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Ida Gamulin in conversation

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as a concert
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NEWS & VIEWS - INTERVIEWS - REVIEWS

A Lifetime's Devotion to Piano & Pedagogy

Ida Gamulin in conversation with Murray McLachlan

Ida Gamulin has been President of EPTA Croatia since 2004. Her extensive repertoire ranged from baroque to contemporary, and she is acclaimed for her appearances with major symphony orchestras, as recitalist, chamber musician and recording artist. She has appeared solo and with orchestras in almost all European countries, as well as in Russia and the United States. She was awarded many prizes, including prestigious Svetislav Stančić Prize at Yugoslav Music Artists Competitions, Dame Myra Hess Award in London, Special Prize at Freiburg Festival and Milka Trnina prize, Croatia's top cultural award.

Ida Gamulin is a frequent broadcaster on both radio and TV. Her recording of Brahms F Sharp Minor Sonata has been proclaimed the best recording performance by the USA Classical Music Directory in 2005. Apart from her solo career, Ida Gamulin has been full-professor at the Zagreb Music Academy. She holds regular master classes in Europe and sits on jury for international piano competitions.

My earliest memories recall my grandmother Ida Strömberger singing to me in the evening Austrian folk songs and beautiful melodies from Schubert songs



Murray McLachlan (MM): Tell us about your family, early years and your first musical memories.

Ida Gamulin (IG): I was born in Split, a beautiful city on the Adriatic coast in the heart of the Mediterranean, into a big family of both Austrian and Croatian origin. There were no professional musicians in my family, but everyone could play an instrument and music was part of our everyday life... like bread and water. My earliest memories recall my grandmother Ida Strömberger singing to me in the evening Austrian folk songs and beautiful melodies from Schubert songs. She was taking care of my musical education from my first piano classes in Split to my first public concerts. My family usually spent summer holidays in Jelsa on the island of Hvar (Pharos), where my grandmother donated the organ to the local church. I remember playing Bach for hours locked in the church and fascinated by the timbres and colours of the sound. From that time on I began to have a magical obsession with Bach's music which continues today. I start every day with Bach to cleanse my thoughts, refresh my memory and keep my fingers alive.

MM: Tell us about the beginnings of your piano studies and first teachers.

IG: My first piano was a very bad instrument and I was already thirteen when my grandmother bought me a new Challen piano. I remember trying the piano in front of my whole family with the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata. My reaction was quite unexpected... I showed no joy or happiness but tears which could not stop. It was a natural reaction to the beauty of the sound that I had never heard before.

I was always fascinated by the sound, and that fascination led me from my first piano lessons to my studies in Zagreb under Prof J. Muray, who was the first assistant of the legendary Svetislav Stančić, founder of the Zagreb Piano School. His



approach was very intelligent and analytical, and he also insisted on some technical exercises based on the Russian and French (Cortot) piano school, which helped to develop my finger technique. I was eighteen at that time and I expected to broaden my repertoire with some Rachmaninov, Tchaikovsky or Scriabin but surprisingly, he insisted on Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms.

Today I understand why, and I am so grateful that he had patience with me, teaching me main postulates in music which are like an Old Testament to any other music before or later. For example, we worked on complete Preludes and Fugues by Bach, but at the same time also on Hindemith's *Ludus Tonalis* and Shostakovich's Preludes and Fugues. Now, I understand why, and I do the same with my students.

MM: Do you have strong memories from your years of study in Zagreb?

IG: During my studies at the Zagreb Music Academy I worked occasionally with Rudolf Kehrler in Weimar and Yevgeny Timakin in Moscow, both prominent exponents of the famous Russian piano school. Loose wrists, free elbows, use of light and heavy arm were demands which I obeyed gratefully. So-called "Russian repertoire" developed not only my technique but freedom of interpretation and musical taste, through the Scarlattian pearl-like clarity of Prokofiev, orchestral piano sound and natural rubato in Rachmaninov to Shostakovich's dark themes and Scriabin's depths. Those were the most precious experiences in my late teens, especially during my preparations for the Yugoslav Competition of Music Artists which gathered all Yugoslav pianists studying all over the world at famous music academies from Moscow to Berlin, Vienna, Paris and New York. My professor was very proud of me after winning the most prestigious Svetislav Stančić Prize in such a keen competition.

