

Published: 2008-02-05

## Pianist Zotova takes on colourful Scriabin in Music Room

By STEPHEN PEDERSEN Arts Reporter

Ukrainian-born concert pianist Oksana Zotova believes that music begins where words end. She will be testing that theory on Wednesday at 7 p.m. in The Music Room as she plays three sonatas by one of Russia's most enigmatic 19th-20th century composers: Alexander Scriabin.

"Scriabin lived at the same time as Rachmaninoff but his style is completely different," Zotova said over coffee in early January. "He had many unusual ideas. He wanted to combine different arts together — drama, poetry, music, even light and colour. He wanted to create a huge piece that combined all these in a synthesis."

Towards the end of his life, Scriabin was working on a grandiose symphony synthesizing all the arts, intended to be performed in the Himalayas and aimed at triggering armageddon. He never finished it.

He did complete 10 piano sonatas of which Zotova will perform Nos. 1, 9 and 10. They are complex, but are held together by Scriabin's adherence to the same formal concepts as the sonatas of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven.

"He evolved from a romantic style to extremely complex language," Zotova said. "Sonata No. 9 is a Black Mass. He had overplayed his right hand and his doctors told him not to play any more. He was very disappointed. But Sonata No. 10 is absolutely different — a soaring anthem of nature, sweet and bright, full of birds."

Zotova's musical gifts are formidable. Her technical command of the keyboard knows no limitations, even in the most complex music. She has perfect pitch, which means she can hear a five-note chord and tell you instantly the names of all the notes in it.

"As soon as I know a melody I can play it in any key. Sometimes I have to play new music in 15 minutes. I just open the score and can hear it." She states this matter-of-factly, not as something extraordinary, but just something which she is able to do.

She grew up in Kiev, and started piano when she was five-and-a-half years old. She had two 45-minute piano lessons a week from the start and progressed rapidly through the Russian music education system of music school, music college, and conservatory, which, in Russia, is a postgraduate institution. She wrote her thesis on Scriabin's piano sonatas. She loves the way Vladimir Ashkenazy plays them.

Zotova has lived in Halifax for four years, but originally settled in Saint John. She arrived in 2000 when the Russian community consisted of 10 families. She is the only musician in her family. Her brother is a physicist working as a software engineer.

Zotova teaches 30 students in her studio at the Maritime Conservatory of Performing Arts.

On the first half of her recital, Zotova will play Beethoven's Op. 33 Bagatelles, Balakirev's

transcription of Glinka's song The Lark, and Pavel Pabst's Fantasy on Tchaikovsky's Eugen Onegin, a florid work often compared to the fantasies of Liszt.

As a performer, Zotova says that the only thing she thinks of during a performance is how to make the music clear to the audience. "I'm thinking how to build these themes, what kind of character to emphasize, how to approach and how big to make the climax happen — how to show the composer's idea.

"Sometimes it's hard to explain what's going on (in the music), but you can feel it."

(spedersen@herald.ca)

**X CLOSE ARTICLE**

© 2007 The Halifax Herald Limited