This past April, I had the opportunity to hear the complete solo piano music of Debussy performed in a series of four concerts on Sunday evenings at the University of Maryland's Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. The pianist was Larissa Dedova, professor at the University of Maryland; she has a new recording, the *Complete Solo Piano Music of Debussy*, released by Centaur Records in May 2011. Performing Debussy's entire piano solo oeuvre in the span of a month is no small feat, as any pianist who has studied some of Debussy's *Etudes* can attest. The complete solo piano music of Debussy takes more than five hours to perform, and it presents the pianist with enormous interpretive and technical challenges.

The first concert in the series was the *Prelude*, Books One and Two, and as I sat listening to the concert, I found myself wondering how a Russian pianist became so enamored with the music of this French composer—enough so to decide to record the complete piano works. Dedova received her training entirely in Russia, graduating...
from the famed Moscow Conservatory with an MM and DMA in piano performance, studying with Lev Oborin and Evgeny Malinin, and eventually becoming a professor at the conservatory for many years before moving to the United States. Dedova’s performance of the Préludes was insightful and inspired; clearly, this was music that she has lived with for a long time.

Dedova’s recording has garnered impressive critical reviews. Jerry Dubins, writing in Fanfare magazine about Dedova’s Debussy recording, said that Dedova’s interpretation of this music is “supported by an unerring musical instinct and flawless technique,” and “by any measure, this is attractive, shapely playing filled with many gratifying moments you will want to savor repeatedly.” He goes on to say that “Dedova is an artist of the highest caliber and she takes the listener on this journey through Debussy’s landscape as a knowledgeable and confident guide.” Listening to Dedova perform the Préludes, I had to agree. And the August 2011 issue of Phil’s Classical Review says, “Dedova makes a compelling case for the listener to engage in performances that are equal to, or at least competitive with, the very best Debussy I have heard in more than 25 years as a reviewer.”

I couldn’t think of a Russian pianist who has recorded the complete piano works of Debussy, and I thought how interesting it would be to talk with Dedova about this “Debussy journey” (as I would later learn that she has called this project) to learn about its genesis. Fortunately, she agreed to talk with me, and we sat down one afternoon in June in her studio at the University of Maryland to talk about the project.

James Litzelman: I can’t think of another Russian pianist who has recorded the complete solo piano works of Debussy—are you the first?

Larissa Dedova: Yes, to my knowledge, I am the first Russian pianist to do this, and I believe no one from Russia has done this. But there are many Russian pianists who have recorded various works of Debussy that I love quite a lot. The recordings of Sviatoslav Richter and Anatoly Vedernikov immediately come to mind, and my favorite recording of the Études is the one by Vedernikov. Another one is Alexei Lubimov, who is a Russian pianist, fortepianist and harpsichordist who studied with Neuhaus and Naumov at the Moscow Conservatory. But no one has recorded the complete solo works to my knowledge. In the 1970s I was able to hear Richter performing live quite regularly and heard him perform some of the Préludes—“La terrasse” from Book Two was gorgeous—and also Estampes, Berceuse héroïque. I recently became familiar with Anatoly Vedernikov’s recording of the Études, originally recorded in the late 1950s or early 1960s. Vedernikov was a frequent duo partner of Richter, but I was not aware of his wonderful recording of the Études until working on this project. I think he’s not as well known in the West, and that’s a pity because he is a great pianist.

JL: As a young student in Moscow, did you have the opportunity to hear much Debussy piano music? And was this music regularly taught at the conservatory?

LD: Certain works—L’Isle joyeuse, Pour le piano and Estampes, for example, were very popular and played with regularity, but of course, the program of study was quite rigorous and some teachers were not so keen on this repertoire. However, my teacher, Lev Oborin, was very interested in the music of Debussy and he would give this repertoire to his students. While I studied with him, he assigned me Suite bergamasque, Pour le piano and maybe a couple of the Préludes. Then in graduate school I became extremely interested in the Préludes as a whole and started to learn some of them. It was at this time that I knew I wanted to play the complete Préludes as a program. Not long after graduate school, in the early 1980s, I recorded the complete Debussy Préludes—my first LP album. This recording sold out very quickly in Moscow because it was so rare in Russia at this time. It was nice to go

The early pieces were first, and then the music came in chronological order. One of the last volumes contained the Études. I remember this in particular, because the Études were initially a little difficult for me to comprehend and I thought they were extremely hard! They looked intimidating on the page but I have to say that this music immediately became very close to my heart, and it has remained so for my entire life. So I guess I would have to say that my interest in this project can be traced all the way back to this time—I just fell in love with this music, and I guess I’m still in love. I remember the anticipation of waiting for each new volume. In school, I played the two Arabesques—a good introduction to his music, by the way—but not much else.

JL: One might not immediately associate a Russian pianist with the music of Debussy. How early in your life did you become acquainted with his music, and what was the impetus for wanting to record the complete works?

