

Reaching Deep: a Conversation with Kathryn Rosenbach BY ROBERT SCHULSLAPER

Although based in Massachusetts, pianist Kathryn Rosenbach frequently performs throughout the United States, Canada, Switzerland, and Italy. Combining a love for the standard repertoire with a fascination for the contemporary, her recitals offer her appreciative audiences a richly satisfying blend of old and new music projected with passion and intuitive perception. On her latest CD, *Sights and Sounds of French Impressionism: Music of Debussy & Ravel*, she brings a fresh perspective to some old favorites.

I'm guessing that music has always played an important part in your life.

I was born into a musical family. My father was a noted jazz pianist and teacher in the Buffalo area. When I was a child, my mother taught as well. As a result, I started lessons at age three. During my youth I also played the flute and sang, and I was fortunate enough to have studied in the summer program at the Chautauqua Institute for two summers. Today I primarily play the piano as well as the organ in my position as the music director for the First Baptist Church of Woburn. I began to compose during my teens, working with Livingston Gearhardt, and that training helps me improvise interludes, preludes, and offertory selections for church.

Over the years I've been a student at a number of institutions. My college career began at SUNY Fredonia, studying piano with Claudette Sorel. I then studied for a semester at the Cleveland Institute of Music, and then completed my BFA and MFA at SUNY Buffalo, where I primarily studied with Stephen Manes. I later studied piano with Barbara Lister-Sink, David Burge, and Jeffrey Kahane in the doctoral program at the Eastman School of Music. It was under Dr. Lister-Sink's guidance that I applied and was accepted for the masterclasses at the Accademia di Chigiana, where I studied with Guido Agosti, who had been Dr. Lister-Sink's teacher. He was a wonderful pianist. I distinctly recall hearing him perform the Bloch Piano Sonata while I was there—it was dedicated to him—and I was struck by his wide palette of colors. I continue to explore this myself to this day.

When you think back to that time, were there any incidents that particularly stand out?

One of my more poignant memories is of performing the Samuel Barber Nocturne in a masterclass. Mr. Agosti had never heard it before ... he seemed quite moved.

On a non-musical note, do you speak Italian?

No, I don't, which caused quite a few problems when I was there!

I've read that Agosti often accompanied singers. Have you followed in his footsteps?

I have always been involved with either accompanying or conducting singers. My first experience as a choral accompanist was when I was in fifth grade. At many points during my career I have worked with opera singers. I also perform and coach chamber music often. Presently I coach both a trio and duo on a weekly basis. I absolutely love playing chamber music.

Do concertos—chamber music on a larger scale, if you like—figure prominently in your concert appearances?

Yes they do: I've appeared many times as a soloist. My first concerto performance was playing *Rhapsody in Blue* when I was 16. I've also performed Liszt's E♭ Concerto, Nobre's *Variacoes Ritmicas* [see below], and Beethoven's "Emperor." I look forward to future appearances.

As you're a composer yourself, I'm assuming that contemporary music is important to you.

I have been intimately involved with contemporary music since my college days. When I was at SUNY Buffalo I performed in many concerts, presenting the works of living composers. On one memorable occasion I was honored to play the Buffalo premiere of Marios Nobre's *Variacoes Ritmicas* for piano and percussion (1963) under the direction of Jan Williams. I was already an active member of the SUNY Buffalo Percussion Ensemble, so I was in the right place at the right time. I also participated in a performance of Lejaren Hiller's *Computer Cantata*, with Robert Moog playing the theremin. It was concerts like these that opened my ears and curiosity to exploring new possibilities of color in music. Besides playing lots of new music I also studied with Leo Smit and Yvar Mikhashoff: later, when I was at Eastman, I studied with David Burge. It was wonderful to learn from the masters.

Today, as a professional, I often work with living composers. For example, I am a close friend and colleague of Dianne Goolkasian Rahbee. I love playing her music. Another composer I know well is Yehudi Wyner, whose *Refrain* I recently performed.

After Eastman I was teaching at the Longy School of Music in Boston. It was during those years that I became involved with Composers in Red Sneakers when one of the original members—Herman Weiss—asked me to join. During my time as a Sneaker, I became artistic director and had a work for children's chorus and two pianos performed. The group recorded a CD that includes one of my chamber performances as well as my choral work *The Courtship of Yonghy-Bonghy Bo* (it can be heard on my website). In addition to performing my own pieces I would often play new works by young composers: It was a challenge, yet inspiring.

