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On Wanderers and Wandering - A Conversation with Jamina Gerl

Jerry Dubins: Jamina, most of our readers, I suspect, are not familiar with you, since your new Tyxart CD, titled "Wanderer," appears to be your debut album. So perhaps we could start by introducing yourself and you telling us something about yourself. Where do you call home? Where and with whom did you study? Where has your career taken you up to this point?

Jamina Gerl: I was born and raised in the city of Bonn, Germany. It is the birthplace of Beethoven and hence I was introduced to his musical heritage at a very young age. The entire city revolves around him: there is the Beethoven-House—rearranged into a museum—in which he lived before his departure for Vienna, the Beethoven Hall, the Beethoven Orchestra, the international Beethoven festival, and many Beethoven societies, competitions, and festivities that make an effort to secure his musical heritage. For years we have already been planning the anniversary of his 250th birthday in 2020. I was fascinated by the piano at a very young age, as I heard my brothers and my mother playing the piano for their leisure. For the great displeasure of my family I would go to the piano at 7 AM and would return to the piano after they put me into the garden to play with my brothers. This was when my parents decided I should have piano lessons, as they were hoping that my experimenting with the piano could be guided into more cultivated sounds. After a while I participated in competitions, also with the violin, which I played at that time, too. Through this I met my future teacher, Professor Roswitha Gediga, from the Cologne University of Music, Germany. I was accepted as her student when I was 11 years old and passed the entry exams at the University four years later. I studied (back then) in the combined Bachelor/Master degree "Diplom in Piano Performance" program and finished in 2009. Following this time in Germany, I decided to pursue my studies for a Master's of Music degree in Piano Performance in Fairbanks at the University of Alaska. I had met my teacher, Dr. Eduard Zilberkant, in New York at Jerome Rose's IKIF festival shortly before finishing my degree in Cologne. Of course, it is not a very conventional decision to move to Alaska in order to study piano, but my intuition was very strong that it would be the right teacher and the right place for me. Dr. Zilberkant is a wonderful musician, possesses an extremely "viral" enthusiasm about music, and has an approach to the piano that goes beyond everything I had experienced so far from other lessons and masterclasses. As a conductor, he saw the musical content from a whole different perspective, which added an entire new dimension to the music for me. Of course, I might have been quite the alien in Alaska, but I am still so grateful about the education and the support given to me and am still very happy with my decision. After finishing my Master's degree, I continued to study at the Catholic University in Washington, DC, where I was accepted into the DMA studies program. But after a while, Germany called me back in 2013. It was not easy to reconnect after almost 4 years of absence, but the continuous work and efforts are slowly paying off.

JD: In one way or another, each of the pieces you've chosen for your album reflects the "Wanderer" theme, which, as you rightly point out, is one of the main leitmotifs that run through Romantic music. But it's more than just a recurring subtext, isn't it? It seems to me that feelings of isolation, dislocation, and perpetual questing for something just out of reach are perhaps the quintessential animating force behind what we call Romanticism. So, let's examine, one by one the musical works on your disc. You begin with Mendelssohn's *Fantasie* in F# Minor, op. 28, aka, *Sonate ecossaise*. It's an early work by the composer, written well before his trek across Scotland,

but he had already read Sir Walter Scott's epic poem, *The Lady of the Lake*, and was bitten by the wanderlust bug. The *Fantasie* is filled with Mendelssohn's imaginings of Scotland and longings for a faraway place he'd never seen. What else can you tell us about the piece?

JG: I agree that "Wanderer" is rooted in the Romantic movement of reaching for the unattainable, searching for self-identity, and for dreaming of an ideal, distant world—a world of fantasy. But when exactly did this movement stop? Many people nowadays are still "wandering" through nature or through the world, searching for shelter from busy everyday life, for a place of retreat, reflection, and relaxation. It is not a wish or a theme that became out of date. I think it was present ever since, and this is why I wanted to select music that is connected in a way to this motif. Even Mendelssohn—who was actually characterized a "lighter, purer, happier soul," keeping mostly away from Romantic exaltation and self-exposure—felt disconnected in the middle of society and too far away from nature in London. As an offspring of a respected and wealthy family, he was sent on various educational journeys. He had a strong affinity to nature: he painted landscapes—Wagner referred to him as a "first class musical landscape painter"—liked hiking, climbing mountains, and exploring the outdoors, as on his walking tour of Scotland. He arrived in Edinburgh on July 28 in 1829. His letters show how much he was impressed by the "serious" and "strong" Scottish landscape, by Arthurs Seat, Stirling castle, and by the "smoky" nature that he saw through the mist. It is not known when exactly Mendelssohn wrote the Fantasy op. 28 (it was published in 1834), but the earliest references to a "Scottish sonata" appear in his letters from 1829 and 1830, when he also started working on his "Scottish" Symphony and the overture, *The Hebrides*. However, the manuscript of the Fantasy from 1833 bears the title *Sonate ecossaise*, which shows the connection of this work to Scotland.
The first movement resembles in its homophonic, choral texture and compositional style some of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*. Yet it still has many characteristics of the sonata form, mixed with an improvisatory character and elements typical for a fantasy. Opinions differ as to whether Mendelssohn used a monothematic approach here by sticking to a single motif which he continues and develops throughout all of its movements and the entire form. But if we take this as a starting point, then we have a cyclic form similar to the "Wanderer Fantasy" by Schubert, which is the last work on the CD. This compositional technique—deriving a complete piece from a single motif and interweave it—had a decisive influence on the composers of the Romantic period. The second movement is written in ABA form, whereas the last movement, written in sonata form, resembles the mood of Mendelssohn's music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its spirits, *kobolds*, elves, and fairies. This already hints at the next selection of works by Liszt: *Forrest murmurs* and *Dance of the Gnomes*. *Dance of the Gnomes*, with its sparkling passages and staccato technique, was often referred to as a "hommage à Mendelssohn" and his capriccios and elven dances.

