



An Evening with: Dobrinka Tabakova

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'In Context' – an Introduction from Dobrinka

There is nothing more precious than listening when composing. It may sound obvious, but it's the only thing we are truly in control of when creating music. Anyone can create a sound, it can even be a beautiful sound, or a memorable sound, but where does it come from and where does it go? The start and the finish are silence, and that is what a composer has to be aware of when they start composing. What is the context of the music you are creating?

This context can be personal - your own circumstances and what led you to want to write music in the first place. It can be social or global - the world around you, and the place of your music in it. Often, it's enough for you, as the composer, to need the music, but in my experience when that is coupled with a wider context, that is when music can be at its most powerful.

For a long time, I resisted reading too much about other composers' lives - it seemed like unnecessary detail when the music should speak for itself. With time, I began to appreciate those details more and it often gave a new dimension to understanding the music, a depth if you will.

For me, the impetus to start composing came gradually and naturally. I grew up in a family who loved music - we'd listen to my grandfather's LP collection and we'd go to concerts of the Philharmonic Orchestra and to the opera at the Roman amphitheatre in my hometown - Plovdiv, Bulgaria. It was my own wish to start learning the piano, and although the wish was supported, I doubt anyone expected that I would become a professional musician. Since most of my family were scientists and academics, it was probably the path everyone imagined for me too. In many ways, I still wish for my music to be enjoyed by people who are not just professional musicians - having been initiated into the world of music quite intuitively, it is important for me to give that immediate and direct connection with music to others.

I started studying composition formally in the early 90s - a time when writing melodic pieces with a recognisable tonic or modal centre was mostly discouraged in academic circles, and I'm quietly proud of resisting any suggestions to change my convictions. It's strange to think that rather than avoiding that environment, I have always felt close to it - most notably by being accepted on one of the most avant-garde summer courses in France - Centre Acanthes, at the age of 15, while the other attendees were undergraduate and postgraduate students. I was fascinated by Messiaen at that time, so it was particularly exciting to attend Yvonne Loriod's classes and it is where I had one of the most memorable musical meetings of my life - with Iannis Xenakis. His encouragement and thinking about musical structure has stayed with me to this day. My link with the avant-garde continued during my 20s, as I programmed the new music concert series of the British Music Information Centre, 'The Cutting Edge'.

One of the greatest developments I have personally lived through has been this democratising of the aesthetic of ‘contemporary music’; seeing the variety of styles being adopted now would have been unthinkable 30 years ago.

I can trace my own journey from improvising on the piano to writing full orchestral scores, and melody is present from the very first creative moments. Creating memorable and emotive themes is an important part of my creative process. But again, it is the context of the melody that is important to consider - the build-up, the background and density of material behind it and how different melodies interact. Developing the right environment for the melody and creating a cohesive structure are at the heart of beginning each new piece.

So, for example, the *Fantasy Homage to Schubert* clearly culminates in the exquisite opening theme from his *Fantasy in C major*, but reaching it required a careful build up, with material which would not compete with the arrival of the melody. The almost glacial harmonic pace of the material is crucial in presenting the fragility of the melody. Similarly, in the *Concerto for Cello* or *Such Different Paths*, the arrival at the main melody is carefully worked out and paced and these moments, for me as the composer, are essential in each composition.

Connecting with listeners is an important part of the creative process, as much as it is to ignite a performer’s imagination to bring the music I write to life. This directness of my intentions was most clearly felt when I first met the producer Manfred Eicher. He has often spoken about the first time he heard the music of Arvo Pärt, listening to the radio while driving in Germany in the 70’s, which made him pull over and subsequently search for months to find out who the music was by. The first time I met Mr Eicher was at a festival in Austria in 20008 where he heard the rehearsal of my *Suite in Old Style*. After the rehearsal he approached me to send more music and I sent him a recording of the premiere of the *Concerto for Cello & Strings*. He immediately suggested we programme an album of my music. The catalogue of ECM Records is made up of some of my musical heroes - from Pärt to Silverstrov, Kancheli and Jarrett, all of whose music I’ve had an immediate connection with. The sincere directness of their music is so powerful, and to be considered among their company was the greatest compliment I could have received. The resulting album - *String Paths*, featured some of my most frequent and long-standing interpreters and was recognised with a Grammy nomination in 2013. That recognition has exposed my music to an amazing number of people and I often receive correspondence about how the music has become part of listeners’ lives. This is just one example of how it inspired a wonderful young film maker: <https://vimeo.com/152926999> but there have been choreographers and other film makers who have connected me with how the music has inspired them.

Access to music from any period or place is the wonder of our time, but more than ever it also means that the conviction with which we create music has to be even stronger and we have to listen even harder to what the world needs from us.

Listening Links:

These are the pieces, which featured in the Scottish Ensembles' 2015 and 2016 tours, and some of you may have heard these performed live:

[Fantasy Homage to Schubert](#) (2013)

[Such different paths](#) (2008)

[Concerto for Cello](#) (2008)

In contrast to the above string-only pieces, I also wanted to include these other works. Choral music makes up a large part of my catalogue- *Truro Canticles* was written during my residency with Truro Cathedral, while the Scottish Highlands inspired the first movement of my organ *Diptych*. The double piano concerto *Together Remember to Dance* continues my affinity with the concerto form while *Timber & Steel* was written for the Sir Henry Wood Prom last year (marking the 150th anniversary of the Proms co-founder's birth), as part of my residency with the BBC Concert Orchestra.

[Truro Canticles](#) (2017)

[Highland Pastorale](#) (2010)

[Together Remember to Dance](#) (2018)

[Timber & Steel](#) (2019 - extract)

Schubert was one of the first composers I connected with, and over the years I have studied and arranged a number of his works. Hearing Messiaen's *La Nativité du Seigneur* opened a world of sonic discovery and hearing Yvonne Loriod at the Centre Acanthes was the closest I came to the composer himself. As I have mentioned already, the structure of Xenakis's music and his percussion pieces in particular were another early fascination. I feel fortunate to have met and had long conversations with the Georgian composer Giya Kancheli, his stark style, typical for its strong contrasts is instantly recognisable and the first work of his I heard was his 3rd Symphony.

Schubert [Fantasia in F minor](#)

Messiaen [Dieu parmi nous](#) (performed on the bayan)

Xenakis ['Peaux'](#) from the work 'Pléiades'

Kancheli [Symphony No.3](#)

Growing up in Bulgaria, it would make sense that I was drawn to the rich and impressive folk music tradition, but it wasn't until I heard the Mystery of the Bulgarian Voices at a concert at the Barbican in London that I truly began to appreciate the music for myself; all to do with context again.

I heard the bluegrass singer Alison Krauss at the Royal Festival Hall (where I also first heard Kancheli's 3rd Symphony live), and they have become loyal musical companions over the years. It

took me a while to find out what or who performed the melody at the beginning of Kancheli's Symphony, and it turned out to be the Georgian singer Hamlet Gonashvili, who has one of the most beautiful voices I've ever encountered. It was difficult to select just a few tracks, but these are some of the earliest on my list of favourites, which have stood the test of time and I hope you enjoy listening to them as much as I do.

[Mystery of the Bulgarian Voices](#)

[Alison Krauss](#)

[Hamlet Gonashvili](#)

[John Surman/Jack DeJohnette](#)