In addition to several of your YouTube videos devoted to Dianne Goolkasian Rahbee's compositions, there's one in which you perform several movements of a piano sonata by Grazyna Bacewicz. Is she another of your favorites?

I was given the scores to a number of works by Bacewicz when I was in my early 20s and I have held this music close to my heart ever since.

Do you find that audiences are receptive to contemporary music?

I have often found that audiences will at least accept newer music if it is performed with intelligence and passion. I often speak to the audience members about what to listen for before performing new works. This line of communication seems to aid their listening experience.

Tell me a little more about your own music.

Although the bulk of my works are choral compositions, I have also composed chamber music and orchestral works. I have composed one piano work to date. I tend to be a composer that draws my inspiration from an outside text of an emotional event. My latest work, *Psalm X* for clarinet and piano, was inspired by the wide range of emotions we had experienced here as a result of the Boston Marathon Bombings.

How do you hope to affect your audience?

Whether as a performer or as a composer, I have always tried to reach into the deep passions and emotions of the listener.

When you teach, do you try to engage your students in the same way?

As a teacher, I believe that lessons should be an experience of guided exploration. I have found that students learn most thoroughly if they are engaged in discovery.

Moving on to your CDs, do you enjoy recording? Some musicians claim they much prefer performing for an audience—and capturing "live" recordings—to the supposed "sterility" of a studio recording. To my mind, as to Glenn Gould's, the studio environment seems a very

stimulating one, as it offers the chance to continually refine your interpretations as well as to fine-tune the sound, etc.

I do enjoy recording, although it is a very different experience from performing for a live audience. I needed to generate an unusual amount of energy that would naturally be present in a live situation.

I liked the old-fashioned sound, if I can put it that way, of the piano you selected for Sights and Sound of the French Impressionists. Is it the same one you played on your previous CD, Exploring the Fantasy?

I recorded the first CD in the Cabot room of the Powers Music School, while the second was recorded in a private studio in Belmont, Massachusetts. Neither of the instruments are newer instruments. Both are aged Steinways, but very different in sound.

Why did you choose to record this particular repertoire?

Both of my CDs were the results of concerts I had given. I like to present concerts with a unifying theme. *Exploring the Fantasy* was a result of my love of the music of Bach, Chopin, and Schumann. *Sights and Sounds of French Impressionism* reflects my utter passion for the works of Debussy and Ravel. It is my hope that the listener will be carried along the journey of the music.

With the first CD, what is about fantasy as a genre that attracted you?

I feel that the *Fantasy* CD represents the journey that each composer explores in his respective language. Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy* takes the listener through such wide unexpected emotions, and the corresponding Fugue synthesizes a strict Baroque form with an even wider emotional experience. Similarly, both the Chopin and Schumann works capture each composer's unique language.

Why does the title of the second CD refer to sights as well as sounds? Does that allude to Impressionism's origins in painting?

"*Sights*" reflects the evocative titles of each piece. This aids the imagination of the listener, giving a further insight into what each piece explores.

Neither Debussy nor Ravel liked to be called Impressionists, yet that's the label that's stuck and I suppose it's an apt one.

While it's true that Debussy and Ravel deplored the description of their music as Impressionistic, I agree with you that the term is a valuable adjective to describe their individual languages. What appeals most to me about their music is the ease with which one can understand its messages. I have found that this program is well received by audiences of a wide variety of backgrounds and age groups.

Were there specific extra-musical events that had a long-lasting effect on these composers?

Both Debussy and Ravel were influenced by their exposure to Eastern culture and arts through the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1899. Similarly, both were fascinated by the Spanish music and culture that was the rage of the day. Both the Eastern and Spanish influences are reflected in the CD selections.

Would you like to record more of their music?

Yes, that's a very attractive idea!

Do you think that Debussy and Ravel spontaneously started writing in a new style or were they tapping into an emerging, perhaps even subconscious, trend? In a word, do you believe in Zeitgeist?

I do believe in Zeitgeist inasmuch as both Debussy and Ravel were affected by the social, cultural, and artistic trends that were popular in France during their day.

Thus far your CDs have replicated the thematically structured programs you present in your concerts. Will that hold true for any future recordings?