JD: Next on your program are two pieces by Liszt, *Waldesrauschen* (Forest Murmers), and *Gnomenreigen* (Dance of the Gnomes), which form his Two Concert Études, S 145. How do these numbers, especially the second of the two, fit into the "Wanderer" theme?

JG: Franz Liszt not only was traveling a lot like Mendelssohn, naming those journeys *Années de pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage). He also was fascinated by Schubert's *Der Wanderer* song, its text and, the "Wanderer Fantasy." He wrote a transcription of the song for solo piano and an orchestral version of the "Wanderer Fantasy." Before he ventured on his Years of Pilgrimage, Liszt had to overcome many difficulties as a person as well as an artist. After his father's death in 1827, Liszt returned to Paris and ended his career as a concertizing child prodigy in order to support himself and his family by teaching. Now he learned about the image of the arts in society, which had been

reduced in his view to a mere occupation and a handicraft to entertain the nobility. In addition, he was refused marriage to his first love due to the differences in class hierarchy. This finally led Liszt to despise a society that would respect him as an artist on the piano, but that would never accept him as an equal. In his diary from 1827, Liszt wrote that he started to dislike music and he started to spend much time with religious and philosophical ideas. Of course, *Forest Murmurs* and *Dance of the Gnomes* were composed well after he had overcome this crisis. He finished them in Rome in 1862, where he lived in a monastery and received four minor orders of the Catholic Church. However, Liszt remained full of personal conflicts and would constantly switch between his life as celebrated piano virtuoso, innovative composer and teacher, and as low-order religious cleric.

JD: It's a bit of a culture shock, not to mention quite a leap in musical period, style, and vocabulary to go from Liszt to your next stop on this "Wanderer's" journey, Shostakovich's *Three Fantastic Dances*, op. 5. I understand that these short pieces, written at the age of 16, are the composer's earliest works for solo piano. Other than that, I have to confess to less familiarity with these pieces than with the others on your album. So please enlighten me, especially once again as to how they fit into your "Wanderer" theme.

JG: I explained why I did not want to select music from the Romantic epoch only. The "Wanderer" motif may have come alive in the Romantic epoch, but did not really lose its potency. The people I meet talk quite often about this and related topics. They feel that they are in the wrong place, in the wrong job, with the wrong people, in the wrong society… They are longing for somewhere else to be, but learned to accept the world and their life situation as it is. Who would understand those feelings better than Dmitri Shostakovich, who lived under one of the most difficult political circumstances for an artist? Due to the censorship around that time, we only have few records and letters from him that portray how difficult his life as an artist and a person was during that time. But the few letters that were preserved show that Shostakovich suffered tremendously from those circumstances and that he even attempted suicide several times. After the young composer had gained continuous popularity, his second opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, was suddenly blocked from the programs when Stalin attended one of the performances in 1936. Following this incident, Shostakovich found himself under constant observation by the Soviet secret police. Every compositional output became a political risk; he had to fear being taken away to prison or even being executed, like many other artists around that time. His compositional works and those of fellow Soviet composers were constantly checked upon, and it seemed like a mere gamble whether they would be found acceptable or not. As a result, Soviet composers became increasingly isolated from the rest of the world and were forced to adjust to the political, social, moral, and economic circumstances in their country. The Three Fantastic Dances, op.5, his second work for piano after his Eight Preludes op. 2, shows a composition before the political situation became so drastic that Shostakovich was hardly able to compose freely. Written in 1922, they follow the development of the Romantic epoch, in which a liking for national styles and idioms in music lead to new forms like short dances and lyrical pieces. Shostakovich used traditional dances, such as the March, the Waltz, and the Polka, which illustrates his early fascination with folk dance forms and melodies. The lively rhythms in connection with quite unusual harmonies of these youthful pieces already exhibit features that characterize his later works.