Pianists are always lonely, practising, travelling, recording, on stage... that's why I recommend to all my students to play a lot of chamber music

MM: Tell us about your strong involvement with chamber music.

IG: Apart from my solo repertoire, I played a lot of chamber music with my colleague violinist Goran Konchar, my future husband. At that time he was on his postgraduate studies in Moscow under legendary Leonid Kogan and his wife Lisa Gilels. We played together the complete repertoire of Classical, Romantic and 20th-century sonatas for violin and piano. That experience was for me as a pianist, invaluable. I became a musician!! Pianists are always lonely, practising, travelling, recording, on stage... that's why I recommend to all my students to play a lot of chamber music and share that magnificent feeling of music-making with others.

MM: When did you first move away from home?

IG: After finishing my Master's degree in Zagreb I decided to move with my husband to London. At that time, in the early eighties, London was the capital of the artistic, cultural and musical world. I had the unique opportunity to hear and meet artists from all over the world, piano legends as well as young laureates playing most exquisite programmes. After having worked with excellent teachers I wanted to hear advice and suggestions from great performers and artists whom I admired. I was lucky to have had that opportunity during my four London years with Stephen Kovacevich, John Lill, Alfred Brendel and Annie Fischer, whenever she came to London.

MM: It would be wonderful to hear more about your connections with Kovacevich, Brendel, Lill and Annie Fischer!

IG: Stephen Kovacevich was very popular in Croatia for his brilliant recordings and piano recitals. I also remember him conducting a concert with the Zagreb Philharmonic Orchestra and playing Beethoven's First Piano Concerto. I worked with him before and after my concert tours through the longer period of time during my stay in London. As he also originates from the island of Hvar, I felt very close to him in a way. We worked on quite a large repertoire, not only Beethoven, although at that time I played the three last Beethoven sonatas and Beethoven's Fourth Concerto. His advice was often of a practical nature, how to get a better sound or how to achieve maximum tempo and lightness at the same time. He insisted on pianissimos in Beethoven G major Concerto with no regard to loud orchestral piano. He also insisted on eruptive gradations, not controlled ones, especially in Liszt. After I returned to Zagreb I invited him to give a masterclass at the Zagreb Music Academy although I knew he was not fond of that kind of teaching, but he accepted and students loved him.

I still remember Alfred Brendel's Beethoven recital in Basel where I played with Goran the day before. That concert was part of his 32 Beethoven Sonatas Concert Series throughout Europe.

Listening to Alfred Brendel live on stage was, for me, the turning point in my “thought and afterthoughts” about live performances. His emotional impact on the audience (and me) was so captivating in a sense that for a long time after the concert you could still feel the electric atmosphere and live character of some parts he played. His Beethoven recitals in the Queen Elizabeth Hall were also a part of that concert series. I was so grateful and thrilled when he invited me to attend all his rehearsals during the recital series, especially because they were also the recording sessions for his second (or third?) edition of Beethoven sonatas. I learned so much about recording in the hall after carefully preparing the piano with the highest possible creative concentration, in comparison to the evening concert without microphones and motivated by the audience. After that experience I never recorded in the studio again but always in the hall with natural hall acoustics. Alfred Brendel came to Zagreb a few years after my return, with the BBC crew recording a film about his life. Not many people know that he actually started to play the piano in Zagreb with Sofia Dezelich, where he moved with his family as a young boy. I found some photos in the archives from his first public concert in the Zagreb National Theatre as well as some letters which his mother Ida regularly sent to Miss Dezelich about his successes after they left Zagreb. He sent me later with thanks a five-CD box set of Beethoven Concertos with Simon Rattle which he preferred to all other recordings (especially the fourth concerto).

I met John Lill after one of his memorable recitals in Zagreb. His highly intelligent and intellectual pianism and vast repertoire fascinated me long before I met him in person. His observations to my playing, especially of Beethoven Op. 109, were guidelines in my future work on late Beethoven. Op. 109, 110 and 111 are much more than just piano sonatas and it was definitely him who offered me the right answers to my questions and wanderings. Therefore I was very sorry when he refused to come on the jury of the Svetislav Stančić International Piano Competition because at that time he was too busy playing many concerts in the States.

