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Spotlight on Sandro Russo



“This piano had a real voice and I’ve never felt something as magical as playing this instrument.”

Speaking with a soft-timbre in his voice, Sandro Russo sat down with NYRisingStar’s Arthur Sato to chat about his burgeoning piano career. Mr. Russo will be performing Beethoven’s Emperor Concerto with New York Asian Symphony Orchestra on a tour of Japan, this coming June.

AS: At what age did you come to NYC?

SR: Early twenties... I’ve been here now for nine years... I was about 22 when I came

AS: Did you come for graduate school or for musical pedagogy of some sort?

SR: Well, when I came to New York, I didn’t have a particular goal. I had in mind to continue my education with a private teacher or some of the fine institutions that New York has. I was more interested in sounding the ground and exploring the new environment.

AS: New York City has an internationally recognized musical community. As an outsider coming into such a music scene, could you shed a little light on your perspective of NYC, and how it might have changed through the years?

SR: Well, I think the difference lies in that fact that before

I came to NY, I only knew about all the great artists that moved here at some point in their lives. So, I had more of a vision of these artists that came here. I'm talking about Rachmaninoff... Horowitz. I heard about the great schools, you know, and all the great artists that they were able to produce. But that's a totally different thing than being here, and exploring...

AS: Where they actually were.

SR: Yes, and also, you really feel not only the people that have been here, but what the city projects as a whole in its musical aura and the environment, which is very interesting, and STILL very fascinating.

AS: And how would you compare it to other international arts communities around the world that you have experienced or continue to experience?

SR: I'm quite familiar with some major cities like London. I studied at the Royal College of Music in 1996. I don't know really, cause these days, the major cities are inhabited by the great artists of the world. And this is what makes these cities great. One of New York's strength is that it is an awesome city and has great history and majesty... Perhaps it overlaps with the music making in its grandness. But I still think it's the people in the cities than the cities themselves.

AS: Are you from a musical family?

SR: Oh? Well, I'm not from a musical family. Well, my parents are big supporters of classical music through what has happened to me. Although I don't come from a musical family in the sense of having pianists or professional musicians in my family, music has always been something cultivated to a great extent in my family if I consider my ancestors... many played at an amateur level, actually. My Grandmother played piano by ear, and my grandfather from my mother side played clarinet in a band, and my mom always desired to study piano. At that time, there were some problems studying piano in tiny Sicily, logistical difficulties. This desire was passed to my older brother and then to me.

AS: Ah, you have an older brother that plays piano as well!

SR: Yes. An older brother that is responsible for me to start playing. When I was four, he was nine and

started taking piano lessons and so I followed in his footsteps

AS: Yes, I know what that's like. I'm a musician, and have an older sister that plays violin. It was the natural thing to do.. When did you start taking privately?

SR: Well, it's interesting. When I was four I was able to start playing without instruction. I was actually able to play all the pieces that my brother played, but I didn't have a teacher.

AS: You played it by ear.

SR: Yes, although—this is what my parents tell me., always—although I played by ear, they tell me I would follow the score and I was able to turn pages. I don't remember this. Apparently, I had my own way to read the score....

AS: And you weren't aware of it?

SR: Absolutely not.

AS: That's great

SR: I remember when I woke up, my wish, my first, was to go to the piano and play. But in terms of instruction, I had very poor instruction as a young pianist, because, again, we didn't have great instruction available in the town that I grew up. At the age of six I was studying with a young pianist that was a conservatory student and had no experience in teaching Then later at the age of 8, my parents were able to send me to a teacher that was able to at least inspire me with stuff like four hand pieces. Still, I was getting ordinary instruction until I was in my mid teens. That was when I was working with concert pianists that gave master-classes all over Italy and taught at different schools.

AS: Ah, ok, so you eased into things.

SR: Yes, I would say it was a little peculiar. Especially now when I consider kids coming at 8 or 10 years old to schools.

AS: Like pre-college programs of schools like Juilliard.

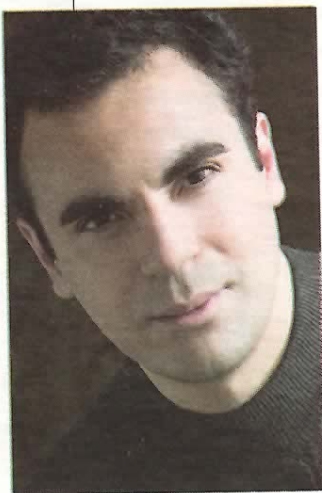
SR: Yes. So, I didn't discover much about the great art of piano playing until I was in my mid-teens. Thanks to a Russian pianist at the Moscow conservatory who I studied with regularly and in master-classes once a month... Boris Petrushansky... he was one of the last students of Heinrich Neuhaus, and later Lev Naumov, who was also a great musician who taught

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great students.

AS: Petrushansky was your mentor?

SR: Definitely, definitely. As a pianist, I see myself from the Russian school rather than Italian., for whatever that means. Because he was really my big influence and he was a musician who was really able to convey the best essence of the Russian school. A school of poetry, and music of the highest level SO that poetry really clicked really well with my musicality.



"I realized that at some point this piano had a real voice, a soul."

—Sandro Russo

AS: As a musician I really understand its not what you learn at the keyboard, but it's your attitude and your musical approach... after awhile, it permeates everything and becomes a guide to your life.

