



# Chopin Notes

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## “This Moment Will Never Happen Again...”

An Exclusive interview with Alexander Kobrin, winner of the 2005 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition

By Bożena U. Zaremba

**Although you have received prizes and won many prestigious piano competitions, including the Busoni and the Scottish International Piano Competitions, it seems that it was the Van Cliburn Competition that gave a real boost to your career.**

I would disagree with that. The Van Cliburn did indeed give a boost to my career in America, but I had been touring quite a lot in Europe and Asia, mainly Japan and Korea, before.

**You were an underdog at the Van Cliburn, and because of your somber stage presence people called you an “undertaker.” What did you think of that?**

I was enjoying it very much (*laughs*). I loved that nickname. The other two were “Iceman” and “Harry Potter,” but after the Competition I changed my glasses, so they don’t call me that any more.

**Did you feel a competitive spirit during the Competition?**

Actually, not really. First of all, it was very hard to hang out with other competitors. You stay with a host family, and I was very lucky that my host family took me anywhere I wanted and introduced me to many people. My hosts were marvelous; it almost felt like home. I was practicing, of course, but I had a lovely time. The audience in Texas was great, very inspiring, so I felt like every stage of the competition was just another concert. So personally, I did not feel any pressure, and especially now, with my experience as a juror, I try to distinguish a competition from a sport event — we are not competing, we are making music.

**You had a chance to meet maestro Van Cliburn\* himself. Tell us something about it.**

It was outstanding, kind of a dream come true, to see him and to spend a few hours with this piano legend, one of my favorite pianists of all times. He is an amazing man and a magnificent musician, truly dedicated to music. Just to hear him talk was so inspiring. It was also wonderful to see how he loves Russia. Everybody loves him in Russia. I still meet people in Moscow who had been to his concerts, and when they learned I was going to be in Texas, they asked me to say hello to him. He had obviously won their hearts, not only with his music, but also with his adorable personality.

**Let’s move back in time a little bit. You were born in Moscow and grew up during a fascinating period of Russia’s history, when extreme political, economical, social and cultural changes were taking place after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. What was it like growing up at that time?**

It was very interesting. There was a lot of instability and poverty; everything was a bit shaky. I was still at school, but it was actually quite dangerous, because the Gnessin Academy of Music was in the heart of it all. I vividly remember the year 1991, when the revolution happened, and 1993, when we had tanks in front of the [Russian] White House. These were tough times, but we school students were experiencing everything mostly at home, where we would listen to our parents talk and analyze what was going on. I am sure we could not really understand what was going on. Now, when I go back to Russia and see people who are 11 or 12 years younger than I am, who were born in Russia, I can see a tremendous generational difference. They



Photo: James Steeber

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## Upcoming Events:

Alexander Kobrin, piano  
March 20, 7 pm

Roswell Cultural Arts Center

See our website for the information about the After-Concert Essay Contest.

Concert tickets are always discounted for members of the Chopin Society of Atlanta. To become a member join online at  
www.chopinatlanta.org or call 770.663.0620

## Chopin Notes

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**Chopin Society of Atlanta has grown a cult following among local piano mavens.**

– Pierre Ruhe, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 2007

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## It was a memorable event!

The Chopin Society of Atlanta's annual fundraiser and the celebration of the Chopin Year, which was established to honor in 2010 the 200th anniversary of the composer's birth, were held on November 6, 2010, at the Country Club of the South in Johns Creek.

The honored guest of the evening was Aleksander Szlam, President and CEO of Szlam Enterprises. Other distinguished guests were Małgorzata Szum, Cultural Attaché of the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Washington, D.C.; Hon. Takuji Hanatani, Consul General of Japan, with his wife Keiko; Hon. Pascal Le Deunff, Consul General of France, with wife Diana; Johns Creek Mayor Mike Bodker, with his wife Aileen; and John Lemley, host of radio station

WABE, 90.1 FM in Atlanta. Over all, we had the pleasure of the company of more than 140 guests.

The piano recitals by young artists touched everyone's hearts. We are especially proud of our work with youth and are impressed by the participants' commitment to music. Our thanks go to Emilia Folkert, Eliza Folkert, Jackson Zurca, Chip Keebaugh, Stephanie Chew and Anthony Wang, who received Certificates of Participation from CSA President Dorota Lato and surprise gifts from the Embassy of the Republic of Poland.

Mrs. Małgorzata Szum presented Mrs. Lato with a gift from the Ambassador of the Republic of Poland, Robert Kupiecki, in recognition of her outstanding contribution to the promotion of Polish culture.

Halina and Aleksander Szlam received special CSA awards in recognition of their continuing support of the Chopin Society of Atlanta.

