

## Elena Roussanova and the Art of Just Doing It

INTERVIEW BY RONALD E. GRAMES

The title of the CD, and the title of the charming, Americana travel piece which headlines that album, is *Moments of Arrival*. It is a fitting title, since for Elena Roussanova, life seems to have been full of such moments. She was born in the Soviet Union; a child prodigy on the piano who seemed destined to make a career with her instrument. Over time the focus of her studies became composition. She achieved early success in her, by then, much changed homeland, and some important recognition. But marriage led her to the United States, and with that change, a set of different challenges than those, perhaps, originally envisioned.

Roussanova now finds herself on the faculty of Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts, an associate professor of composition in a school renowned for the quality and eclecticism of its faculty, program, and students. We discussed her life's many moments of arrival, her compositions, her philosophies, and her plans as she juggled the many demands of writing, teaching, and home, often in emails sent in the wee hours of the morning. She is not, it would seem, one to let circumstance get in the way.

The journey's starting point, then, was the logical subject for the first questions. She was born and grew up in the twilight years of the Soviet Union, and lived through the turmoil of the formation of the Russian Federation. It had to be more than a little unsettling when that transition took place, not least because she was pursuing a career in music during that time.



“I was born and raised in Moscow, USSR,” she explained. “In fact, I lived in Russia through so many major political changes. From the very young age we were taught to be very serious and organized. I remember very well when Brezhnev died. I was in the second grade in elementary school when our teacher entered the class crying and telling us that our leader had just passed away.

“I remember how I was instructed by my parents not to say a word about the ‘Radio’ that my father used to listen to at night. Later on, I found out that it was the Voice of America radio station. I remember the *Perestroika* (restructuring), a political movement for reformation within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union during the late ‘80s. And of course the Yeltsin time.”

Boris Yeltsin, for those who forgot, was the first president of the Russian Federation, and presided over those first chaotic years. Roussanova went on to talk about her first experiences with the world outside the USSR.

“My first strong impression of the West was during the school exchange trip, when I traveled to the Netherlands in 1990, where I had to perform the Rachmaninov Concerto No. 1. I was sixteen year old. It was my very first time being outside of the USSR. Everything looked so different. We were so excited about every little thing we saw! People were so nice to us. It felt like I was in a whole new world.

“We didn’t avoid the oddity, though! One day our big group was taking a long gathering walk around Amsterdam. We made a wrong turn and accidentally end up in the red-light district. It was shocking to see all those women behind the windows. Our teacher-chaperon hurried up and tried to move us in a different direction as fast as possible by saying “Don’t look! Proceed! Don’t look!”

“But, of course, the biggest thing for me was to learn about new culture, absorb that *new air*, make music, make new friends, see the beautiful countryside. When we were traveling by train to Holland, the demolition of the Berlin Wall had already started, and when we were coming back, German reunification formally concluded! I always felt like I was living through a very exciting time. The doors which were closed for so long were suddenly open!”

Through all this tumultuous time, she was busy studying music.

“I started taking music lessons very early, when I was only three years old. One of the very strong memories of my childhood was when my mother brought me to a legendary teacher, Anna Artobolevskaya, who strongly recommended for me to start attending the experimental Wunderkind Program, which was specially designed for the musically gifted children of preschool age. There were twelve of us.

“Once we had a group of visitors from the Minister of Culture of the USSR. They were observing our lesson. The teacher was pointing at me by saying to the visiting committee, ‘Please pay attention to that girl; she is very talented.’ I heard what she was saying and started showing off even more. Funny, but hearing the praise about myself made me even more enthusiastic about my music lessons. Around that time I started coming up with my own little songs.”

The eclecticism of her current musical surroundings at Berklee were anticipated by the music of her childhood.

“My musical taste was shaped by very different types of music. My parents loved everything classical, especially opera. My father could guess any singer from the very first opening line. I liked that game so much that, by age six, I could easily recognize the voices of Lanza, Corelli, Monaco, Gigli, Ruffo and, of course, Caruso.

