

Dora Deliyska: “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

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The Bulgarian pianist Dora Deliyska is known for unique artistic projects. This also applies to her new CD ‘*Études & Préludes*’. Alain Steffen talked to her about it.



Dora Deliyska
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On your new CD ‘*Études & Préludes*’ you place works by Chopin, Debussy, Ligeti and Kapustin directly opposite each other on such a way, that you create two completely new piano cycles. What was the idea behind this project?

Clear structures have always fascinated me. In an artistic sense, a structure can have many forms and variations; it can be a dramaturgy, a choreography, a compositional structure, or a stage direction. From a pianistic point of view, a piano cycle is a good example of how individual pieces can exist together in a clear musical structure and what meaning they take on within this framework. This self-contained scheme has its own musical rules and thus creates clarity and peace. A piano cycle is a universe of its own in which strongly contrasting pieces interact and influence each other. They can be arranged by key, (as in J.S. Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*, for example) or emerge as technically challenging masterpieces (as in Chopin’s *Etudes op. 10* and *op. 25*). With my new CD, I wanted to create my own musical structure, the framework of which serves to position pieces from different piano cycles in such a way, that their artistic meaning and interpretation changes.

Why exactly these composers? After all, there are many others who have composed piano cycles of etudes and preludes?

I used György Ligeti as a basis for the selection of the etudes. I have been playing and analysing his compositions for several years and find the *Études pour piano* particularly fascinating. These pieces have their own musical language. After thorough research on Ligeti, I discovered exciting details about his personality and compositional style. I found out that he was greatly influenced by the Mexican-American composer Conlon Nancarrow. Nancarrow composed 49 etudes for player piano, a self-playing piano. Ligeti was fascinated by the complexity and temporal variety of these compositions. The tempi in these etudes for player-piano are often unimaginable for human hearing. Ligeti’s etudes also border on technically impossible musical pieces and create great challenges for the pianist. Nevertheless, they sound very logical and self-contained. Ligeti implies the concept of non-human music, which sometimes sounds remote to our minds and understanding.

I added the etudes by Chopin to the programme because, in contrast to Ligeti, they have a strong melodic emphasis. Together with Debussy’s impressionistic colours they provide a balanced overall image. Since both Chopin and Debussy also composed piano cycles consisting of 24 preludes, the choice of composers for the prelude block was obvious. Kapustin was included because I was looking for a radiant end of the programme. I wanted to have a positive and bright Finale after so many complicated connections and thoughts throughout these 24 pieces.

As a performer, is it allowed to deconstruct already existing cycles and put them together again?

This is an important question that has always intrigued me: To what extent should a performer interfere in a composition? With my dramaturgical ideas, I believe I have found an answer for myself. Based on musicological analyses beforehand, I create a musical structure in which I position individual pieces on such a way that their meaning changes with the new order. This process is an artistic composing in itself and allows me to make certain changes in the interpretation within this structure.



Dora Deliyska
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In the case of your CD this has succeeded. The new piano cycles not only have their own identity, but they also allow the listener to experience the pieces in a completely different perspective. How did you proceed?

I think it is essential to get to know the selected piano cycles, in this case those of Chopin, Debussy, Ligeti and Kapustin, and their individual pieces in great detail before you then try to restructure them. For example, I studied Chopin's preludes not only individually, but also the way each piece changes in relation to every other. How does the first prelude sound if you play No. 3 instead of No. 2 immediately afterwards, or No. 4 instead of No. 2? And backwards: what musical or conceptual connections are formed if you play Prelude No. 24 followed by No. 23, or No. 24 followed by No. 22, and so on. It's almost like a complicated mathematical task. This long process takes a lot of time and concentration until the individual pieces come together and a new structure emerges.

In the Etudes cycle, the works are vigorously mixed; in the Preludes cycle, the composers follow one another, i.e., first Chopin, then Debussy, then Kapustin.

The twelve etudes are arranged by intervals, from a repeated note in the “Zauberlehrling” - Ligeti calls it a continuum, I, on the other hand, call it a zero interval - via the semitone step in “Pour les degrés chromatiques” by Debussy to the full tone step, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and octave, they develop a gradually growing structure and musical tension. At the end, one hears the etude “Pour les accords” by Debussy, in which the chords can be seen as a combination of intervals. The two arpeggio etudes before it, one each by Chopin and Debussy, are considered examples of decomposed intervals that form strong harmonic nuances and colours. The second part of the programme consists of three composition groups - five preludes by Chopin, four preludes by Debussy and three by Kapustin. The listeners can thus distinguish the clear differences in the compositional styles even more clearly. These twelve preludes mirror the first part and create a sense of unity in the programme, which, with its 24 individual pieces, can be considered a work of art and a piano cycle in its own.

When hearing the program, the etudes by Chopin and Debussy in particular suddenly seem very modern in the context of those by Ligeti.

