
TOCCATA
CLASSICS
Emile NAOUMOFF
PIANO MUSIC
Gregory Martin
FIRST RECORDINGS

THE PIANO MUSIC OF EMILE NAOUMOFF

by Gregory Martin

In late January 1970, Gueorgui and Eli Naoumoff arrived in Paris with their seven-year-old son Emile, brought to the French capital in search of the legendary music-teacher Nadia Boulanger. Emile had revealed himself as a prodigy, and the Naoumoffs had been told by the pianist Constantine Stankovitch, a former student of Alfred Cortot (and so viewed as someone of rare quality in Iron-Curtain Bulgaria), 'If there is one person in the world – and if she is still alive – who can determine the right thing to do with a child prodigy, who can take on the responsibility to help him develop, it is Nadia Boulanger'.[1] Having been granted permission from the Communist government to accompany Gueorgui to a radiology conference in Italy, the family had left Sofia at the beginning of the month. Now, after stops in Vienna, Venice and Rome, the Orient Express finally pulled into the City of Lights. On the arranged date – a Wednesday, the only day on which Boulanger accepted visitors – the trio made their way to the Ninth Arrondissement, where they briefly searched for Boulanger's apartment[2] before deciding to ask a woman on the street not far from the Moulin Rouge for directions. It was only afterwards that Dr and Mrs Naoumoff realised the nature of her profession; when little Emile asked, Gueorgui simply told him that she was a 'guardian' and a sort of lucky charm for them.

Charmed, indeed, that moment was, for the appointment that followed established a unique relationship. In spite of the 75-year age-difference, there was an immediate mutual affection between the iconic pedagogue and the little boy. The prodigious Emile had found a teacher, and Boulanger was about to begin the most

[1] Emile Naoumoff, *My Chronicles with Nadia Boulanger*, Gregory Martin, 2015, p. 3, available online at https://37eb1fb3-2762-486b-b1c3-425b283cef6f.filesusr.com/ugd/9aaf97_fd97e9af97934dca8e96720cd66e5f08.pdf.

[2] Boulanger lived at 30 rue Ballu – until 1968, when she persuaded the city authorities to rename part of the street place Lili Boulanger to mark the 50th anniversary of the death of her sister; 30 rue Ballu thereby became 3 place Lili Boulanger.

comprehensive course of instruction in her long and illustrious career, one that would last until her death ten years later, ending with a touching final letter to the disciple she had called the 'gift of my old age': 'As I softly pass away,' she wrote, 'I do not wish to leave without saying that I know you are aware of all that you owe to me, but know also that I owe you still more. Your, Nadiejda Ernestovna.'[3]

Boulanger saw from the start that 'Emilka', as she called him, was a remarkable talent. A year into their work together, she told *Le République de Seine et Marne*, 'Plato was a genius, Stravinsky was a genius, Boulez is a genius, and I believe that my little eight-year-old Emile Naoumoff is also a genius'.[4] More significantly, she also recognised that he already had a clear and distinct musical voice. In 1975, Mademoiselle Boulanger – or, simply, 'Mademoiselle', as her students often called her – intimated to film-maker Bruno Monsaingeon,

> [Emile's] personality as a composer has developed naturally without being enslaved to any school. […] Sometimes I ask myself: 'Let's see – is his music influenced by Stravinsky? No. By Bartók? No. By Shostakovich? It is a little more in this direction, but not completely resembling it.' I let him speak. […] I want him to be absolutely free.[5]

The music on this album is an exploration of that free and singular voice. It has, of course, evolved since that fateful encounter in 1970, but it is as distinct in the self-consciously Bulgarian miniatures of his childhood as in the more elaborate works from half a century later.