“My parents were not musicians, but they endlessly loved music. My father was a metallurgical engineer. One of his uncles was a famous metal scientist, academic Severdenko. His choice of occupation was decided as a continuation of the family tradition. My mother worked as an economist, but she always wanted for me to be a musician. She is the most dedicated woman you can meet. Without her support I would never be where I am now.

“She likes to tell the story about when she realized that I had to start my musical education. When I was a toddler, I heard Mario Lanza on TV. Amazed by the beautiful music and his voice, I started conducting with a knitting needle that I grabbed from my mother. Interesting that my taste for different musical styles began quite early. I was obsessed with the Creedence Clearwater Revival tune *Lookin’ out my back door!* Blood, Sweat & Tears’s *And when I die* was also one of my favorite songs.

“I even had a *cabaret-like* dance using my father’s hat as a prop and would play the same vinyl disc over and over again to dance to. The Beatles and Chicago were my favorites. The list is long. It was very difficult to get these discs during the Soviet Era. The print was limited. But my brother would get them, and I would listen to them when he was away.

“I do believe that such a broad exposure to all sorts of different musical genres made my transition from Russia to U.S. much easier. My ears were well prepared.”

Not surprisingly, her formal musical education was a little more traditionally classical, though even here, her interests in other music, and in writing her own music, kept popping up.

“Piano was my primary instrument, but every time when I would sit down to practice, I was ending up improvising some new tune. Composition process was always taking my time from piano practicing.

“However, I decided to enter a music college as a pianist and was lucky to study with Irina Naumova and Olga Zimina, who tremendously shaped up my musicianship and techniques. Later at the Moscow Conservatory, I studied piano with the wonderful Anotolyi Rozanov. Every single student of his adored him. He used to say, ‘Do you know that you are a great-great-great ... grand student of Beethoven? I studied with Oborin. Oborin was a student of Igumnov. Igumnov studied with Pabst; Pabst was a student of Listz; Listz studied with Czerny and Czerny studied with Beethoven!’”

Ultimately, it was the composition, not the piano, that won out, though the curious can hear her demonstrate her considerable pianistic skills on YouTube in some very challenging repertoire.

“During the last few years of the music college, I understood how much I wanted to compose. I was introduced to a professor of composition at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory, Tatiana Choodova. That meeting changed my life. I started writing chamber music, including a

sonata for trumpet and piano, art songs, and a piano suite. I was preparing to take very difficult entrance exams for the legendary Moscow Conservatory. It was my dream to be a student of the place with a majestic aura, legacy, and history of the great composers and musical artists. I was lucky to study with people who remembered and could tell stories about when they met with Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Prokofiev...”

The chamber works, and the test scores, were more than enough to get her in. Her online Berklee bio says she has a Master in Music degree from the Moscow Conservatory, but apparently degrees aren't quite equivalent in the two academic systems.

“In order to receive the highest degree in music, you have to complete your studies at the Conservatory *or* the Music Academy for five years after four years of study at a music college. I studied for five years as a composer and graduated with a summa cum laude, the so called Red Diploma / Highest Honors of Distinction at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow.

“The counting of studying years and understanding the difference between the U.S. and Russian system can be confusing, since in the U.S., you have to study only two years for the master's degree. The Russian system looks more like a master's program, plus extra three years, and had to be completed with two composition concerts: a symphonic piece and a recital of chamber music which we had to compose during our fifth year of studies. I guess it sounds more like a DMA.”

Roussanova actually started a career in music there in Russia and was elected to the United Russian Composers Union when she was but 26.

“After I graduated from the Conservatory, I had several auditions to become a member of the prestigious United Russian Composers Union. Different committees had to listen to my music and had to vote and decide if I was prepared to be elected as a member of such an important organization. Previous members include Shostakovich and Prokofiev, to name a few. I became a member as soon as I graduated from the Conservatory in May of 2000.”

What followed were a number of high-profile premieres: “I was lucky to have my music performed by professional orchestras and artists in Russia even when I was a student. One of my first professional compositions, written while I studied at the Conservatory, was *The Great Chaplin* brass quintet for the members of the Russian National Orchestra. They played it first, then the members of the Bolshoi Theater Symphony Orchestra brass quintet performed it. Even when I was writing it for the brass quintet, I was thinking of doing it for the orchestra. So, I finally did it, and it was premiered in 2014 with The Head Military Orchestra of the Russian Federation at the Moscow Conservatory Great Hall. (Here is the YouTube video of that performance: [youtu.be/A9Re04kf0IU](https://youtu.be/A9Re04kf0IU).)