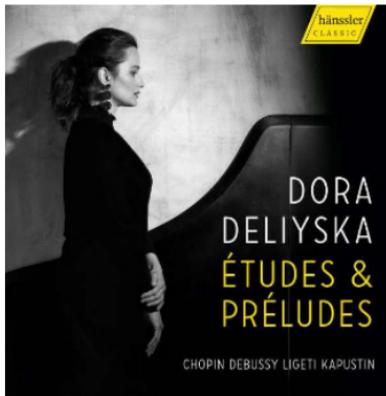
For many listeners, the complex compositions by Ligeti are not always easily understood. In a combination with the tonal and harmonic palate of Chopin and Debussy, these works suddenly sound much more accessible. And vice versa. The technically challenging passages in Chopin suddenly lose their significance and one can hear modern musical ideas in the context of Ligeti. This is the power of the newly formed musical structure.

Nikolai Kapustin seems more like a stranger here. What can you tell us about this composer?

I was very fascinated by the preludes of Nikolai Kapustin with their jazz harmonies and complex rhythms. The Ukrainian composer was an excellent concert pianist who wrote many works in a jazz style. For me, as a classically trained pianist, these works are very enjoyable to play. Kapustin has everything notated in meticulous detail, even the part that sounds like an improvisation.

When you put together a programme like this, does it also affect the interpretation? Do you play Chopin differently if you have Ligeti in your ear at the same time or does Ligeti’s music have an influence on the way you play Debussy.

The idea that the whole is more than the sum of its parts is clearly felt in my dramaturgical projects. Each selected piece is closely related to the one that follows it, and as a result, different ideas, nuances, and musical colours are being transmitted. But the overall concept is the decisive factor for the interpretation.



With this CD, like many of your colleges, you leave the conventional way of creating programs. As a performer nowadays, and as a listener, does one have to search and explore new paths in classical music?

I have always followed my own personal paths in music and in art. I have never created certain projects only because they would be well received in the classical music scene. For me, it is always very important, that an honest approach to the composers and their works emerges during the developing period and during practising. Once this process occurs, it automatically mirrors the ongoing development of classical music. However, one must not take oneself too seriously as a performer. We serve the music, the compositions, and the composers, and this means that our task is to create unique moments on stage or in a studio. A live performance or recording can affect deeply the emotional world of the listener and we have a responsibility to treasure and keep these experiences on a genuine way.

You do not limit yourself only to the classical repertoire but also play jazz, even live, as for example in the best-known Viennese jazz club „Porgy & Bess“.

The project in the „Porgy & Bess“ was together with musicians who are also good friends of mine, hence the title „Dora Deliyiska & Friends“. I have also recorded a CD with the same concept - „Danzas“. All the pieces in the program are related to different dance rhythms - Argentine music (Ginastera), tangos (Piazzolla), Balkan rhythms (Georg Breinschmid) and Romanian/Bulgarian folk music (Bartók). I love to dance myself! That's why this project was not only a great pleasure for me, but also a chance to experience my favorite dance rhythms on stage. And it was very inspiring that it took place in the legendary Viennese jazz club „Porgy & Bess“.

How jazzy can classical music be? In other words, how much freedom can one allow the music?

The different musical styles have a close connection to each other. For example, how much jazz can be found in the second movement of Beethoven's Sonata op.111 and how much baroque in the Preludes and Fugues op. 87 by Dmitri Shostakovich? One has to find these sometimes hidden musical connections and the interpretation automatically liberates itself. As a performer, I think it's essential not to engage „only“ in classical music. I am a concert pianist, but I also enjoy listening to pop and jazz, dancing hip-hop and dancehall, and I can appreciate a concert of experimental electronic music. One should always expand the horizon in order to get new artistic ideas.

With so many first-rate musicians nowadays, everyone wants their piece of the pie, of course. Many specialize, others stay on the classical path or seek a secure orchestral position, while others try their own hands at playing niche repertoire or open themselves up to new stylistic genres and musical forms. How do you experience the current classical music scene and how wide is the line between survival and making a great career?

One's artistic development is a very individual process and partly a personal decision. I never had a specific goal to have a great career, to become famous or even to be a concert pianist. I just knew very early in my life that I felt really comfortable on stage. Through many rehearsals and concerts with the choir, in piano performances, theatre and ballet productions that I participated in, I knew since I was a child that I loved the stage and I wanted to step into that magical space as often as possible.

Then, when I was about 15 years old, it became clear to me that the purest communication on stage for me is through the sound of the piano. That was the first conscious artistic decision - to dedicate myself only to the piano.

A little later, I realized that I was very passionate about the connection between science and music. So, I started to think more broadly and to develop dramaturgical ideas that have a musicological basis but can still be considered a work of art in itself.

So, it's a path that has a lot of possibilities.

I don't know where my artistic self will take me next, but I have learned to trust my musical intuition and let both the emotional and intellectual ideas evolve and flourish.

Of course, one must also remain realistic in order to survive as a professional musician. A healthy combination between artistic freedom and realistic ideas would be best. However, I tend more towards idealistic thinking in art, and that has its own difficulties. But there is a lot of beauty in the moment when you dare to let go of everything and devote yourself only to music. And finally, artistic growth only happens when you think boldly, take risks, and don't conform too much to society's expectations.