Annie Fischer never came to Zagreb but I met her in Budapest where I played Dora Pejacevich's evening with the Budapest String Quartet. During my stay in London we met many times whenever she came for a concert and it was quite often in the early eighties. I still remember the day when she decided not to travel anymore... and she never came to London again. I still have her Budapest address that she wrote in my notebook with trembling letters: Szet Istvan Park 14, Budapest. That was our farewell!

Our sessions usually lasted four to five hours with intervals when I could play to her almost whole recital programmes on a beautiful Bechstein piano in the flat of our mutual friend from the British Council. She liked the way I played Bach, and insisted on long lines, natural rubato and singing legato in all Romantic pieces I played. I still remember her words interrupting my playing: “Don't enjoy the music you are playing but listen to what is coming out from the piano... let the audience enjoy!” During intervals she gave me many useful pieces of advice for rehearsals with orchestra, practising on tour, dealing with agencies and planning interesting recital programmes. She was a very warm and caring person and I still remember many things she told me about managing both life, family and career together. Today I am proud to have a beautiful and talented daughter, Ljerka Elizabeth, both cellist and composer, a laureate of the Kabalevsky International Competition for Composition, and son Lovro, a young architect graduated in Vienna where he has been invited by his university professor to continue his career in a Centre for Global Architecture, the winning Austrian team for the Biennale in Venice. My grandmother Ida would be so proud!

MM: What was the most significant turning point in your professional career?

IG: After winning the Myra Hess Award, followed by a successful South Bank debut in 1983 and two later Queen

Russian repertoire developed not only my technique but freedom of interpretation and musical taste

Elizabeth Hall recitals, my career developed rapidly. I got invitations through the Zagreb Concert Management for recitals in the Franz Liszt Academy, Rudolfinum, Auditorio Manuel de Falla and Unisa Concert Hall, appeared at the Janáček, Varna, Freiburg, Dubrovnik and Spoleto Festivals and toured throughout the ex-Soviet Union and Europe with my husband. One of my favourites was a concert with the Talich Chamber Orchestra in Lichtenstein's Palace in Prague with Jan Talich conducting Mozart KV.414 and giving the world premiere of *Tu mar de mi alma* by Croatian composer Berislav Shipush for piano and strings. I often played thematic or one-composer recitals: Bach recital (*Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*, Italian Concerto, Chromatic Phantasy and Fugue, Partita in E Minor); Beethoven recital (*Tempest Sonata*, Waldstein Sonata, Sonata Op. 110); Brahms recital (*Two Rhapsodies*, Op. 119 and F sharp minor Sonata); Schubert recital (*Hungarian Melody*, Three Piano Pieces Op. Posth, Sonata in B flat); *Italian Capriccio* (Scarlatti, Bellini and Rossini); and a Russian programme with Tchaikovsky's *The Seasons* and two Prokofiev Sonatas. My chamber music concert programmes included almost all Piano Quintets with the Zagreb String Quartet, Jan Talich String Quartet (Prague) and the Budapest String Quartet (Budapest), Arias and Romances by Russian composers with the Bolshoi Theatre bass Aleksander Kisselev and Sonatas for Violin and Piano by Beethoven, Debussy, Schubert and Shostakovich with my husband Goran Konchar.

MM: Tell us about your return home and love of teaching.

IG: Expecting our first child we both decided to return to Zagreb (1986) and were soon appointed assistant professors at the Zagreb Music Academy. Goran also became a member of the Zagreb String Quartet which he has been leading for the last 30 years. At the same time I devoted more time to our daughter Ljerka Elizabeth, and that was the main reason why we both decided to stop with our chamber music concert tours in the future.

Starting a teaching career I was glad and ready to share my experiences with my first students, getting much more satisfaction with their progress and success than with my solo concerts. Some of them have continued with their careers abroad and some became devoted and caring teachers. I am very proud of my students.