At the heart of Naoumoff's music is a fusion – and often a tension – between his Slavic roots and the western tradition in which Boulanger educated him. Although the former element contains often overt cultural allusions, such as Orthodox church bells, it reveals itself more profoundly in a predilection for slow harmonic movement and explorations of time which convey an experience more cyclical, or rotational, than goal-directed. The tendency of these qualities occasionally to settle into outright stasis was

[3] September 1979; quoted in Naoumoff, *My Chronicles*, p. 138.
[4] *Le République de Seine et Marne*, 5 July 1971.
[5] Bruno Monsaingeon, *Mademoiselle: Entretiens avec Nadia Boulanger*, Éditions Van de Velde, Paris, 1981, quoted in Naoumoff, *My Chronicles*, p. 102.

something of which Boulanger was acutely aware, and so at the centre of her didactic efforts was a focus on equipping Naoumoff's technical arsenal with an understanding of how counterpoint can motivate a musical texture – a lesson fuelled by a steady diet of Bach, Byrd and the works of her own revered mentor, Gabriel Fauré.

The elegy *Mélancolique et 'Slave'* ('Melancholic and "Slavic"') 2, the last in a collection of three such works originally composed in 1988 for bassoon and piano, is a consummate example of the integration of these two ingredients. At almost no point in the entire piece is the music without a pedal point on the tonic C: a low, hypogean tolling in the outer sections, and an oscillating mid-register pendulum in the contrasting middle portion. In this regard, the harmony is utterly inert – and yet there is a real sense of direction throughout, driven in the opening and closing portions by descending scales in the inner voices that create subtle chains of self-propelling tension and release. The central section mirrors this process through a series of calls and responses, similarly based on a falling-scale passage, though here brought to the melodic foreground. Written almost a decade after Boulanger's death in 1979, this short threnody demonstrates a simple and elegant union of Naoumoff's predisposition for harmonic stillness and the contrapuntal impetus instilled by his teacher, exemplified in a melding of Baroque lament and species counterpoint. From a biographical perspective, the middle section of the piece is especially poignant, given its echoes of Fauré's *Pavane* and the *Nocturne* for violin and piano by Lili Boulanger, Nadia's beloved younger sister, who had died in 1918 at the age of 24.

The *Nocturno* subtitled 'La silencieuse ancienne ruelle de Tryavna' ('The Quiet, Old Street in Tryavna')[6] 3 also sits on a tonic pedal note for most of the piece, though in this instance it is the product of pure, naïve inclination. Written while its six-year-old composer was still living in Bulgaria, it was inspired by a painting by his grandfather, Vladimir, a renowned artist who had travelled around the country painting landscapes. Naoumoff didn't yet know how to notate the music flooding into his head, and so Gueorgui, who had had some musical training in his youth, would take dictation and

[6] Tryavna is a small town in central Bulgaria.

write down his son's inspirations. This early musical portrait was revised in Paris, once Emile had begun his formal training with Boulanger.

Also from the early days of his Paris apprenticeship are the *Danses Bulgares* ('Bulgarian Dances'). Unsurprising for a family in exile – even if self-imposed – Emile's father would regale the boy with historical accounts of his homeland, narratives which would conjure up a mixture of nostalgia and pride, often leaving the young expatriate homesick. Written as an attempt to cure such wistfulness, the three dances in this set are near-contemporaries of a number of large-scale efforts that Naoumoff was beginning to compose, similarly inspired by the country of his birth (including the theme to *Bulgaria 1300* and the *Symphonia Concertante*, both for piano and orchestra, as well as the early piano sonata *La création de la Bulgarie*). The two dances included here are examples of the *ruchenitsa*, a 'dance holding hands' in triple metre, with the third beat slightly longer than the other two: the first is a lively piece in A major with excursions into F and C major [4], and the second is a slower incarnation (as indicated by the 'bavna' marking) [5]. Naoumoff was as yet unaware of ethnomusicological matters; it was his father, an admirer of Bartók, who suggested notating them in $\frac{7}{16}$, following that composer's example. These joyful works have an enduring simplicity and freshness, exuding youth and childhood precocity.