“*The Legend of Babylon* for symphony orchestra also became a professional piece. First, it was performed by the Symphony Orchestra of the Russian State TV and Radio Centre conducted by Maestro Viktor Ivanov at the Diploma Symphonic Concert in 2000. Later, in 2003 it was conducted by Maestro Vladimir Fedoseyev with the Tchaikovsky State Symphony Orchestra, which was originally founded as the Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra.

“My duo for violin and cello *Goya's Caprichos* was played many times by one of the world's most active performer/pedagogues on the violin, Charles Castleman. He programmed it

at his numerous recitals in the U.S. It was also performed at the Moscow Autumn festival. My clarinet quartet *At The Bazaar* was performed many times by Prof. Rafael Bagdasaryan and his clarinet studio of the Moscow Conservatory, including at the Kremlin Music Festival.”

And performances of her music continued in the United States even before she moved here in November of 2000.

“In 2000 I got a commission from the Las Vegas Music Festival to write an opening fanfare. So I wrote *Festival Celebration Music in a Russian Style*, an overture for orchestral brass and percussion, which was performed in August of that year. In January of 2016, it was performed by the Omaha Symphony, conducted by Maestro Thomas Wilkins. In fact, Maestro Wilkins planned to perform this piece a long time ago with the Detroit Symphony. The original score called for six percussion players and it can be challenging to program. So I had to do a second edition with fewer percussion.

“I have to say, this piece opened many doors for me. I started working for Warner Brothers Publications as a composer and arranger after their editor heard this piece. Several years ago, it was performed by Maestro George Stelluto with the Peoria Symphony; by the way he was the one who commissioned and premiered it with the Las Vegas Music Festival Orchestra. It was also performed in Russia at the Moscow Autumn festival and was even included in the commencement program of Boston University.

“When I moved to the U.S., the Dallas Brass put *The Great Chaplin* in their repertoire and played it during its American tour. And recently the Stow Symphony Orchestra and Metrowest Symphony Orchestra in the U.S. performed it in its orchestral version. *The Legend of Babylon* was published by Warner Brothers Publications in 2005.”

“In 2005, I was teaching a couple of classes at Boston University. One day I went to Berklee to introduce myself and hoped to be invited to teach at the school in the future. I left my CV, and several months later I got a call from the chair of the composition department to come for the audition. That’s how I started teaching at Berklee.

“I heard so much about that school, even when I lived in Russia. To me it was always a great Mecca of jazz and popular music, but I discovered that it had one of the largest composition departments in the country. It’s really exciting to be part of such a diverse musical community. All styles and all western musical genres—and not only western—can be found at Berklee. What makes it even more special is that we are always open to musical collaboration between different departments. I have amazing colleagues. We are so excited to share our ideas and thoughts on teaching, performing, and composing. This is what makes Berklee so unique.

“Also, I helped to broker a relationship with the Moscow Conservatory with a historic signing of an agreement between our two institutions. This program has incorporated several different departments within our school including Composition, Film Scoring, Electronic Production and Design, Voice, and Contemporary Writing and Production. To date there have been five very successful exchange trips that have benefited both of our faculties and students.”

*Moments of Arrival* appears on the Centaur CD, conducted by Julius P. Williams — who is now Roussanova’s husband — and there is another performance on YouTube, also conducted by Williams, with the orchestra of the Moscow Conservatory. The performance of *The Great*

*Chaplin* she mentioned, also recorded at the Moscow Conservatory, is led by Williams, as well. They appeared to be a result of that partnership between Berklee College and the Moscow Conservatory, so I about that and her work with Williams, who is also on faculty at Berklee.

“I have worked on the behalf of Berklee to enhance the reputation and outreach of classical concert music for almost 10 years. During this time, I have helped to bring faculty exchanges, performances, master classes, workshops with students, and wonderful people to people musical friendship.