Special gratitude goes to all members of the CSA Board of Directors: Chairwoman Dorota Lato, Renata Cichocka, Elżbieta Gürtler-Krawczyńska, Anna Holub-Standish, Barbara Leszczyński, Marty Merkler, Halina Szlam, Aleksander Szlam and Claude Wegscheider, as well as all the volunteers for their hard work in organizing the event. The funds raised during the evening will help us achieve our goals: to promote culture and advance the appreciation of music, particularly among youth.



Halina and Aleksander Szlam



Aileen and Mike Bodker, Mayor of Johns Creek, Piotr Folkert, Dorota Lato, and Halina and Aleksander Szlam



John Lemley, host of Radio Station WABE, 90.1 FM Atlanta, and Aleksander Szlam



Małgorzata Szum, Cultural Attaché of the Embassy of the Republic of Poland



Pascal Le Deunff, Consul General of France and Dorota Lato



Gail and Karl Powers, and Linda and Marty Merkler



Barbara and Tolek Leszczyński



Dorota Lato, Linda Merkler, Anna Holub-Standish, Urszula Gronowska, Renata Cichocka, Aleksander Szlam, John Lemley, Barbara Leszczyński, Małgorzata Szum, Halina Szlam, and Elżbieta Gürtler-Krawczyńska



Małgorzata Szum, John Lemley, Mike Bodker and Young Artists: Chip Keebaugh, Emilia Folkert, Eliza Folkert, Stephanie Chew, Anthony Wang and Jackson Zurca

## Magical, Mesmerizing, and Masterful

Essay Contest for Young Listeners

Magic is an inherent part of everyone's childhood. What child has not fantasized about touching a magic wand and being taken to a place he or she had never been to, never dreamed of, or never even imagined? As we grow older, we realize that this is just fantasy, but sometimes it takes a child to make us realize that magic can still exist. Just read the excerpts from the essays written by children who attended Joyce Yang recital in September 2010, and you will see.

"Debussy's piece had a magical, harp-like fluency, with bells tinkling, as if it were a spring shower.... I was mesmerized and entranced by Ms. Yang's playing. The music and the pianist's emotions took me through different moods and to different places. It was a journey of the senses.... The first Chopin piece was delicate, like a ballet. It had a lovely melody. There were parts where a singular voice was joined by a second voice and both were united for cadenced sequences.... The best parts of her playing were her graceful movements and how she was able to use the piano as a tool for the music and emotions. She created

a give-and-take partnership with the piano. Ms. Yang has mastered form and achieved grace." **Natalie Bothwell** (11<sup>th</sup> grade)



Photo: Tiffany LaReau

"I was a little bit nervous because it was the first time for me to go to a piano concert. I was very surprised by the fantastic performance.... Ms. Yang's played the parts of *piano* softly and beautifully, and the parts of *forte* – powerfully.... I liked Debussy best, because different scenes came into my head immediately.... The *Pagodes* reminded me of my home country, Japan.... In the second part I liked the high chords. I imagined people holding hands and watching a sunset. The third part was a little bit scary be-

cause the rain sounds were getting harder and harder. But I could imagine, after it's gone, the sunlight came back and the rainbow came up over the sky. I wish I could play these pieces some day." **Mayo Ito** (6 years old)

"My favorite piece was the *Hungarian Rhapsody in D-flat* by Franz Liszt.... Ms. Yang was very expressive with her dynamics and tempo in the piece as well as with her own motion. She had a wonderful grasp of every part and made it her own.... She made the performance very interesting and energetic.... I thoroughly enjoyed the concert and was inspired to work harder on my own music." **Laura Sturgis** (15 years old)

"Frederick Chopin was considered one of the great Romantics. He was born in Poland but spent half of his life in France. When he left Poland, he brought some Polish soil with him. When he died the soil was sprinkled over his grave. He really loved his homeland." **Flaherty Collins** (4<sup>th</sup> grade)

**Thank you for participating in the contest!**

*Authors of the best essays have been awarded Barnes & Noble gift certificates. Excerpts have been edited for space and clarity.*

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have a totally different mentality. They don't know what it is like not to be able to know what you are going to eat the next day. And then we were freed, and we were witnessing something building up, though we were not sure what direction it was going to take. A lot of my friends, who were studying abroad, were coming back in the '90s, because there was that feeling of revival, the feeling that something huge was going to happen to our country. And now it is just one big disappointment. A lot of them regret coming back. Part of it forced me to leave and build my life in the United States. I got my freedom here, for which I am very grateful. It is a shame that I could not feel this way in my own country, where my parents, my friends and my teachers live.