Under Boulanger's guidance, it wasn't long before Naoumoff began to develop a wider-reaching musical language. *La musique dans l'univers d'un enfant* ('Music in the World of a Child'), composed in 1978, the year before Mademoiselle's death, demonstrates not only the degree of complexity which his music had obtained but also the stylistic range which the sixteen-year-old composer had already achieved. This collection of thirteen miniatures is thoroughly polyphonic and replete with enharmonic pivots, and yet the technical devices are always at the service of the musical impressions (the titles came afterwards). Written in just under two weeks at the rate of one per day, the concentrated composition time resulted in a subtly unified cycle, with, for example, a pair of sigh-gestures acting as an important figure tying the suite together, first appearing in the second half of the opening 'Conte d'automne' ('Autumn Tale') [8] before coming into focus as a dominant motif in No. 2, 'Flocons de neige' ('Snowflakes') [9], and then

re-emerging in the coda of No. 8, 'La tempête' ('The Storm') 11, as the forgotten source of its musical material. No. 3, 'Une belle histoire' ('A Beautiful Story') 10, and No. 13, 'Le château délaissé' ('The Abandoned Castle') 12, evince similar secret threads with the rest of the collection, discreetly holding the whole together – not unlike the piano cycles of Robert Schumann, whose *Kinderszenen* had served as an inspiration for the album.

As with *Kinderszenen*, *La musique dans l'univers d'un enfant* was meant to capture the fancies of childhood, rather than be a set of pieces for children to play. *Valse pour Nadia* 18, written not for Boulanger but for Naoumoff's daughter Nadia (there are no prizes for guessing whom she was named after), straddles this distinction in a touching display of fatherly warmth. Bearing the dedication *pour ma fille* ('for my little girl'), the piece originated as an improvised melody he would sing to Nadia at bedtime. More often than not, however, his efforts to lull the child to sleep ended up with her giggling instead. This oh-so-Parisian waltz was born from the thought that one day he could play it with her as a piano duet – a dream inspired in part by coming across a photo of Fauré playing his *Dolly* Suite with the young Régina-Hélène Bardac.[7] Composed in 1996, the piece was included in a set of five *valses* for piano four-hands, and shortly thereafter arranged for a single performer.

A more traditional lullaby may be found in Naoumoff's *Réminiscences* (1997). 'Berceuse' 19 offers an almost hypnotic invitation into dreams, the limitless rocking of the left hand acting as a sonorous cushion to the rarefied, *bien chanté* melody poised above it, the entire tapestry bathed in a swathe of pedal. The whole piece is so drowned in the hazy mist of A minor that when the occasional accidental does surface, it carries a weight of significant intrusion – the sudden fit that threatens to wake the anxious child, Samuel Beckett's murmur, 'something gone wrong with the silence'.[8] As with 'Berceuse', 'Désespoir' ('Despair') 7 is an immersion in A minor, though here so completely that not a single note from outside the tonality appears; Naoumoff erodes any sense of dissonance and consonance, so that the regular strings of parallel sevenths (and

[7] Conversation with Emile Naoumoff. Régina-Hélène Bardac, known to her family as 'Dolly', was the daughter of Fauré's mistress, Emma Bardac.

[8] Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (1955) in *The Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, John Calder, London, 1994, p. 88.

other such freely approached discords) induce no urgency for immediate resolution. It is instead the gestural thrusts, and the intervallic expansion and compression, that provoke and govern the musical discourse.

Thirteen Anecdotes (1990) is a collection similar to *Réminiscences*, mixing parody with portrait. No. 5, 'Le Cygne' ('The Swan') 14, consists of two identical strophes of contrasting minor- and major-mode themes (like 'Désespoir', in an unblemished A minor), framed throughout with *glissandi* spanning most of the keyboard – a pianistic reflection of a swan gliding on the water. No. 6, 'Chez Brahms' 15, recasts Brahms' famous Waltz in A flat major (Op. 39, No. 15) as an early twentieth-century Parisian *valse*, rife with chromaticism and climaxing in a descending whole-tone cascade. In his memoirs, Naoumoff makes note of the story of a young Debussy travelling to Vienna for a lesson with the German maestro, only to be turned away by Brahms' maid on the grounds that 'her master would neither entertain nor acknowledge a French composer';[9] perhaps this piece may be regarded as an attempted reconciliation between the two. No. 9, 'Old Big Band' 16, is a short tribute to the sounds of Duke Ellington and Glenn Miller, introduced by a jaunty ascending bassline punctuated by chords thick with jazz extensions.