“I organized very successful performances at the Moscow Conservatory and Moscow Autumn Festival. The relationship with the Moscow Conservatory was brokered in 2010. This is when we established the Berklee International Composers Institute with the support of our administration, President Roger Brown, Senior Vice-President for Academic Affairs/Provost Lawrence J. Simpson, Dean of Professional Writing & Music Technology Division Kari Juusela, and Former Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation, Rector of the Moscow Conservatory, A. S. Sokolov. Julius Williams is the Artistic Director and I am the Co-Artistic Director.”

The last few years has seen an increase in tensions between the U.S. and Russia, and I wondered if this had any negative effect on the partnership between Berklee and the Moscow Conservatory. Has it made the coordination of her program more difficult?

“Not at all,” she replied. “For me the role of music is to connect people. Music should be absolutely free from politics. In fact, when my husband went to Moscow with the group of Berklee professors to conduct the concert with the Military Orchestra, everyone was so appreciative that we came. The Conservatory helped to promote that concert, they put big posters and announcements all around the city. People were thanking him for being a true musician for whom music is absolutely independent from any political pressure! They even stopped him on the streets to thank him and to show their appreciation.”

What is amazing in all this is that somehow Roussanova, who has a toddler son with Williams, manages to balance that with all of her administering, teaching, and composing.

“I think all women know how to multitask,” she observed. “You just do it. *Of course* it’s challenging, but that’s life.”

“You just do it.” I remembered her using the same phrase in response to a question in an online Berklee College faculty profile I’d read. The question was about short deadlines and inspiration. “You just have to do it,” she said then. “You have inspiration, you do it. You don’t have inspiration, you do it.” I wondered if this was something of a motto for her. Is it part of what she tries to impart to the students she teaches? And does she find teaching those student musicians fulfilling?

“I love teaching!” was her enthusiastic response. “I have so many students around the world who studied composition with me and now they are very successful professionals! And, of course, they are my close friends, too. We all have our ups and downs, and I think this is one of the role of the teacher is to understand how to inspire and move in the right direction with each individual student. Yes, the world outside is very competitive. I always teach my students to give their best and be prepare to deliver a quality work even when the deadline is very short.

“A composition is a sacred process. It’s like a meditation. You are visiting your own

world. And in this world there are only you and the inspiration which can have many forms and meanings for each of us. We can be easily inspired by nature, art, conversation... The task is to try to hear your own voice and describe your emotions with the universal language of music. For that you need the tools: your knowledge of how to write counterpoint, how to develop your material, how to orchestrate etc. And that's why you are in the school to learn how to do that."

And, of course, motherhood has some unique rewards: "It's actually amazing to see how your little child develops and showing the signs of exceptional talent. He started singing the correct notes and repeating short melodies even before he turned one. Now I can imagine how my mother felt when she discovered that I had a gift for music. As a mother, I can say it feels like a magic."

Back to her music: The Centaur recording of *Moments of Arrival* was made with the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra. The result is very fine, so I asked how this ensemble was chosen, and what the sessions were like. Was it a good experience? Had she and Williams worked with them before?

"Thanks for your kind words!" she wrote back. "Yes, Maestro has a very long relationship with this wonderful group of musicians. He has already recorded several CD's with the Prague Radio Symphony. He creates a friendly and positive atmosphere, and he is the master of rehearsal. He knows exactly what to do with new compositions and which sections needs more preparation. Also, he has a great support and friendship from everyone in the studio. The staff is very professional and knew how to handle and record these works."

Was she there for the recording sessions for *Moments of Arrival*? What was it like hearing her music being recorded for posterity?

"Yes, I was present during the recording sessions. I was sitting next to the sound engineer and the producer. First of all, to hear your music performed by the orchestra: it's an amazing thing. Usually, I get very nervous. It's like watching your own child competing at the Olympics. You want everything to go perfectly. In fact, sometimes it's easier to *play* your own music than to listen how others perform it. With the Prague Radio Symphony and my husband as a conductor, it's easy. I have to say that I felt very comfortable because my music was in good hands!"

