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A close-up portrait of Patricia Kopatchinskaja, a woman with long, dark, wavy hair, wearing a black turtleneck sweater. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a gentle smile, her hand resting near her face.

PATRICIA KOPATCHINSKAJA

On artistic principles, interpretive freedom,
and recording the music that needs her most



A STREAK OF INDEPENDENCE

Violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja on art, interpretation, and musical commitment

By Laurence Vittes



“You have to be mad to make music,” says violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja as we talk about her approach to her craft. “It’s not a profession—it’s a day and night existence; it’s living in a dream.” On her storybook journey from rural Moldova to concert stages around the world, violinist, composer, and entrepreneurial force Kopatchinskaja, known commonly as Pat Kop, makes her musical experiences as personal as her travels. As she demonstrates on three new recordings, she believes in her projects as a principle of life, and commits herself without compromise.

Kopatchinskaja’s recording of Schumann’s Violin Concerto (along with the Fantaisie, Op. 131, on Audite release *Robert Schumann: Complete Symphonic Works, Vol. IV*), with Heinz Holliger conducting Cologne’s West German Radio Symphony Orchestra, puts her in the company of colleagues like Carolin Widmann, Isabelle Faust, Rachel Barton Pine, and Baiba Skride. Holliger, who first conducted the concerto with Gidon Kremer, says Kopatchinskaja is “uncompromising and sincere, does what she believes in, and has a sensitivity for Schumann’s world that is not accessible to everyone.”

“

It’s about speaking to the listeners so that the music appears in their imaginations as the interpreter’s personal view.

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Her startling rethink—in terms of style, tempo, and mood—of Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto with fellow free spirit Teodor Currentzis conducting his MusicAeterna

Orchestra (Sony), reveals answers to her internal dialogue. “Which piece should I record?” she asked herself. “How much does this piece need me?”

And finally, her *Take Two* CD (Alpha) of 23 short duo pieces plus Bach’s D minor Chaconne, has a long, revealing subtitle: “Duos with Different Instruments from 1,000 Years of Musical History for Young People Aged from 0 to 100.” Kopatchinskaja dedicated the CD to her nine-year-old daughter: “Dear Alice, come with me, I will show you together with my musical friends many little duo pieces from our musical soul-globe,” she says in the liner notes.

But the three recordings aren’t enough to define her 2015–16 season. She’s also touring and working on Ligeti’s Kurtag Fragments, as well as concertos by Michael van der Aa, Sofia Gubaidulina, and Holliger. It has also been announced that she will serve as music director of the 2020 Ojai Music Festival.

I reached Kopatchinskaja by phone in Houston during a weekend of performances of the Schumann Concerto with the Houston Symphony, conducted by Andrés Orozco-Estrada.

Why record the Schumann Concerto?

Because it’s not Brahms, not Beethoven, so I can’t just play with my eyes closed. It’s been a discovery, a very uncomfortable one actually—you have to know how it was composed, at what time in Schumann’s life. It was one of his last orchestral works. He already was suffering from symptoms of his cerebral disease, and had difficulties hearing and understanding speech. Only a few months later he would hear the voices of angels and devils, and music similar to the second movement of his new Violin Concerto, which he said was sung to him by ghosts of Schubert and Mendelssohn. Clara [Schumann] and [Joseph] Joachim didn’t understand this music and didn’t want it to be published.

When the Schumann was finally published in 1937, Donald Tovey wrote of its ‘immensely deep and true personality . . . and inexhaustible vein of sublime melody, profound and rich harmony.’ In a conversation I had with Holliger, he called the concerto ‘far more than just a violin concerto

ONWARD TO OJAI

A few days after our interview, Kopatchinskaja was named music director for the 2020 edition of the Ojai Festival. I contacted festival artistic director Thomas W. Morris to find out how Ojai connected with Kopatchinskaja. He told me he had known her for a few years from her recordings, which meant music by Bartók, Peter Eötvös, Farid Karáev, Ligeti, Tigran Mansurian, Prokofiev, Stravinsky, and Galina Ustvolskaya—all composers who would fit in at Ojai.

Then he heard her live, in November 2015, playing the Beethoven Concerto and the Michael Hersch premiere at the same concert, in Saint Paul with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra.

