

My View

THE ARTS AT LARGE BY ROBYN SASSEN

Jan
24

The woman who sees the world through her piano



MY 'black sailing ship' and I: Lithuanian-born pianist Muza Rubackyte only needs to touch a piano to feel at peace with the world. Photograph by Christine de Lanoe (Geneva).

YOU MIGHT BE forgiven for thinking the Johannesburg Musical Society in association with the Johannesburg International Mozart Festival has somehow managed to bring out Meryl Streep to perform its first concert of the year. You'd be mistaken; Lithuanian pianist Mūza Rubackytė brings not only her classic facial features to South Africa, and she is, indeed, a bit of a Streep dead-ringer, but she also brings her flawless technique, which will dazzle you completely. Last week, she took the time to chat to My View, from her home in Paris.

Hers is a story of piano love and the need to earn an international reputation not once, but twice. It's about the privilege of working with beautiful music, and above all, of being at home in the world.

"I was born into a family of musicians," she says, explaining that her first name, Mūza, is a derivation of the Greek term 'muse': it's like her family knew her talents before she was born. "The challenge was to find out which instrument to put into my hands. My mother and her sister were pianists and my father, an opera singer."

They put a violin into her toddler hands. They got her to sing. She smiles. "I played a lot of instruments as a child; my preference was always piano. I

grew up in a house full of pianos. My aunt taught students in the house. For me it was fantastic to be a part of that world. I asked my aunt to add me to the list of her students, so that I could be like the 'big' people."

She wasn't that big when she debuted: She first played in public with the national philharmonic orchestra of Lithuania when she was seven. And the die, it seems, was cast for a brilliant career.

But growing up under a Communist regime, even after 19 very serious and focused years of music study, she was still a big fish in a small pond. Or was she? She didn't know. She was not allowed to leave the Communist Bloc to spread her wings.

By the time Gorbachev came into power, in the 1990s, the draconian laws had softened a bit and there was a possibility that she could travel to the west if it was with a plan to study.

"It felt like nonsense to me at the time, as I had studied for so long and achieved so much, already. The Tchaikovsky Conservatory of Moscow, which is still considered among the best in the world, was where I had learned my skills, but the one thing I felt was lacking in their teaching programme was French music."

So in 1991, with a bid to spend 10 months studying French music, she left the Communist Bloc for the first time. "So, this was my beginning in the West," she says. "It wasn't difficult to integrate into western culture, because music is a universal language. But it was difficult to start my career again. In the West, no one knew my successes. I had to start again from nothing. It took me almost 10 years. I met the good people, step by step, but it was a tough time."

She mentions how her win of the Grand Prix at the Liszt-Bartók International Piano Competition in Budapest in 1981 was not recognised by the music fraternity of the West. It took time, and hard work, but eventually, she won First Prize in the Concours International Les Grand Maîtres Français and she was back on track.

These days, Mūza commutes between Paris, Vilnius and Geneva, when she's not travelling further afield for concert performances. What's it like to be on the go all the time? "You need to like it," she's frank. "I like to escape from the routine, but being on the move has become a part of who I am. I cannot be at the same place more than three or five days. I get restless. To travel to faraway countries is extremely exciting for me. It's snowing in Vilnius right now. Here – in Paris – it's raining. And next, week I will be in hot South Africa."

But it's more than just weather. "I like to see the world," she says. "I am like a shipman or a gypsy. I see the world through my piano. And it's the happiest of careers for me: I get to travel to the big halls to meet new audiences. I get to live in high level music, and to touch fantastic composers – to understand them and transmit ... it's extremely exciting."

"Nevertheless," she adds, "I also adore 'home sweet home', where my beloved husband and I dance together, cook together and write together. We are writing an autobiography at the moment about my enchanted life. Often my husband joins me in my tours to live the strong moments in art and see the world together. It's a real joy for us. The nature is also something that we both really need," she says, anticipating South Africa's warm climes and magnificent landscapes.

Acknowledging the complexity of a musician's career – you may have the ability but what happens next: do you teach or compose? Record or travel? When do you practice? – Mūza composed prolifically until she was about 18-years-old. "There were lots of compositions for piano, for violin, for small ensembles. Doing this was part of my education, but finally, you must choose.

"Being a performer, you need lots of hours of music. It's not only about playing the piano. It's about travelling, organising, recording, publicity." Rubackytė gives master classes wherever she goes. She's a piano professor at Lithuania's National Academy of Music and organises a big piano festival in Lithuania, now in its fifth year.

Next week, she performs works by Mozart, Beethoven and Schumann in Johannesburg. "The programme is my choice, but it complies with JIMF's theme this year of opposites. Schumann's Carnival and his Arabesque illustrate a dual personality," she adds.

With a life's repertoire of about 40 concert programmes concertos, over 40 piano concertos and 30 recordings, Mūza remains hungry to learn more. At the beginning of the year, she went to her library and took out all the scores she would need for her concert fixtures. "It's a pile like this," she indicates a lot. "I cannot take scores in my luggage; they're too heavy. I have to carry them in my head," she grins.

She baulks at the idea of choosing a 'favourite' composer. "It's all about the piano. I cannot be 'vegetarian' and choose one over another. The privilege of touching the piano is everything."

Two years ago she was a jury member for the Unisa piano competition, in Pretoria. "It was marvellous. I invited the winner, Daniel Ciobanu, to this year's Vilnius festival, so I have good souvenirs of your country."

- Mūza Rubackytė performs in a piano recital for the Johannesburg Musical Society and the Johannesburg International Mozart Festival at the Linder Auditorium, Parktown on February 3 at 8pm. Visit jms.org.za or www.join-mozart-festival.org for more details.
- She also performs in Pretoria, on February 1, Knysna on February 6 and Cape Town on February 8. Visit muza.fr.
- CDs of the programme she will perform in South Africa – recorded in Tokyo – will be on sale at her performances.