

Special Interview with Visiting Professor Eliso Virsaladze

Interviewer: Professor Izuru Kobayashi January 22, 2020

We conducted a special interview with visiting professor Eliso Virsaladze, who for the past five years has been teaching master classes at Tokyo College of Music. The interviewer is Professor Izuru Kobayashi,



Head of Department, Piano. We asked this world-class pianist about her views on music, teaching methods, and for some words for the students.

(Kobayashi) What is the source of the overflowing energy and exuberance of your music?

(Virsaladze) I'm not so full of energy. Sometimes the energy runs out, too *[laughs]*. The only thing I can say is that I had a student named Yoshito Numasawa in Japan during this stay. He had gotten into teaching and he said something like,

"Virsaladze Sensei, how do

you balance your concert activities and teaching? I can't do it, I just don't have the energy." It certainly is very difficult to teach while performing.

At the Kirishima International Music Festival, I teach lessons every day and play two concerts, and Professor Nojima always says, "How can you do that? Amazing!" Without a doubt it is difficult and tiring. But it's not that I myself am putting out the energy, rather that these wonderful musical works are giving me energy and doing the moving for me.

(Kobayashi) Apart from the sense of being energetic, what is the source of your overflowing music?

(Virsaladze) Although I have built my career up to the point where it is now, I always have the desire to work on something new, and it's very frustrating not being able to keep up with the number of things I want to do.



(Kobayashi) The piano you played at last year's master class lessons was old and very difficult to handle, and hard to get a sound out of, but your sound on it was incredibly deep. You are bringing out unlimited potential from the piano. And I feel a strong intent in each note you play. It resonates in the soul, and the scale is large and full of life.

The old Steinway in today's lesson room was in far from good condition, but did it even matter to you?

(Virsaladze) When I was living in the Soviet Union, there was a time when I had to play on really awful instruments, so horrible that you can't even compare them to this one. I also performed in small towns other than big cities like Leningrad and Moscow, and the pianos in these places were truly the worst instruments, no longer capable of expression. Still, we had to play them. And in my view, there are no bad instruments, only bad pianists!

(Both) LOL!

(Kobayashi) That was well said.

(Virsaladze) A bad pianist can either play a Steinway well or ruin it. It doesn't bother me to play any instrument, and not just because of that. But unfortunately the pianos provided at Moscow Conservatory

are in the worst condition. If you came, you'd understand. The pedals squeaked, they were out of tune, and the left pedal of the instrument in the classroom where Prof. Neuhaus taught was always creaking and squeaking. Every piano they had was a real embarrassment. Even now [*laughs*].

(Kobayashi) That kind of instrument was even in Prof. Neuhaus' class?

(Virsaladze) Even in Prof. Neuhaus' lesson room.

(Kobayashi) By the way, you have been teaching master classes for many years, so please tell us a little about the art of conveying music to students and what you keep in mind.

(Virsaladze) It's hard to say in a brief comment because, after all, every student is different. Everyone has something interesting to offer. Some students haven't yet mastered the piece when they come to the lesson, so sometimes I'll instruct the student on what direction to take the piece they haven't mastered yet. Other times, a student might be playing a piece quite well, but is not confident yet, so I'll try to teach in a way that instills confidence in them. In that sense, what you really need to pay attention to and what you need to stress will depend on the situation. In some cases, I can immediately tell the student directly, "This is your weakness, this is what you are missing," while there are other students who would break down if I said that to them. These students are extremely delicate and it takes them many years to get to that point.

(Kobayashi) You're exactly right. By the way, your playing of Schumann and Prokofiev is very highly regarded. However, listening to your performances and master class lessons, I felt that you were well versed in piano repertoire of all eras. Does that mean you have insight in the timeless aspects? What are you conscious of when you approach, for example, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, Brahms, etc.?

(Virsaladze) Well, you can't express the music of any one of these composers without playing many of his works over many years. Beethoven has it all. If you can process Beethoven correctly, you will be able to understand the works of other composers—in theory, that is. Take a look at Beethoven's sonatas and in them you can find Chopin nocturnes, various themes and variations, Schumann, and Brahms, as well as even Prokofiev and jazz in them. For example, you can even hear his Op. 101 sonata (Sonata No. 28), Hammerklavier (Sonata No. 29, Op. 106), and the later string quartets in Webern and Schoenberg.

I was very lucky that my grandmother, Anastasia, who was my first teacher, made me play a lot of Mozart. I think I was very blessed. But I hated etudes. My scores on etudes were always the worst. In short, I hated etudes that were just meant for practicing.

(Kobayashi) You recorded an excellent performance of the Chopin Etudes.

(Virsaladze) But I don't think of the Chopin Etudes as practice pieces!

On the other hand, how difficult the technique for playing Mozart is! The fewer the number of notes in a sonata, the more difficult it is, because it's as if you are naked and exposing yourself in public. Still we have to make something out of nothing. In that sense, Mozart is more difficult than Beethoven. Beethoven is a dictator. He tells you what to do and it's all written on the score. Mozart does not do that for us. But there are a variety of reductions [meaning "various editions" here] of Mozart's work, and subsequent generations of people have been saying, "play it like this" and "play it like that" and adding various things. People always want to put in something extra here, and add something new there. For example, today many people say that to play Chopin, you should use the Ekier editions. However, there were many wonderful performances of Chopin's music in the past. They say that Cortot was a Chopin player, but of course he wasn't using the Ekier editions. Anyway, regarding editions of Mozart's music, I think there is a great deal of nonsense out there.