“Her explosive energy, utter fearlessness, and awesome musicianship were infectious,” Morris says. “After spending time with her, there was no question she had to be a music director of the Ojai Music Festival.”

to show off a great soloist. It’s revolutionary,’ he said, ‘equal to the concertos of Beethoven and Berg.’ Still there are only 19 recordings of it today (and one of those by a cellist). What’s the problem?

It has a difficult beginning—it feels at times like a bird that cannot fly, with broken wings, and also like a poet facing death, trying to carve in stone some archaic music about his lost soul, maybe all lost souls.

Why did you decide to perform the Schumann Violin Concerto with the Houston Symphony?

I played my first Stravinsky Concerto with [Houston Symphony music director] Andrés Orozco-Estrada in Graz, Austria; I admired his energy onstage. He was very attentive, and we communicated well together. I love his kind of making music, which is what the Schumann needs. It is very difficult to accompany. Many orchestras don’t have much experience with this piece—me neither!—so even more than normal, it’s about discovering together how to understand the music and tell it to the audience.



WHAT SHE PLAYS

VIOLIN: Giovanni Francesco Pressenda 1834, Torino

BOW: Tourte “for most, but not all, recordings.”

STRINGS: D’Addario Kaplan, Larsen, and Thomastik-Infeld Dominant, are “all strong”—but for the Beethoven and Tchaikovsky CDs and the Mendelssohn video, coming soon on ARTE with MusicAeterna and Teodor Currentzis, she used Gamut gut strings.

JULIA WESELY

Why did you decide that Tchaikovsky’s Concerto needed you?

Because I’m still struggling to find my own personal way of reading it. [Currentzis and I] found there was a tremendous similarity at one point to a French song from Tchaikovsky’s youth, with a text that speaks about a mysterious secret. It asks, “Where are you my love?” and we came to understand that the concerto is not about thick sound and

vibrato—it’s about loneliness, and losing yourself in a space so wonderful you can whisper. It’s about speaking to the listeners so that the music appears in their imaginations as the interpreter’s personal view.

Where do you find the courage, and the justification, to develop such a profoundly personal view of a well-known piece like the Tchaikovsky?

When you attend a play, for example, you hear the director’s view, whether it’s Shakespeare in costumes of our time, or different spaces and times. In classical music, however, it’s been prohibited to think like that. It’s like we’re in a robot world in which everyone has to achieve a certain level of playing, which is polished, shiny, perfect, beautiful—and that’s it. Everything else is considered a disturbing element. But geniuses like Beethoven



LEILA NAVIDI

and Janacek broke the rules. They did not conform with tradition or even with their time and, in doing so, opened new parameters. This is the art that has value to me.

What are your principles for the art you create?

The process of searching is the most precious light in an artist's existence—it is the center of our art, our core. Every single piece requires a different interpretation, a way of playing, to the point where there are no generalized legatos or spiccatos. Each piece needs its own book, rewritten, destroyed. Take risks and be curious. Be wrong, because wrongness is important. Mistakes onstage can be the price of searching.

In addition to the unexpected musical riches, your *Take Two* CD is packaged with dozens of photographs and

illustrations, plus essays about each duo. What inspired you?

As I wrote in the notes, I often feel so lonely on tour as a soloist, so for encores I began to collect and play duos, just for company. From this habit grew a repertoire, and finally this CD with duos coming from a thousand years of musical history.

I also thought, so many violinists play the same Wieniawski and Vieuxtemps encores; it can't be that classical music ends with the last century. That way it's not art—it's not even a museum—just reproductions.

What message do you hope to inspire?

Opening up the idea that music gets its power from being something you cannot express in words—that this power is in everybody. When you make music, it opens your soul, and as much as you give, you receive. It's also about freedom and independence.

Is there also a practical message for young musicians?

The most important thing is to tell your story, to not be ashamed of what you feel or understand, and to not be afraid of the great pieces.

Where did your fierce streak of independence come from?

If you think of Moldova, where I was born, squeezed now between Romania and Ukraine, for so many centuries it had no identity.

In this small, weak country, people learned to have their own principles, learned how to think independently, and to build opinions based on their own experiences, reflections, and views.

It happens with every piece I play: I don't think in terms of interpretation—I try to find my own connections. ■