MM: Though it is distressing to remember, can you tell us a little about some of your deeply impressive artistic work during the war years from the 1990s?

IG: During the five years of the tragic and most absurd war in 20th-century Europe, in Croatia (1999-2004), both Goran and I played many humanitarian concerts abroad.

The life in shelters was a nightmare for both of us especially because in the meantime our second child, son Lovro, came into the world. It was very difficult and stressful to explain to our children why this war had started. It was a horrible time.

I was especially sad later when I heard that Annie Fischer had died in Budapest during the war in Croatia and I did not even know. That's why I hate wars!

One particular memory is playing a concert in aid of victims of Dubrovnik in St. Martin-in-the-Fields with Stephen Kovacevich, Martha Argerich and Alex Rabinovich. It was actually Stephen's idea to collect some financing for Dubrovnik, a magnificent ancient city where he played many times.

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BETHOVEN : SONATA OP.31 NO.2 ‘TEMPEST’
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PROKOFIEV : SONATA NO.4 OP.29 IN C MINOR
ALLEGRO MOLTO SOTTENUTO
ANDANTE ASSAI
ALLEGRO CON BRIO, MA NON LEGGERO

Ida Gamulin was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 1977. She started studying the piano at the age of six and gave her first public performance when she was eight. Her talent was recognized early and in spite of her being opposed to difficulties and physical disability as a pianist, in 1992 she received the Zagreb Music Academy award and studied under Professor J. Mraz and graduated in 1993 with Distinction in Performance. During that period she was awarded several national and international piano prizes, and ranked herself as one of the finest pianists of her generation.

Ida Gamulin has attracted real attention after winning the Beethoven Prize in 1996. This was followed by numerous private and great academies from both cities and public international. Visiting artist in the Soviet Union. In 1997 Ida Gamulin won the Jury Prize in leadership which allowed her to continue studies at the Hochschule für Musik ‘Franz Liszt’ in Weimar under Professor R. Berger. In the same year she gained a Master's degree at the Zagreb Music Academy.

Ida Gamulin first came to London when she had been invited since October 1992, and in that period her career has developed rapidly. She was invited for a recital tour of the Purcell Room, and made her first appearance in the Purcell Room in England. During her stay in London she had valuable experience and has been invited to participate in the A. Bruch. She has also participated in Edith Vogel's master classes, and made her first appearance with J. Little and R. Bishop-Konrad.

In July 1993 Ida Gamulin won the International Myra Hess Award in London.

REVIEWS

‘...a pianist of rare technical perfection, combining this with an amazing musical imagination.’

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KONCERT DORA PEJAČEVIĆ (1885-1923)

Praha, 22. 10. 2001.
KLÁSTER SV. ANEŽKY ČESKÉ
Ida Gamulin, klavír
Taličhovo kvarteto

Budapest, 30. 10. 2001.
FÉSZER MŰVÉSZETI KLUB
Ida Gamulin, zangora
Kosa György vonosnegyes

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STEPHEN BISHOP KOVACEVICH Piano
GORAN KONCAR Violin and IDA GAMULIN Piano

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BELLINI sonata in G

G. KULJERIC Arabesque (FIRST PERFORMANCE)

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PROMOTION of the
CD "Italian Capriccio"

ИДА ГАМУЛИН

MM: How did EPTA Croatia re-emerge after the war years?

IG: During the war, cultural and concert life in Croatia stopped and in my opinion that was the right moment to revive hibernating EPTA Croatia and give her a new start. As the new president, elected in 2004, I tried to gather as many new young members as I could according to the circumstances. I continued with two major international piano competitions in partnership with the Zagreb Concert Management; Svetislav Stančić International Piano Competition in Zagreb and Dora Pejacevich International Piano Competition in Osijek, inviting the most prominent pianists and teachers onto the jury, including Dmitry Bashkirov, Eliso Virsaladze, Philip Fowke, Gjörgy Sándor, Jerome Rose, Eugen Indjic, Naum Grubert, Karl-Heinz Kammerling, Einar Steen-Nøkleberg, Sebastian Benda, Murray McLachlan, Diane Andersen, Dina Yoffe and many others. I also started the EPTA laureates Concert Series in all Croatian cities and abroad, presenting young Croatian prizewinners from both competitions.