JD: Next you turn to Chabrier's *Bourée fantasque*, said to be the composer's last work and one that foreshadows in extreme technical difficulty Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit*. It's a short piece—only six minutes in duration—but in that time span it exploits dynamics, pedaling, and keyboard sonorities

that make it one of the most original and important pieces in all of pre-20th-century French keyboard literature. Can you describe what some of the those technical difficulties are and how Chabrier uses the piano that makes the piece unique.

JG: Alfred Cortot wrote about this piece "No one had previously written like this for the piano, bringing unsuspected orchestral resources to it, using sound colors to give character to the rhythms, and freeing the radiant power of the pedal. As much as *España*, if not more so, this entertaining little piano piece will have set composers on the path towards a new technique of musical color." What he was probably referring to were the extremely detailed instructions by Chabrier, asking for frequent dynamic changes in the range from *ppp* up to *fff*, constantly changing articulation, use of the middle pedal, phrasing, unusual accentuations, tremolos, and crossing hands. All of this, together with the constant syncopations, constant repetitions and staccato phrases, certain elements of parody and its folk character, give a very percussive and modern character to this work. The Bourée was an old French court dance that became a folk dance from the French Auvergne, Chabrier's place of birth. Chabrier enriched this old form with unusual harmonies and irregular rhythmic patterns, making it appear in a humorous and completely new light. As a composer, he followed the line of nationalism in music. He wished for regeneration and modernization of French music as France should become a leading nation in Classical music once again. His musical education, far away from the standardized paths, supported him in his independent thinking. Different from other composers around that time, he did not concentrate on symphonies, symphonic poems, or sonatas, but was fond of "overused" forms such as the dance forms, *opéra comique*, and character piece. This, together with the fact that he was working in the ministry, led him to be quite an outsider in comparison to his colleagues. His contemporaries did not understand his music. Chabrier was interested in the art of painting and poetry, too. Different from the Impressionistic paintings around that time, however, his musical style avoided mixed colors and preferred clear sounds. He also attempted to transcribe metric patterns of poetry to his music, leading to polyrhythms. He was a "freethinker" in his time and place, using uncommon titles like "Bourée fantasque—i.e., eccentric Bourée—without explanation. However, the young generation of French composers around the turn of the centuries, like Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, and Francis Poulenc accepted him as a guiding example.

JD: After Chabrier it's back to Mendelssohn, this time for the three "Venetian Gondola Songs" drawn from three separate books of his *Songs Without Words*—op. 19b/6, op. 30/6, and op, 62/5. Is Mendelssohn here recalling his time in Italy, which he visited during his European junket of 1829 to 1831?

JG: Yes, another of Mendelssohn's educational journeys led him to Italy in 1830. He spent his time predominantly in Rome, but also visited Florence, Naples, and Venice. As travel guide he used Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Italian Journey*. Here, as in Scotland, he would take long walks by himself, enjoy the view of the valleys, the country houses, the ancient art, the monasteries and monks, as well as the warming sun. He was excited and enthusiastic about the musical heritage of Italy, studied many old scores and manuscripts of old music and would copy them out. But in comparison to Scotland, he felt lonely. He missed a companion with whom he could share his thoughts or who would take an interest in his finished compositions. And he felt foreign to the people, though he was always in company. As much as he liked the countryside of Italy, he felt disconnected from the people. When he arrived in Venice on October 10th in 1830, he wrote "This is Italy. Everything that I have considered as life's greatest joy, ever since I have been capable of thought, has now begun, and I am relishing it." He was impressed by Venice's location on the water, the arrival in a gondola, the St

Mark's Tower, the Doge's Palace, the Bridge of Sighs, and Venice's illuminated atmosphere in the dark night. In his Venetian gondola songs without words, we can hear the movement of the water, the gliding of a boat, the call of the gondolier. The only song he composed in Venice in 1830 was the first one, though. In Mendelssohn's works for piano, the collection *Songs without Words* (1834–1845) take an important place. Here he combined the Romantic character piece with the art song that is characterized by poetic thoughts and narration of impressions of the landscape. Mendelssohn's strophic songs in a rather continuous and fluid style are very different from the songs of Schubert, often interrupted by dramatic breaks and recitative-like passages.

JD: From the canals of Venice, it may not be that far geographically to the imaginary *L'isle joyeuse* of Debussy, but it's a lightyear away chronologically and musically. Here in this short piece from 1904, Debussy delights in mixing diatonic, whole-tone, and Lydian scales in a joyful ménage à trois. Where does this fit into the "Wanderer" scheme of things?