I was particularly struck by the very American quality of Roussanova's music, a bit surprising coming from a member of the United Russian Composers Union. What was the attraction of this idiom—it seems to go beyond the American popular music she had mentioned—and how was this accepted by her Russian—and Czech—colleagues?

"They really enjoyed playing music that is different from the regular repertoire. I was always very fond of American classical music with touches of jazz, folk, and popular sounds. That's why some of my favorite composers are also Americans: Gershwin, Copland, and of course, Bernstein. As you know, all three were born of Russian, Lithuanian, or Ukrainian Jewish descent."

In addition to the work for professional and more advanced ensembles, a lot of Roussanova's efforts have been focused on educational music since coming to the U.S. She has written a fair amount of music for younger, less experienced musicians. She sent me number of recordings, and I listened to examples on the Naxos Music Library, as well. I could not help

smiling at the irony that many of *these* works have Russian folk roots. All were very well and imaginatively written, and, in fact, the more advanced pieces would serve ideally as *light music* selections, if professional orchestras played such music anymore. I had to guess that she found this work challenging and rewarding.

“There is nothing more important for the young musician than to like what she/he is playing. If they enjoy the piece they are going to practice it. So you have to write nice non-complicated musical phrases, clear harmonic structure, and still make it interesting. I remember how much I loved the music of Schumann and my all-time favorite, Tchaikovsky. Some of his lines would make me cry, because they were so beautiful.

“Answering your question about Russian folk roots: The editor from Warner Brothers asked me several times to compose some pieces with the ‘distinguished Russian folk music flavor.’ Of course, it was easy for me; it’s in my blood. I just switched to my native musical language. If you will think about the great Russian classical music, what comes to your mind is gorgeous long lines with the depths and the wide range of emotions. I had to be very careful what I was writing, though, since there are certain parameters for the technical ability and ranges when you compose educational music. This, I would say, is the challenging part.

“The most rewarding aspect of this work is to see the happy faces of the young musicians and read their ‘thank you for your music’ letters and emails! It always makes me feel that I did something very important!”

One of my impressions of too much of the music I hear being written for younger ensembles is its rather crass commercialism. Given Roussanova’s views on music as a “sacred process,” does she sometimes feel frustrated by how commercial the music industry—even that word suggests commercialism—can be? How does she teach her students—in an institution that prides itself in producing students ready to write in genres from pop to opera—to balance the inspiration with the more mundane necessities of making a living in music?

“I think I mentioned composing as a sacred process, but I guess teaching composition can be described the same way, too. Yes, don’t let me start (laughing). You see, everything now is so commercialized. The majority of listeners don’t want to imagine anything anymore on their own. You have to provide the visual entertainment all the time. I guess the best way to appreciate the music is to listen to it with closed eyes, so your mind will paint the picture for you. I often think that the majority of great opera singers and instrumentalists from the past would be without the job in our present days, since they don’t have ‘the look.’ Many managers are busier counting centimeters around a soprano’s waist than listening to the quality of the voice. It’s sad, but it’s true.

“I often tell my students that you have to be honest to yourself. Don’t think what people want to hear. You are the one who wants to tell something very important with your music; don’t be afraid to express yourself.”

Are there different challenges to being a composer here in the West than there were when she was in Russia?

“It’s challenging to be a composer in any country,” she replied with what I imagined was a sigh. “It doesn’t matter where you are.”



*Moments of Arrival* has a program that is briefly outlined in the notes, and I have already suggested it as something of a metaphor for the composer's life. Given some of the references, though, to rain, and lakes, and final destinations, I had to wonder if there was a particular set of events, say a particular trip, which inspired the piece.

"It would be better to describe it as my reflections on traveling to several European countries. The first movement ["Moving Forward"] has a mix of many different memories, more like collage. There is excitement from seeing different landscapes while traveling by train, car, or a small plane which flies closer to the land. I even had a picture in my mind, at the beginning of the movement, with the sound of the single rain drops falling down. That's how my journey starts.

"The second movement ["Reflection"] brings us to a beautiful lake in Switzerland. It was an absolutely magical moment during one of my trips to that gorgeous country. Besides the beauty of that lake with the willow trees, rose gardens, and the reflection of the moon on the water, it also helped me to think and reflect on my own life. It was that special moment when you feel so close to nature.

