

## **“By the Highest Mandate of Sound at its Purest”**

Margarita Shklyarevskaya

As I was in the process of absorbing the multidimensional array of information that the Russian Bazaar reveals to us in every issue, I came across an announcement of a concert in Manhattan with a program that caught my eye—as it well should have, seeing as how it was a chance to hear a live performance of a number of oeuvres by contemporary American composers, and by “contemporary” I mean our actual contemporaries, all of whom have made a name for themselves in New York. There were four of them, and they would all be present at the concert hall: Nika Leoni, Michèal Fiacc, Lisa Ralia Heffter, and Waundell Saavedra, composers renowned for their independent approach to music, and professionals of the highest class.

The concert was doubtlessly a crucial event in the musical life of the capital of the arts, as our megapolis is known worldwide.

However, I would like to single out Waundell Saavedra and Nika Leoni in particular—not only do they compose melodious music that's perfectly riveting to hear; they also perform it. And they are outstanding performers.

They are true bards! Bards of a special sort, with a powerful charisma and gravitating toward showing their emotion with a convincing sense of drama. Saavedra's sumptuous *basso profundo* seemed to have shook the walls of the hall, taking advantage of the venue's remarkable acoustics as it soared toward the dome. Nika Leoni is an exceptionally talented composer and singer, with triumphant femininity manifest in her music as well as her appearance, and definitely worthy of our very special attention.

Our periodical tries to use every opportunity to mention members of our Russian-speaking community—in particular those renowned for their talent and uniqueness. We have, of course, already mentioned Nika Leoni in our publications—the readers of the Russian Bazaar will remember her as the creator and producer of a colorful, fun, and compelling musical for kids, whose audience truly appreciated the harmonious music, children and adults alike, as well as the author's laudable intent to awaken a passion for music in children and to facilitate their understanding thereof by means of exposing them to a live performance. We also wrote how Nika acted not only as a producer of a fabulous mini-opera telling the legend of the beautiful and brave Queen Esther, but also sang the title part. The opera was a “mini” since it was made for children—yet again, with the aim of bringing them nearer to music culture. This was followed by Snegurochka—another fine bid for getting children interested in opera. The results were just as great—these amazing legends translated into the language of opera were accepted and understood by the children, for Nika has given them the entire space of her soul.

I could also feel this at the latest concert as I was listening to Leoni sing her own works—the divinely poetic Songs of Love performed together with the pianist Violetta Zabbi.

Relatively recently I had an opportunity to hear Nika's rendition of a number of songs by Shostakovich, as well as her part in the Broadway production of Pushkin's Little Tragedies, and I can testify to the fact that her talent keeps evolving, and her emotion has grown even more intense, which casts every song in a unique sensuous and intellectual hue.

Six songs. The imagery is nothing short of spectacular! The clouds are chased by the wind, reminding one of the wind of fate that chases us, at times... Pierrot, alone, abandoned by everyone... A night of love, filled with tenderness and fierce passion, but also the fear of loss... And mistakes. Inescapable mistakes engendering suffering and doubt.

One cannot help recollecting the words of a time-hallowed Jewish book, "Oh that my grief were thoroughly weighed, and my calamity laid in the balances together. For now it would be heavier than the sand of the sea." Such are the bitter fruits of mistakes.

The audience listened spellbound, face to face with a show of true talent. They were just as rapt as Nika performed Eurydice, one of her own oeuvres—a suite of immortal love. You will find everything here—the tragedy of parting, all-encompassing sorrow, and love beyond boundaries. How did Leoni manage to express it all in music and song? And how she sang! Her voice has power and tenderness, character and sheer beauty. And the music that she wrote would make Orpheus proud. This is truly a gift—a gift from God.

***Margarita Shklyarevskaya***

(Translated from Russian by Mark Berelekhis)