SR: Well, at first our temperaments werent on the same page. He inspired me in a way that my temperament would be come more versatile... that my vocabulary and feelings in music would become as wide as possible. I was really drawn to his art

AS: The more you're drawn to it, the better you get at it, the more you want to learn.

SR: Yes, and then later you are able to depart from it.

AS: I agree. Change of gear—I read about your interest in more obscure composers and your commitment to them. How did you realize this interest?

SR: Yes, well... None of my teachers inspired me in doing this. (We both share a laugh) I've always been passionate about reading music, spending time in libraries studying scores. I've also been fascinated with how (a piece of) music looks before I play it... I've always wanted to explore as much music as possible. As a pianist, I feel, as part of my mission, a very strong responsibility, you know, to bring to

the light the music of unknown composers who, for some reason, did not have the luck of some of the others. You know, it happens nowadays, it happened centuries ago. Great pieces that for some reason didn't get the recognition that they should have had. And let's remember the artists that whatever they played, like Horowitz, the next day people would go to the store and get the sheet music. These great names who played those works and were able to make the works so famous. There are many works that didn't have the superstar musician to get famous, but, still, they are wonderful in quality. There are unknown composers that make great things, and there are well known composers who sometimes, well, make not-so-great things.

AS: (Chuckling) I'd have to agree with the former and the latter.

SR: Again, redeeming these works from an already oblivious situation in which they are never played or never known, I am also very interested in the contemporary music of composers. Especially those who are pianists, because they really know how to write for the instrument. Also, because I feel like I am part of the same living tradition, which is very special to me. To play a work of an artist out of respect, I really feel part of a world.

AS: Understandable. Definitely one of the best parts of being a classical musician, or performing artist. Taking part in the lineage and history and tradition of the art and its practice. I like that phrase "Living tradition".

SR: most of the time I feel the composer-pianist is able to continue more of that great tradition of history with Schumann, Chopin, Liszt... all the great composer pianists. I also wonder if this interest in composers was born out of the boredom of playing the standard programs.... When I was still in the conservatory in Italy. One could arrive at their final year in training without having touched a Prokofiev Sonata or a Scriabin Sonata. So, It's a bit curiosity and interest, and a strong element of my mission as a musician.

AS: In the later spring, this year, you are going with NYASO to Japan to perform Beethoven's Emperor

Concerto with the orchestra. This past October, the great pianist and board member of NYASO Walter Hautzig, performed this concerto with NYASO to great approval. Can you shed any light on how it feels to have opportunity to perform this piece with the same orchestra, following Maestro Hautzig?

SR: Well, certainly, it's a great honor, first of all, cause I was at the performance, and I was very much inspired by his art of playing.... Particularly, I felt something that was of the old school and that was what I was really drawn to. He was able to project such great poetry, which is not always the case when you hear it. So, absolutely it is really a great honor when Maestro Yamada asked me to perform it on the tour. Each one of us has his idea of the piece, but it's very nice to think of that performance as an inspiring moment.

AS: Have you had a chance to concertize in Asia yet?

SR: Not yet, actually, so this will be my debut.

AS: Recently, you worked on a DVD project. Could you expound a little upon that?

SR: Yes, this was actually, really, a great surprise for me. I'm actually a big fan of Bechstein pianos. So, I expressed my enthusiasm to do a concert to the general manager of the location in New York. He noticed right away the special connection I have with these instruments and he invited me to take part in a gala to celebrate a historical instrument from 1862 that belonged to Franz Liszt. The piano was on a tour through the States.

AS: And this was your opportunity to play such a historical instrument!

SR: Yes, at first they asked me to play something gentle, but I realized that at some point this piano had a real voice, a soul. So, we came up to an idea to do a recording of some kind of repertoire of this instrument. Of course, it would have to be repertoire that would help come out the lyrical part of this instrument. So, I came out with a program of about an hour that included Liszt...Schubert-Liszt Ave Marie....and some other works related to Liszt... some very difficult repertoire for this instrument. So, I

set out on recording these works on this instrument, and it was such a great experience... as I had said before, this piano had a real voice and I've never felt something as magical as playing this instrument. This instrument was able to draw me into a world of sound I have never been in before... So, something very inspiring. The DVD should be out soon.

AS: So, this is a very rare opportunity for people, especially the aficionados of historical pianos...

SR: and Liszt!

AS: ...and Liszt to witness.... And this was video recorded, where?

SR: At the Bechstein Piano Center on 58th St.

AS: And when can we expect this to come out?

SR: Hopefully, in the next couple of months, you will be able to get a copy of the DVD, either directly through my website, or through Bechstein, or hopefully even Amazon.

AS: What a wonderful project.

Concert Schedule

June 2009

Tour in Japan with NYASO, performing Beethoven's 5th Piano Concerto (Emperor)

08-12-2009 at 12:15 pm

Solo recital at Dame Myra Hess Memorial Concerts-Preston Bradley Hall of the Chicago Culture Center

08-24-2009 at 7:00 pm

Solo recital at the Chetham's International Festival in Manchester, UK-Long Millgate, Manchester, M3 1SB

URLs:

www.sandrorussopianist.com

www.myspace.com/pianistsandrorusso

Youtube:

www.youtube.com/results?serch_query=sandro+russo