videotape them to study their presentation, the way they walk and bow—this is where the Alexander technique is so helpful—and to help them overcome nervousness. Because their discomfort can be felt by the audience, who in turn become uncomfortable. The best performances always flow from a

combination of mental and physical relaxation, states that are inhibited by fear. When I was a candidate for the professorship in Buenos Aires I had to compile a book of my pedagogical observations and theories, and my next project is to have it translated into English.”

Rosa has had her own uncertainties to deal with, and not only musical ones. As a newcomer to our shores she had to establish herself afresh, to learn a new language, to build a solid base for both concerts and teaching. “I felt overwhelmed and I felt homesick,” she admits. “Over a period of eight months I lost many members of my family to illness, as well as Roberto Caamaño. All of this made me feel insecure. I knew so little English that when I saw the September 11 disaster on television I didn’t know if they were showing a real event or something imagined. Gradually I grew acclimated to life in America. At Steinway—I’m so proud to be a Steinway Artist, they’ve been so helpful to me in many ways—they always thought of me as very shy, but they also said I was very brave to come to America all alone. As my English improved, they said, ‘Rosa, you’re shy, but not as much as we first thought!’ Also, I had to go through a time of healing to cope with my personal losses and that process helped me, as well. Today, with all the kind people I’ve met through my concerts I feel that I’m home, I’m opening up to life like the orchid I treasure that was a lovely gift from Pamela Fiori [editor in chief of *Town and Country*]. There comes a time in your life when you feel like you are protected in a way, and then is when you can be more confident. That’s why *Esperanza* means so much to me. Susan Bush, president of Albany Records, understood this. And I want people to know that it was her idea to record a complete CD of Argentinean music. She’s been very supportive and loved all the selections. And now, not only have I recorded this marvelous music, it’s been embraced by the American public in ways I would never have imagined.”

Rosa Antonelli performs in New York’s Allen Room, Frederick P. Rose Hall, Lincoln Center, on May 7, 2010. Readers are also invited to view her videotaped performances on YouTube.