"I have to tell you a little secret. I started composing the second movement before my trip and it was almost finished. The music which I wrote was about something completely different. In fact, I spent at least a month on composing it. And then, after my Swiss trip, I realized I had to write a different second movement. My inspiration was so strong it took me only a few nights to put it down on a paper.

"The third movement ["The Moment of Arrival"], like the first, also had multiple places. There is a different type of excitement here. You have already learned something new about yourself and the world. You changed. And you are ready to arrive."

The work really is very charming, and has a wonderful unself-conscious glow to it that is most affecting. Typically composers are not that enthused about talking about the technique involved in their works, but I was particularly interested, since Roussanova offered, as there is a tendency for people to assume that programmatic works are not as rigorously structured as so-called absolute works are. I imagined that she would not agree with that. But did she find music with a program easier to write, or absolute music that does not depend upon an external image or story to carry it? And would she care to discuss how *Moments of Arrival* has been written: how she starts—an image, a melody, a particular interval or rhythm—and how she suggests the program through the way the music develops.

"Sometimes I start from a short melodic line or harmonic progression, but usually when I am at the piano I get 'the whole package' at the same time: image in my head, harmonized melodic idea with the instrumentation in mind, which obviously already includes rhythmic pattern and a counter melody, if needed. Then I start developing my material, compose some new ideas, connect them and, of course, I always think about the form of the piece. That's how *Moments of Arrival* has been written.

"Regarding the program: Yes, it guides you and gives a direction for the composition. Without it you must come up with your own plan, but that doesn't mean your composition process is going to slow down. For me, it's actually easier to write without the program."

Roussanova's music, at least that which I have heard, tends to be tonal and, if I may say, audience friendly. That is not meant as a criticism, just an observation. There are, however, moments in some of her work—the Bartókian *Goya's Caprichos*, for instance—that suggest real skill in writing grittier music, as well. Has she ever been moved to write anything more avant-garde; more thorny and cutting-edge? What does she think of such modernity?

“I have pieces which I wrote using different contemporary techniques: atonality, serialism, aleatory, minimalistic methods; as you described, more “thorny” music. At that point, I felt that I wanted to write this way. I had a song cycle, a trio, a clarinet solo, and a couple of piano pieces; all of them had dramatic program notes and using a different approach than the tonal made perfect sense.

“Also, what do we call *avant-garde* now, since some of the really edgy pieces had been written at least one hundred years ago? I believe if composition has no connection between different materials—no feel of direction and lack of development—then it doesn't matter in what style it's written. It's sad to hear when a good, interesting musical idea didn't go anywhere.”

Amen to that observation!

“And, finally, it's up to an artist how she/he wants to be heard at a certain time or point of her/his career. Think about evolution of styles in music of Stravinsky. Same with painters: Kandinsky, Picasso...

“Going back to the style of *Moments of Arrival*: I wanted to work with the particular musical ideas I had in my mind. That called for certain rhythm and time signature changes, harmonic implication, counterpoint, and orchestration. Yes, it's tonal, but you still have to put a lot into it to paint a musical picture.

“I will tell you one short story. I brought my doctor friend, a neurosurgeon, to one of the new music concerts. There were six or seven composers on that program. I have to say that he knows classical music repertoire very well and also plays piano. So, after the event was over, I asked him how he liked the concert, and he said, ‘sounded like all those pieces were written by the same person, who was just in love with the intonation of a minor ninth and composes only slow music with occasional *hit* and *bang*.’ That's why *audience friendly* music can be a good thing.”

I hear cheering from the ranks of some of my colleagues. Meanwhile, Roussanova and I were out of time. One more pair of questions: Are there any recordings in the works? And are there others of her pieces that she would particularly like to see recorded?

“Yes, of course!” she enthused. “At this moment I'm working on some songs and hope to have them done by the beginning of the next year. There are a couple of commissions, one for a great opera singer. Fingers crossed; I would love to have them recorded with the orchestra.”

I rather imagine that we will be hearing that and much more from Elena Roussanova, in due time. With her talent and determination, I am sure that she will *just do it*.

**Interview by RONALD E. GRAMES**

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