LD: I guess this goes all the way back to when I was a girl of 12 or 13 and much of the credit must be given to my grandfather. The first Russian edition of Debussy’s piano music was published at this time, and my grandfather bought a subscription to the series for me. There were five or six volumes in the series and each new volume came every couple of months.
into a record store and see how people were buying my recording—this was a very wonderful experience.

And recently, something rather unusual happened because of this recording. I was invited to play in Tokyo this past February on a series of concerts at Sounida Tritony Hall on "Heirs of Russian Pianism." I was wondering how they knew about me and how I got this invitation to play. Well, in an interview with one of the main music critics in Tokyo, I learned that they knew of me because of this earlier recording of the Préludes, and it’s rather remarkable that this invitation to play came at the same time I was immersed in this Debussy project!

So in terms of Debussy being taught at the conservatory, it certainly was, but it wasn’t obligatory. For instance, in the Tchaikovsky competition, Debussy's Etudes were on the list of etudes that one could choose to perform. Beethoven and the great German masters, along with Chopin and the Russian composers, was always part of the standard curriculum for all Russian pianists, and although the music of Debussy didn’t necessarily get the same level of attention as those composers, everyone knew that this music was different and kind of special, and teachers like Neuhaus and Oberin would regularly assign Debussy to their students.

Malinin, who was Neuhaus’s assistant and later head of the piano department at the Moscow Conservatory, loved the music of Debussy and in fact, I performed En blanc et noir with him a number of times. When I became Malinin’s assistant I had the opportunity each summer to go to Tours, France to participate in a music festival. I did this for a number of years in the 1980s and of course, this added to my love of painting of Monet, one may say the color is blue, but if you look closer, you see purple, black, white, brown—many different colors that go into making the color blue. One must paint on the piano in the same way, using many different colors to eventually get the color “blue.” And I love this. I love the impressionism in art and although I don’t want to argue with Debussy, I do like the impressionism in his music. I think I also respond to his harmonic innovations; these sounds give me such pleasure and to be in that world and live in the sonority is a wonderful thing for me. And perhaps most remarkable is, that with all this freedom, there is such proportion, architectural beauty and perfection in his music.

"Debussy said ‘music is a free art’ and maybe it is this freedom that I hear in every note of his music that speaks to me so much.”
and I was asked to fill in for him with the second book of the Préludes. So by the time I returned to Switzerland in March to play my four concerts at the Debussy Festival, I did end up playing almost the entire works there—not everything, but most of it, including both books of the Préludes, Études, Suite bergamasque, Pour le piano, both Images, Estampes, L’île joyeuse, Children’s Corner, the Arabesques, La plus que lente, Masques and a few other pieces. And these four concerts happened in a span of 22 hours! The concerts were quite successful, garnered great reviews, and although I was completely exhausted, it helped me enormously to prepare for the programs here at Univeristy of Maryland in April.

Getting back to the preparation for this—last summer I started practicing quite a lot, at least four or five hours each day, and I would play parts of the program here and there. During the academic year, I used every spare minute to practice. On days when I had no teaching, I would work seven or eight hours each day—sometimes more. And days when I was teaching, I would work for a couple of hours in the morning, and then again at night. The idea was not to lose a second and just practice.

My students were very supportive of this project and fortunately I didn’t need to cancel any of their lessons. In fact, the lessons that I missed while I was in Switzerland performing were made up during our spring break, and I’m very proud that I was able to maintain my teaching schedule and that all of the students got all of their lessons.

This was as very special time in my life I am so happy that I was able to do it—as a musician and artist, it was such fun, and such a huge accomplishment for me.

**JL**: For the performance here at University of Maryland, how did you decide upon the order?

**LD**: I decided to put both books of the Préludes on the first concert, because they are so representative of his work. And since the Études are so complex, I decided that they needed to be the last thing in the series, and although this was difficult for me, it felt right to do it this way. And so I didn’t do it in a chronological order, but I think this worked well from the audience point of view.

**JL**: What advice might you have for piano students who want to play the music of Debussy?

**LD**: Try to develop your ear. One needs a good ear—a very keen ear—to play Debussy. One can develop one’s ear through playing his music because the demands of the sound are quite special in his music and require careful use of the pedal. Attention to, and love for, the sound of the piano is also necessary. And of course, imagination—imagination and a good ear—these are perhaps the most important requirements for playing this music. Debussy can teach these things to students if they are able to listen carefully.

The two Arabesques, Rêverie, and all the early music is beautiful and can serve as a good introduction to Debussy. It’s traditional, but one can still recognize the kernels of his later style. If a student is mature, but not technically advanced, he might be interested in playing the very late pieces, like Berceuse héroïque.

**JL**: Any closing thoughts?

**LD**: I would like to thank our school of music and my colleagues here at the University of Maryland. I had tremendous support, and without it, my recording project and series of concerts would not have been possible. As I said before, this period of my life was very special and I’m so happy that I had this opportunity. I would gladly do it all over again!

Notes

AMT