The pieces in both *Réminiscences* and *Anecdotes* were composed in single sittings and then left untouched. In this way, they anticipate Naoumoff's recent work, especially his video project of daily improvisations at the piano, which now number in the thousands. On 15 April 2019, as he sat watching Notre Dame cathedral engulfed in flames, preoccupied with the hope that the crown of thorns said to have been worn by Jesus Christ would be saved, Naoumoff recorded 'Improvisation 6472' 6. It is an elegiac paean to that fabled emblem of Parisian culture and French identity, an edifice that had survived centuries of war and revolution only to be seen now as all too vulnerable. As he fashioned the opening organ hymn, Naoumoff could not have known that the magnificent instrument by Cavaillé-Coll – with some components dating back to the 1400s – mercifully would be spared. The bells that resound as the piece draws to a close

[9] Naoumoff, *My Chronicles*, p. 127.

are less a reference to the Orthodox bells of Naoumoff's youth than they are an echo of the distant but resilient peals of another holy seat overcome by the elements: Debussy's sunken cathedral. Similarly, the final wispy arpeggios suggest not only thin traces of smoke dispersing into the Paris twilight but also the eternally unfolding and evaporating sonorities of Fauré's song *En Prière*. Though it wasn't transcribed until four months later (the manuscript is dated 20 August), at which point it was given the more evocative (English) title *Cathedral in Tears*, it remains nothing less than a real-time chronicle of one man's anguish as he watches a revered symbol of his adopted homeland being damaged, a spontaneous expression of personal grief.

Having grown up in Paris, Naoumoff considers himself to be essentially a French composer. *Le parfum de l'âme* ('The Perfume of the Soul') 17 is an homage to the tradition in which he was raised, with its composer regarding the almost 'run-on' melodic lines as a sort of crystallisation of the French aesthetic as epitomised in Fauré's music.[10] Boulanger had been one of Fauré's favourite pupils, and she, in turn, never lost her reverence for him, as became only too clear in an uncomfortable moment following a performance of the *maître*'s last nocturne by the thirteen-year-old Naoumoff: one of Mademoiselle's guests dared to call the music *joli* ('pretty') – an utterance that Boulanger deemed to be an impertinent trivialisation – and was corrected with a staid and direct, 'Fauré just is'.[11] Naoumoff's lessons frequently included examples from Fauré, especially the Requiem, and the young composer naturally came to see himself as a musical descendant of the older one. It was while composing the recapitulation of *Le parfum de l'âme* – at which point the two principal themes are presented simultaneously in counterpoint to one another – that, in Naoumoff's words, he genuinely recognised himself as 'a true disciple of Gabriel Fauré';[12] the piece is accordingly dedicated to him. The designation *nocturne*, then, is not only an indication of the character of the piece but also a marker of musical, spiritual and cultural continuity.

[10] Conversation with Emile Naoumoff.
[11] Naoumoff, *My Chronicles*, p. 58.
[12] Conversation with Emile Naoumoff.

Las Brisas ('The Breezes') 1 is another work that acted as a milestone in Naoumoff's self-identification as a French artist. For several years in the mid-1990s, he taught at the summer courses of the Reina Sofía School of Music in Santander, Spain. The founder of the School, Paloma O'Shea, had a magnificent home on a cliff overlooking the Atlantic called Las Brisas, to which Naoumoff was invited a number of times. He had always loved the music of Isaac Albéniz, and since, in his words, 'French composers seem to have a penchant for writing Spanish-inspired works',[13] he thought he should compose one, too. The result is this lively rondo, brimming with Spanish dance-rhythms.

In spite of such a vigorous engagement with Iberian styles and idioms, it is, naturally, Naoumoff's eastern-European heritage that comes to the fore when he explores the most profound aspects of existence. In 1993, he responded to the tragic death of a colleague's child by writing the expansive and demanding *Rhapsodie* 13, a work which includes a brief epigraph acknowledging that, in order to find a way 'to express the unnameable pain that is the loss of life around oneself',[14] he had turned to the very depths of his Slavic soul. The *Rhapsodie* stitches together a series of episodes into four larger sections, reflecting the various phases of life, from recollections of early childhood to its staggering end, concluding with a calm, hymn-like valediction. In such a reflective tract, it comes as no surprise to hear Naoumoff's cherished Orthodox bells tolling throughout. Much of his music is about extremes, and nowhere is that better exemplified than in this piece, with its exploration of the limits of the keyboard compass, the dynamic gamut and, indeed, the very boundaries of pianistic technique. It is a juxtaposition of music that is at one moment closed and compact and compressed, and at the next bounding and wild and pointillistic; now saturated with chromaticism, now united under a blanket of unadulterated C major that could rival anything in Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. Musical processes are established and then systematically explored and expanded through every intervallic possibility until all options are exhausted, not unlike much of Lutosławski's music. And holding the whole thing together is the scale – pure, primal, untouched. The