JG: This character piece belongs more to the imaginary side of "Wanderer" and the dreaming of an ideal world and fantasy. It is said that Debussy composed it in connection with the painting, "The Embarkation for Cythera" by Jean-Antoine Watteau, which depicts the departure of a group of young people to the island of Cythera. Especially in the 18th century, this island was considered to be the island of the Greek goddess Aphrodite. Hence it was said to be the kingdom of love and a place far away from any kind of conflict. The piece creates an atmosphere of hedonistic abandon, in which the bright day shines and the dream of the happy island is reality. Although he graduated from the Conservatoire de Paris, where he was a well-regarded pupil, Debussy felt very restricted in his compositional approach, which was too unconventional and experimental for the authorities of the Conservatoire. Even his stay in Rome, which was made possible by the Conservatoire and its Prix de Rome, made him feel artistically stifled. This circumstance led to a depression, which often prevented him from composing.

JD: After a tour that has taken us on quite a musical spin it comes as a welcome, homecoming relief to return to the composer who quite likely gave birth to the whole "Wanderer" context of musical Romanticism, Franz Schubert, as you conclude your recital with a piano transcription of his song, *Der Wanderer*, D 489, and his great "Wanderer" Fantasy in C Major, D 760. What is it about so much of Schubert's music that expresses the wandering and *Weltschmerz* feelings?

JG: I was deeply moved ever since I heard Schubert's song, *The Wanderer*, for the first time, and the poem he set to music. Schubert movingly follows the figure of the lonely wanderer as a leitmotif of Romanticism by pondering the poem on which the Fantasy is based: "Their sun appears to me so cold, their blossoms limp, their life so old; and what they speak of, empty fare: I am a stranger everywhere.

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“Wandering,” as in to his song cycle *Winterreise*, expresses a certain feeling of isolation and longing for home, support in society, and family. In his world-weariness and hopelessness, the protagonist of the poem temporarily dreams of his ideal world and escapes to an imaginary place. I believe that a lot of Schubert’s music has this tremendous feeling of *Weltschmerz* in it, because of his occupation with literature. We only have to read the poems by Rellstab, Heine, Müller, and Goethe that he set to music to see what moved him. Especially the late works in his life show an extraordinary depth, seriousness and gravity.

JD: Shifting from your album to more general topics, I see from your bio that you were hailed by critics in your New York debut, performing Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto, and that you’ve impressed critics and audiences alike in Carnegie Hall and other venues here and abroad. Tell me about your concert and recital career.

JG: I was performing ever since I started studying the piano. Of course, this would be student recitals and at piano competitions first, but as time went by, there were bookings, too. Most of these concerts took place in Germany, but I was also invited to give recitals in Switzerland, Italy, the U.K., Japan, and the U.S. As I am very interested in literature and constantly reading, I also started to think about other recital forms. So I started to do Literature-Concerts, in which the music alternates with readings by a professional narrator or actor. This could be texts by Hermann Hesse, Goethe, or Thomas Mann, as well as Dante or Petrarca. It is also my wish to bring classical music closer to children and people who are not familiar with it yet. One major tool in this attempt is to explain the human and emotional background of a composition, the story of the composer, and to combine this in a Lecture-Recital with demonstrations of certain passages of the music. Altogether there are so many ways to share the classical music and the art of piano playing. And fortunately the piano is still one of the most popular instruments, so there is just no end to all of the possibilities to make the music appreciated and loved by many people.

JD: I also note that you have quite a large and diverse repertoire, ranging from Scarlatti and Bach to Scriabin, Prokofiev, and Ligeti, and many of the mainstream Classical and Romantic composers in between. Are you looking forward to taking some of that repertoire into the recording studio?

JG: I still want to expand my repertoire, and I prefer to take as much time as needed to explore the depths of each piano work. If I feel that the time is right to do another recording, I will do it. But for now, I’m looking forward to record some unrecorded music soon. Deutschlandradio Kultur and the Pfohl Society, Hamburg, have asked me to record the oeuvre for solo piano of the German composer Ferdinand Pfohl, a contemporary of Gustav Mahler and Edvard Grieg. I would also love to record the *Four Parables for Piano and Orchestra* by the American composer Paul Schoenfield, but this is a long-term project for which I am still in search of an orchestra.

JD: What would you like to add to your repertoire that you haven’t taken up yet?

JG: There is so much piano music that I want to play that I had to stop writing it down, in order not to discourage myself. There is simply too little time in life to learn the entire piano repertoire. But for the next years I would like to add more of Bach’s suites and more music by Haydn. Right now I’m working on more Beethoven sonatas for a festival in Italy. Then I would like to add Schumann’s *Kreisleriana*, more Schubert, Chopin, and Mendelssohn, more Prokofiev and Shostakovich, and especially more Rachmaninoff.