(Kobayashi) You mentioned your first encounter with Mozart. At that time, were you taught that you had to play his music a certain way?

(Virsaladze) I was a very bad listener, so I wasn't willing to obey my grandmother. I had no problem sitting in front of the piano, but I hated practicing. If I was told, "Sit down," I could sit down all day, but I hated the practicing itself. Even so, Mozart's music came right to me from the beginning, and I don't remember my grandmother giving me any advice or instructions. I played it so naturally and loved it. Before going to Moscow, I went to the Conservatory of Music in Tbilisi, Georgia, and at the time I enrolled, I was already playing eight or nine Mozart sonatas quite well.

(Kobayashi) That was before you enrolled in the Conservatory of Music in Tbilisi?

(Virsaladze) Yes, I was already studying when I entered. I was about 17 years old. I was playing a lot of Mozart quartets and did a lot of chamber music. I played Mozart quartets quite a bit.

(Kobayashi) So you had chamber music experience before you were 17 years old?

(Virsaladze) That's right. I also played with orchestras. I have been very attracted to chamber music since I was a child, and I cannot imagine my current musical activities without chamber music. If you haven't played Mozart's chamber music—for example, the violin sonatas, trios, and quartets—then you can't say

you can play Mozart. Unfortunately, I can't carry a tune, but it's impossible to think of Mozart without his operas. Of course, I could play Mozart's opera music on the piano without having to sing. When you're talking about Mozart in that way, I think it is very important to learn music in all fields. I'll repeat this one more time to answer to your question. Mozart came to me fairly easily. Beethoven came almost as easily, as well as Schumann and Schubert. Chopin took a long time.

(Kobayashi) Why was that?

(Virsaladze) It's difficult. A lot has been said about tradition—"tradition this" and "tradition that"—for playing Chopin, but I think that many of these traditions are not at all positive. Chopin is salon music. He was the highest-level salon music composer, and I mean that as a compliment. It's actually extremely difficult to preserve the salon character of Chopin's music in a good way. If you are careless, the music will become extremely light, or it might become too classical. Therefore, I think it's terribly difficult to play Chopin's music while maintaining it at its most attractive level.

(Kobayashi) In that sense, I think that your Chopin playing is very elegant.



(Virsaladze) In my opinion, I have a feeling that the simpler you play Chopin, the better the performance. This is because the music itself is very expressive. Perhaps the same can be said for Rachmaninoff. Rachmaninoff's music

will be suffocating if you add too many expressive things that are not already written in the score.

I think that is the most difficult and important thing. It's not just music, but the simplicity of art. This simplicity is very difficult to preserve. This is also true in the world of painting; I don't really like the extremely modern works. In music as well, I think the hardest thing is expressing simplicity, which one could say is the essence of music itself. I love simplicity in modern music as well.

(Kobayashi) A long time ago, I was deeply impressed by a German pianist who was playing Beethoven. He wasn't doing anything special, but it remains deep in my heart. It was played just as written, but it was an unforgettable performance.

(Virsaladze) Is he still alive?

(Kobayashi) No. He passed away.

(Virsaladze) Edwin Fischer once had a master class with a student who was playing Beethoven's Piano Concerto No.4. Right from the very beginning, he advised the student, "Why do you do such unnecessary things? Try playing more simply. Play more naturally, as if you are looking at nature and finding it beautiful. Play it simply. " The music itself tells us a lot.

You mentioned energy earlier. I'm so happy to be so connected to music. I'm probably receiving a great deal of power from music, because just being in contact with music makes me feel so fulfilled. If the day ever came that I was no longer fascinated with music, or stopped thinking it was wonderful, I would close the lid and say goodbye to the piano. But as long as I am excited by music, I will keep playing the piano forever.

(Kobayashi) I feel like you've just put into words the first thing I asked you about—your “source.”

(Virsaladze) We are very fortunate because whatever happens in today's terribly complex world, we can keep staying in the wonderful world of miracles that is the world of music. I think we are very lucky. I really like the students at Tokyo College of Music. This time, some of them are new to me, and others I've been looking after over and over again for years. I always want each and every one of them to bring out their abilities to the maximum.

(Kobayashi) My last question is, what are your impressions of the students at Tokyo College of Music? Have your impressions changed over five years?



(Virsaladze) Very much so!! They have changed for the better. Some students are extremely good and intriguing, some just play the piano skillfully, and many of them also have more beyond that. I am really feeling lots of possibilities here.

In closing, may I digress? The Kirishima International Music Festival is another job that I enjoy immensely. I am a nature lover, so I am very much drawn to the nature of Kirishima. I think the Kirishima International Music Festival has something that no other music festival in the

world has.

(Kobayashi) How's the weather?

(Virsaladze) I love it. It's really fun. If you have time on the third or fourth day, please go there. The hot springs are also wonderful.

(Kobayashi) Do you like hot springs?

(Virsaladze) I've never been in a hot spring.

(Both) Huh? [*Laugh*]

(Virsaladze) The source is hot, so I'm scared to go in. But I do think I'm missing out [*laughs*]. Anyway, I think everyone should go.

(Public Relations)