[13] Conversation with Emile Naoumoff.

[14] Epigraph in the score of *Rhapsodie*, Schott, published in 1995.

twentieth century showed that there was still much to be said with the diatonic scale, be it the mysterious and monolithic opening of Sibelius' Seventh Symphony or the dramatic solo ascent to the orchestral *tutti* in the first movement of Elgar's Cello Concerto. The *Rhapsodie* is another example, with the melodic minor mode dominating much of the conversation. In addition to generating and underpinning the main thematic material, these scales also often move the listener across the tableaux, fulfilling a role similar to that of the 'Promenade' in Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*.[15]

Twenty years later, in 2013, the composer revisited the same underlying theme of the *Rhapsodie* in *Les saisons de la vie*. Though a less weighty work, this set of four short pieces does have moments of epic grandeur, though conveyed in more lyrical terms. In the final movement, 'Entraînant' ('Rousing') 20, Naoumoff again delves to the bottom of his Slavic soul, especially with respect to the expression of time. Rather than develop the melodic material (which bears a resemblance to the opening theme of *Las Brisas*), he repeats it over and over again, mantra-like, while kaleidoscopically changing its context through subtle harmonic reappraisals and continually evolving expressive indications – *inexorablement*, *soif d'absolu* ('thirst for the absolute'), *cheveux au vent* ('hair in the wind') and *source miraculeuse* ('miraculous source'), to give but a few – and only occasionally deviating from these reiterations (for example, at a brief eruption redolent of Chopin's second étude). This rotational approach to the unfolding of musical material, as opposed to a more teleological impulse, has long been recognised as a prevalent feature of Slavic music (it has been proposed that this characteristic, and what it might imply about the Slavic mindset, may be rooted in the fact that cyclical patterns, such as one finds in the agrarian way of life or cultures under the pervasive influence of the liturgical calendar, held sway in Slavic lands much longer than in the west, which was industrialised and urbanised much earlier). This stream of repetitions, each a different vision of both what came before and what is to come, is not only a portal

[15] *Pictures at an Exhibition* is a work close to Naoumoff's heart; he has often played it in recital, and in 1991 composed a fantasia-like concerto version for piano and orchestra. Originally planned for collaboration with Leonard Bernstein, it was premiered with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, DC under the baton of Mstislav Rostropovich as a result of Bernstein's death.

into a particular experience of time but also an archetypal depiction of our collective, mythologised crumbling into dust and generational rebirth.

In 2012, the year before he composed *Les saisons de la vie*, Emile Naoumoff returned – for the first time – to the apartment in the Istok neighbourhood of Sofia that he and his family had left some 42 years earlier. Both of his parents had died recently, and his old home was heavy with memories. Naoumoff's response to the overwhelming emotion it provoked was the *Romance* that concludes this album 21, a mini-masterpiece which holds within its two pages the experience of a lifetime, and stands as a perfect marriage of the two consciousnesses and artistic approaches that have served as the *fons et origo* of his music. The piece emerges from the simplest of thematic material – a mordent and a fragment of scale – building itself through gradual transformations of the elemental, chant-like opening phrase. This rather circular construction owes something to the same rotational approach to time as 'Entraînant', but the title *Romance* offers a clue as to the involvement of the French tradition in this incredibly personal testimonial, invoking, in part, Rousseau's definition of the romance as 'written in a style that is simple, affecting, and in a somewhat antique taste, […] each strophe adds something to the effect of the preceding ones, and the interest grows imperceptibly; and the listener finds himself moved to tears'.[16] The *Romance* would sound completely at home in an eastern Orthodox liturgy, and yet the ornamentation is unmistakably Baroque, an indication of just how deeply Naoumoff has internalised Boulanger's rigorous cocktail of Bach studies. The confluence of western counterpoint and eastern inflection – the interplay of these two aesthetics – finds a gorgeous final sublimation in the ascent to the top of the keyboard that follows the cadence into the parallel major, a passage fashioned from a union of the turns and scales that have been ubiquitous throughout the piece: rolled chords buttress the music as it navigates across the entire range of the instrument, imbuing it with a luminous calm. Harmonic stillness and contrapuntal direction have fused; the static and the ecstatic are revealed as aspects of the same frame of mind – indeed, one of the most remarkable aspects of the *Romance* is its ability to express a