**At what point did you decide to settle in the U.S.?**

After a couple of years touring the U.S., someone suggested that I apply for the green card, and I did. I think it came naturally, because from the very beginning I felt very comfortable here.

**Why, do you think?**

It's the contrast from Russia, I guess. People here are so independent, nice,

and hospitable. When I go to Europe and I see people on the street, I do what I do here — I smile. I have this huge argument with my mother, who says, "They ask you, 'How are you?,' but they don't really mean it." I say, "Yes, Mom, it doesn't mean anything, but you prefer when somebody says 'You are a fool' right into your face (*laughs*)." I prefer the first way. You can also talk about opportunities for people here in America, about the comforts of life, but what I admire most is that when you work hard, you can feel appreciated. I am sorry I could not get this in Russia. Of course, there are wonderful people there, too, but there is this aura of depression and that feeling that there is no way out.

**What is the most important lesson you learned at the Moscow Conservatory?**

I was blessed to study with Prof. Lev Naumov for seven years. He was a remarkable teacher, a great musician, and a very wise man. The most important thing I learned from him was the complete and uncompromised devotion and dedication to what I am doing. Another great teacher I would also like to recognize is Prof. Tropp from the Gnnessin Academy of Music, who said, "If

you want to understand Rachmaninoff, love him."

**I would think it is impossible to force yourself to love a composer.**

We pianists are like actors — we try to make somebody's life our own in order to get a deeper knowledge of this life. A famous Russian actor, Vladimir Vysotsky, just before he died, said, "I am so tired of dying every night." That's what should really happen; we should try to go as deep as possible. It's very hard to do, and it's not for everyone.

**What impact are you trying to make on your students?**

I'm trying to continue the path I took at the Moscow Conservatory, this emotional approach. It does not matter how talented you are. Sometimes a less talented person, who maybe is struggling with fingering, loves it so much that he or she achieves more than someone who has beautiful fingering but does not care enough.

**The concept of talent can have many faces. Sometimes it translates into the ease with which you move your fingers, while other people possess a talent for having greater insight into music.**

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Absolutely. Also, with music, you cannot just go home and switch it off. If you don't live it, I am not sure it makes sense.

**What are your musical fascinations?**

Through the years I have narrowed down my interests to Romanticism and Classicism. I adore Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven and the great Romantic composers, Chopin, Schumann, and Brahms. I am also a great admirer of Rachmaninoff and Shostakovich.

**What place does Chopin's music have in your repertoire?**

I played Chopin from the very beginning of my musical education, and he had a great impact on me. There are so many things to explore in his music that you can never get tired of it. It is hard to talk about a genius and describe my feelings about his music.

**What does a pianist need to do to perform Chopin convincingly?**

Oh, I really don't know! This question is so difficult. For example, I could never forget the recording of Chopin's *Scherzo in B Minor* by Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli in Hamburg. It didn't feel like Chopin in the sense of style and

touch, but it was so dramatic, so grave. Nobody would ever play this way. If you played like that for a piano competition, you would be kicked out immediately. It was impossible. But it was convincing. And you couldn't say it was not tasteful, not at all. We can talk about what you need in Chopin — the melodic lines, the style and chromaticism, the patriotic aspect, the feeling of nostalgia — but when you listen to the performance of remarkable pianists, you don't think about those things, you just listen. So it comes down to how you feel after the performance — whether you feel nothing or disappointed, or bored, which is the worst thing, or whether you get inspired.

**In one of your bios I read that you are an accomplished soccer player. What accomplishments are we talking about?**

My main accomplishment is two broken legs (*laughs*), at two different periods of time, of course. When I was a small kid, it was just a chapter of my childhood. It is important to have something apart from what we are doing; you cannot just sit at the piano and play all day. Let kids be kids. What I always say is, "Listen, look at all those composers we are

playing — they had tremendous personal lives. They lived crazy. How do we explore their lives if we don't experience it ourselves?"

**Once you said "I'm trying to play every concert as my last one, to do the best I can." Has your attitude changed?**

No, I still feel the same. The most precious thing about making music is this Faustian feeling of freezing the moment, this realization that this moment will never happen again. Every concert is different — I am different, the place is different, the stage is different — so every time I go out there, even if I am playing the piece for the 10,000th time, I can never be bored by it. This understanding that some kind of a miracle, something unique is taking place in this particular minute, makes me be just more careful with it and enjoy it more. ♪

\*Harvey Laven "Van" Cliburn Jr. (known throughout the world as Van Cliburn) was the winner of the first Tchaikovsky International Piano Competition in Moscow in 1958. At the time of the Soviet regime, the judges had to ask permission of the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to give the first prize to an American.

*For an extended version of the interview please visit our website: [www.chopinatlanta.org](http://www.chopinatlanta.org)*

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