Yes. I am presently presenting a program entitled *The Stories of Life*, featuring Ballades by Chopin, Brahms, and Goolkasian Rahbee, as well as Wyner's *Refrain* and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, which I may record. I also have plans to record a Bach CD in 2020, including a piano transcription I made of the Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor: a full life.

DEBUSSY Images: Reflets dans l'eau. Estampes. L'isle joyeuse. RAVEL Pavane pour une infante défunte. Miroirs: II-IV • Kathryn Rosenbach (pn) • KATHRYN ROSENBAACH no catalog number (52:16)

This is only Kathryn Rosenbach's second album. Her debut album, a collection of works by Bach, Chopin, and Schumann, titled *Exploring the Fantasy*, is available in both physical and downloadable form from CDBaby, in downloadable form only from Amazon and iTunes, and in streaming audio on Spotify. Since Rosenbach is apt to be new to *Fanfare's* readers, a little background is in order. Born in Buffalo, she studied at the local campus of the State University of New York (SUNY), graduating with Bachelor of Fine Arts and Master of Fine Arts degrees. Rosenbach then went on to pursue her doctoral studies at the Eastman School of Music and at the Accademia Musicale di Chigiana in Siena, Italy, where she was awarded an Artist Diploma. Since then, she has been widely acclaimed as both a soloist and chamber musician, performing throughout the U.S., Canada, Switzerland, and Italy. Rosenbach's repertoire ranges from Bach and Handel to premieres of works by contemporary composers, such as Yehudi Wyner and Marlos Nobre. A composer in her own right, Rosenbach was a member of Composers in Red Sneakers from 1996 to 2002, and she is active as both a teacher and an accompanist.

For this, her second album, titled *Sights and Sounds of French Impressionism*, Rosenbach has chosen to play it both safe and not so safe at the same time. What do I mean by that? Well, if you were going to put together a program of piano works by Debussy and Ravel, you could not possibly pick more popular works by these composers than those Rosenbach has chosen. That's the safe part of the paradox. The not-so-safe part is that precisely because these are practically signature works by Debussy and Ravel, the competition on record is formidable. Rosenbach is therefore very brave. I think I can safely say, however, that based on the evidence of her playing on this disc she has no reason to be daunted. The water sprites splash about and play in the fountain of rainbow mists, like svelte Rhinemaidens, only on the Seine. That's the "sight and sound" of Rosenbach's sparkling "Reflets dans l'eau." Her *Estampes* is a Love Boat cruise making its ports of call.

Whatever the inspiration was for Debussy's *L'isle joyeuse*, it can't be denied that the "joy" of the *joyeuse* was erotic, if not outright sexual, in nature. The piece is believed mainly to have been inspired by Watteau's painting *L'Embarquement de Cythère*, depicting a group of revelers making merry on the mythical Mediterranean island of Cythera, birthplace of Venus, the goddess of love. The original painting leaves to the imagination what the revelers have in mind for their outing after the picnic, but the cupids hovering overhead and shooting their arrows at the couples in a second version of the painting, titled *Pèlerinage à Cythère*, erase any doubt. It's also believed that *L'isle* in Debussy's title refers to the Channel Island of Jersey, where, in 1904, the composer took his second wife to be, Emma Bardac, for a little pre-marital *joyeuse*. All of

that aside, *L'isle joyeuse* is one of Debussy's most compositionally sophisticated pieces, combining the whole-tone and diatonic scales with the Lydian mode in a harmonically, rhythmically, and texturally complex work that has virtually become the textbook definition of French musical Impressionism. Rosenbach recreates the piece for us with exceptionally keen ears to Debussy's pianistic touches that give the music its pleasure-seeking, seductive mystique.

Where Debussy composed relatively few original orchestral works compared to his output for piano, Ravel favored the orchestra over the piano. In fact, a number of pieces by Ravel listed under his keyboard works are arrangements he made of his orchestral compositions. That, however, is not the only difference between the two composers. In fact, it's not even the most salient one. General music appreciation courses and popular music history books have practically hyphenated their names, as if Debussy and Ravel were joined in matrimony, but their musical aesthetics and personalities are actually quite different. Where Debussy really is the poster child for French musical Impressionism, Ravel's brand of Impressionism isn't pure. It's a good deal more eclectic, laced with the influences of Neoclassicism, jazz, the folk music of Ravel's native Basque culture, and the group of composers that came together under the banner of Les Apaches and which included figures as culturally, aesthetically, and musically diverse as Stravinsky, Florent Schmitt, and Manuel de Falla. What a motley crew that must have been. In any case, in a work like *Daphnis et Chloé*, Ravel could prove he was every bit the Impressionist Debussy was, while in works such as *La valse* and *Tzigane*, Ravel could turn out parodies of corrosive power.