[16] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de Musique*, Duchesne, Paris, 1768, p. 427.

sense of eternity in three and a half minutes. Without ever losing this state of ecstasy, a final peroration revisits all twelve pitches as the music once more traverses the span of the piano, rising to a final ethereal D major chord, its third sweetly voiced at the bottom of the sonority. The *Romance* is above all a protest against limits, a rebellion against the conceit that merely expressing enough is sufficient. It stands as a culmination of the fusion of Naoumoff's natural inclinations and the course that Mademoiselle Boulanger devised for little Emilka half a century ago, an expression of the enchantment that comes when the transcendent touches the deeply rooted. Emile Naoumoff's music is not only an exploration of that duality – it is its story.

Gregory Martin has performed throughout the United States, Europe and Japan as both soloist and chamber musician, his performances being hailed as 'filled with imagination, fire, and lyricism, [...] a virtuoso performance' (Robert Hatten, author of *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*). He has premiered new works by composers such as Emile Naoumoff, Robert Saxton and John Traill, as well as unpublished compositions by Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gerald Finzi, for whose centenary (in 2001) he organised a series of recitals and lectures at Indiana University. Recent seasons have included solo performances at Carnegie Hall (Weill Recital Hall); chamber concerts with members of the New York Philharmonic, the symphony orchestras of Chicago, Detroit and Indianapolis, and the Dresden Staatskapelle; and various other recital, chamber and concerto engagements, including a collaboration with the Swedish baritone Håkan Hagegård on a staged version of Dominick Argento's song-cycle *The Andrée Expedition*.

In addition to performing, he has lectured at such institutions as the University of Berlin, the Grieg Academy in Bergen and Oxford University. His presentation on the Grieg *Ballade*

during centenary festivities (2007) at the composer's home in Bergen was called 'some of the most important work on Grieg in years' (Daniel Grimley, author of *Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity*), and led to recital engagements and lectures in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and the United States; a major article on the work was recently published ('Grieg as Storyteller: The Poetics of the Ballade in G Minor, Op. 24', *Music and Letters*, Vol. 100, No. 4, November 2019, pp. 615–53). He has also published on Vaughan Williams' opera *Riders to the Sea*, contributed a chapter to *Music in Middle-earth*, a volume on music in the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, and translated Emile Naoumoff's memoirs of his studies with Nadia Boulanger. He is an active composer, his works having been called 'glorious' and 'inspired', and in 2014 was named co-artistic director of the Ronen Chamber Ensemble (Indianapolis). He has been awarded a scholarship from the Finzi Trust and grants from the International Edvard Grieg Society and the University of Indianapolis, and was a 2017 recipient of a Creative Renewal Fellowship from the Arts Council of Indianapolis.

A native of Buffalo, New York, he holds DM and MM degrees in piano performance from Indiana University in Bloomington and a BM from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (Valedictorian); additional postgraduate work was conducted at the University of Oxford (Worcester College) and focused on the intersection of language, music and national identity in twentieth-century England. His principal teachers included Edmund Battersby, William Black, Marcella Branagan, Leonard Hokanson and Karen Shaw, with important encouragement from Robert Saxton. He is an Assistant Professor at the University of Indianapolis, and is Head of Piano Studies at Music Across the Pond (UK).

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EMILE NAOUMOFF Piano Music

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Gregory Martin, piano

TT **80:28**

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