MM: Your recording career is extremely impressive and has been widely acclaimed. Can you tell us about your first CD and how your discography developed from there?

IG: My first digital debut recording (Abbey Road Studio, London 1985) for EMI/Mava label with Prokofiev Sonatas got an excellent review in *Gramophone* by Lionel Salter. In the same year I recorded the First and Sixth Partitas by Bach (CBS Studio, London) for Yugoton. That was the beginning of what is, to date, a 35-year-long collaboration with Yugoton, latterly extensively with Croatia Records. Additionally I have recorded almost the complete piano oeuvre of Dora Pejacevich, as well as major works including Tchaikovsky's *The Seasons*, Brahms' F sharp minor Sonata and his Op. 119 pieces, There is a Schumann *Carnaval*, Bach *Italian Capriccio* with Scarlatti Sonatas and also some Italian music: Bellini's *Sonata in G* and Rossini's *Sins from Old Age*. I've enjoyed a lot of variety, and I recall also Beethoven's *Fourth Concerto* and *Tu mar de mi alma* by Berislav Shipush with the Zagreb Symphony Orchestra. There is another recording of the Dora Pejacevich Piano Quintet with the Zagreb String Quartet and Miniatures for violin and piano with violinist Jan Talich. There is a Schubert CD with the D960 *Sonata in B Flat*, *Three Piano Pieces op.posth* and *Hungarian Melody*. Finally there are four CDs of Croatian composers with music dedicated to me.

MM: Your wonderful EPTA competitions are extremely popular and widely respected internationally. Tell us about your involvement with the competitive piano world.

IG: Although I was not fond of competitions myself, I always advise young pianists to apply for competitions and attract attention being different and imaginative, not only competitive. I like sitting on the juries, listening to devoted young musicians from various piano schools showing at the same time their own cultural, social and musical heritage. I would prefer to listen to more of their own compositions, improvisations and chamber music than always the same competition programmes. Sometimes I am very unhappy with the results which could be totally different with some other jury members, but that's life!

MM: As a teacher, do you have strong principles on the development of young fingers and hands?

IG: Regarding the development of technique in general, the question is what is "technique?" It is not possible to work on technique apart from music, because technique is not just speed and accuracy. Good technique is complete freedom of movement in service of the sound and maximum intensity.

MM: How do you try to encourage imagination and creativity in your students?

IG: To become a good musician every pupil has to broaden their horizons in many ways through the educational system, knowledge and understanding of musical thoughts to build their



Starting a teaching career I was glad and ready to share my experiences with my first students

own interpretations. The most important achievement in the development of young artists is when they succeed in captivating the audience with their interpretations and individuality. Sadly many of them never succeed.

MM: What are some of the things you encourage your students to try and participate in?

IG: During every academic year I stimulate my students to apply for various auditions or Young Artists Concert Series in smaller concert halls or salons. They should prepare a professional CV, photo and good programme for such an occasion. Only very organised and ambitious students succeed in doing it alone without my help. All others, sometimes the most talented ones, behave like "moonwalkers", expecting someone else to do this work.

Today, it is much more difficult for young musicians to start their career without winning some competitions, because concert agencies and promoters want only big names and young stars on their lists...audiences too.

MM: I know that Croatia has suffered since lockdown not only with Covid-19 but also with a terrible earthquake. Tell us about some of your experiences since March.

IG: Since the lockdown started in Croatia, all cultural events have been cancelled, concerts, masterclasses, competitions, even music schools and academies closed their doors and piano lessons continued online. But as it was not enough, a few days later, on 22nd March, there was a disastrous earthquake in Zagreb which destroyed the old centre of Zagreb, its churches, concert halls, cultural institutions, universities and thousands of homes. After this shock I was healing my PTSD with Beethoven although EPTA's Conference in Bonn has definitely been cancelled.

I was planning concerts to mark my 35th anniversary, and 15 years of leading EPTA Croatia, but obviously in 2020 everything has to be cancelled. It is a terrible pity!