Ravel's too-popular *Pavane pour une infante défunte* was a student work the composer wrote in 1899 while at the Paris Conservatory under the tutelage of Gabriel Fauré. I say "too popular" because early on it came to typecast Ravel as too close a follower of Fauré, and Ravel felt it didn't represent his best work, although he still thought well enough of it in 1910 to orchestrate it. Personally, I've always thought you could add a few off-the-wall performing instructions to this bittersweet, dolorous, repetitious piece, sign Erik Satie's name to it, and no one would know the difference. But that's just my opinion.

Les Apaches, mentioned above, plays a role in Ravel's *Miroirs*. Each of the pieces in the five-movement suite is dedicated to one of the avant-garde artists in the group, not all of whom, by the way, were composers. Some were poets, others, painters, and still others, writers, essayists, and even a music critic. Rosenbach's performance of three of the pieces from the suite—II, "Oiseaux tristes"; III, "Une barque sur l'océan"; and IV, "Alborada del gracioso"—is exquisitely atmospheric, diaphanous, and musically telling, which is all the more reason to lament that she did not include the first and last numbers in the set. I'm not sure why, since the disc timing is clearly not an issue.

This is a very fine recital of popular and widely recorded pieces by Debussy and Ravel, which, notwithstanding that, easily holds its own against the competition. The sound of the recording, made in a private studio in Belmont, Massachusetts, in June 2016, and engineered and produced by Pamela Marshall of Spindrift Music Company, is a model of how to obtain exemplary results capturing a solo piano. **Jerry Dubins**

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Sporting painter Lionel Walden's atmospheric *Hawaiian Sampans* on the front cover, pianist Kathryn Rosenbach's album presents a finely judged recital of French Impressionist pieces. A pupil of Guido Agosti in Siena, Italy, Kathryn Rosenbach has a fine command of keyboard color, a trait so necessary to convincing performances of this repertoire.

A finely etched “Reflets dans l’eau” sets out Rosenbach’s strengths. Each right-hand simultaneity is carefully balanced, the result clearly of much thought. She is not one to drench everything in a haze of sustaining pedal; lines speak clearly. While “Reflets” is an excerpt from *Images* Book One, Rosenbach presents the complete set of *Estampes*. Her left-hand thematic statements are perfectly judged in “Pagodes,” while she captures the more outgoing “La Soirée dans Granade” well. Her rhythms are infectious, and the terrain is appropriately varied. Here, too, that careful pedaling means the textures do not saturate even when dancing is involved. Her “Jardins sous la pluie” is a more dramatic affair than many; at around the two-minute mark, too, there is the sweetest of touches for the treble melody. Of the Debussy, only *L’isle joyeuse* disappoints, being somewhat earthbound. It needs sophistication and fantasy, plus a sense of ecstasy at its climax: Bavouzet (Chandos) and Noriko Ogawa (BIS) are both excellent modern recordings of this elusive but magnificent piece.

The Ravel section of the recital opens with a lovely *Pavane pour une infant défunte*. Rosenbach colors the canvas perfectly in shades of melancholy, always intensely pianistic (in other words, the ear is not using the piano to “remind itself” of the orchestral version). Again, Bavouzet on Chandos crops up as notable and formidable competition; over on Hyperion, Steven Osborne’s superb Ravel set also stakes a claim. Yet Rosenbach offers a noble version, one of intense integrity. The move to the opening single note of “Oiseaux tristes” from *Miroirs* is a long one. Rosenbach seems to caress the keys for some of the calls, while the filigree calls imply the delicacy of cobwebs. Perhaps a touch more bass clarity would have helped bring off “Une barque sur l’océan” completely convincingly, but there is enough fantasy here to sustain the argument. Rosenbach opts to emphasize the restrained side of “Alborada del gracioso,” the final movement of *Miroirs*. A touch more abandonment might have helped to escape the studio, yet the final moments are well prepared through crisp rhythmic work.

The recording itself (Belmont, MA, produced and engineered by Pamela Marshall) is present and clear, the acoustic dry enough for all details to come through without feeling too clinical. The disc is available via CDBaby.com. **Colin Clarke**