finalists meeting with the press, jury presidents discussing the variable level of soloists in any given year, etc.

The quality of the visuals and audio is quite good, especially given the age of the original materials, which for the most part date as far back as the mid 1960s. By that time, some rehearsals as well as the semifinals and finals were being recorded for subsequent airing over television, and in 1972 live broadcasting of the events began.

The documentary narrative is effective, at times surprisingly so, with strong imagery supplementing the visual mood at key points. One panoramic scene of Brussels, for instance, includes the voiceover, "In this middle-of-the-road country, paving stones are rarely dug up." It's a small touch, but indicative of the detail lavished on this production.

The commemorative documentary on DVD will be of interest to Queen Elisabeth Competition fans such as me, and to music-lovers in general who are curious about life behind-the-scenes at a major musical competition. But the set of 12 CDs representing Queen Elisabeth Competition laureates in live, complete performances should reach a larger audience. There's fine music-making at all times, and some individual gems that would grace any personal collection. Both the CDs and the DVD are available through Qualiton Imports; and both are highly recommended.

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# Pianist John Robilette: Maybe an Idealist, But Not Naive

**BY RAYMOND TUTTLE**

John Robilette is an American concert pianist who lives in a house much like the other houses in a leafy suburban neighborhood in northern Virginia, not far from Washington, DC. For some reason, I found this a little funny, but Robilette was nonplussed, and said,"Well, where am I supposed to live?" In an average year, he gives more than a dozen recitals, and he has played in the United States, Europe, and Latin America. Last year, he gave 17 recitals, culminating in his Wigmore Hall debut in London (to be released on a Musicians Showcase Recordings CD). In the summer of 1999, he recorded concertos by Saint-Saëns (the Second) and Beethoven (the Fourth) in Bulgaria with the New Symphony Orchestra of Sofia (Musicians Showcase Recordings MS1031). What's the connection between those two composers? Actually, Saint-Saëns composed first- and third-movement cadenzas for Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, and Robilette's CD contains both Saint-Saëns's and Beethoven's cadenzas for the listener to program in at will.

Robilette first studied the piano in his small rural hometown in southern Wisconsin. A memorable piece of advice that his first teacher gave him was that *forte* playing "should be like an elephant wrapped in velvet." But she actively discouraged him from a musical career, claiming that the life of

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a musician was too difficult. Nevertheless, by the time he was 16 Robilette knew that it was the life for him, and he planned to attend a music conservatory. His parents, preferring that he be "well-rounded" instead, persuaded him to go to liberal arts college in Iowa, where, oddly enough, a pupil of Alfred Cortot taught piano. This gentleman, whose name was Julian Bern, was an encouraging mentor, and also a teacher with some strong opinions. When he thought it was time for Robilette move on, Bern was eager that his talented pupil not study in New York with an American teacher.

"In the 1960s," Robilette recalls, "one could still talk about 'schools' of piano-playing—an emerging American school, a French school, a Russian school, and so on." Cortot had died in 1962, though, and Bern, reflecting upon his own experience, recommended one of Cortot's assistants, of whom there were many at the time. And so, after a brief and somewhat unsatisfying stint studying with Paul Badura-Skoda at the University of Wisconsin, Robilette went to play for a woman with the grand name of Mme. Bascourret de Gueraldi. He remained there for two years.

"She didn't speak any English, and I didn't speak any French," Robilette remembers. "That was quite an experience for a 22-year-old who'd never been out of the Midwest." Eventually, he became proficient in French, but he tells a wonderful story about his audition for La Bascourret. A British woman who was a fluent Francophone took pity on him and was his "Samaritan" on that first day. "She took me to lunch at the Pam-Pam, and then we went to Mme. Bascourret's studio, where a Pleyel piano and the great woman herself were waiting. She was a cripple, her face was covered in pancake makeup, and she insisted that one kiss her on both cheeks in the European style. Dust from her makeup filled the air. The walls were decorated with autographed photos of Fauré, Saint-Saëns, and Debussy, with whom she had been personally acquainted. Perhaps Mme. Bascourret didn't think I was as naive as I actually was; after the audition was over, my friend took me back to her flat to cook me dinner. 'That's a very ruthless woman,' she said. I answered, "Really? She looked just like a grandmother to me.' 'No, she assumed that I was your lover, and that I was paying for your lessons.' So I was introduced to the French aesthetic very quickly!

"She didn't care much for my playing. At the time, the French had a way of teaching in which everything was codified and choreographed; musical notation was translated into physical gestures. Musically, I got choked off, because my ear became divorced from what I was doing technically. I wasn't looking at the printed score and hearing music, I was seeing gestures. There was a dichotomy. I knew something was wrong. I used to look forward to playing in student concerts because they were tape-recorded. Those were the only times when I knew what my playing sounded like!" After two years with Mme. Bascourret, Robilette was offered a scholarship to return for a third, but he chose not to.

Robilette next went to Los Angeles, where he studied with Aube Tzerko. "That was an altogether different story. Whereas Mme. Bascourret solved musical problems from the instrument, Tzerko solved them from all the elements of the music itself. He was very analytical. He would have been a great conductor." He also studied with Louis Kentner. "I liked him a lot, and he liked my playing very much. He was practical. He played everywhere, and he knew all the halls and what

music worked in them and what didn't. He had a huge repertoire, and he knew all the music without even looking at the score. Kentner had it memorized, and he was extremely perceptive. Even with his back to me, and in a big chair that was more than 20 feet away from the piano, he would suggest alternate fingerings. He corrected lapses in taste, but he didn't try to impose any school of thought on me. I was already 28 at the time, and kind of a late bloomer, so it was a much easier experience for me than my two years with Mme. Bascourret. Shortly before her death I went back and played for her, and she liked it very much, which I thought was ironic. And then I studied with Peter Feuchtwanger in London. That was interesting too, because he reveres the old-timers and he teaches in their style. I don't know of any teachers who are quite like that today."

Robilette is hesitant to classify his style. "I think as we become older we come closer to who we really are. When I was younger I certainly was steeped in the older French style of playing. Tzerko's background was in the German school, and he had an influence on me too. I suppose I am a combination of the two." Reading Robilette's publicity material, one finds Cortot's name again and again, and Cortot's books and recordings are prominent in his practice room. What does Cortot mean to him? "His interpretations satisfy me artistically, emotionally, and creatively. His influence surrounded me all my life. When I was an undergraduate, a friend and I used to go to the basement of the music building. There was a treasure trove of 78s down there, and we'd listen to this mysterious, eccentric figure named Cortot, and we'd wrinkle our noses and wonder what the big deal was, because he played so many wrong notes. In those days I thought a great reading meant craftsmanship; Horowitz and Rubinstein were the icons then. Mme. Bascourret talked about Cortot as if he were a god, and put him on the same level as Chopin. It seems morbid to us, but the French have a cult of the dead. All the elderly ladies who worked at the institute where Mme. Bascourret taught spoke of Cortot in the same way. They kept his office exactly as it was, as a sort of shrine. It was all there: the inkblotter, the autographed picture of the Queen of Romania, the cobwebs, everything. They'd show you the marks on the wall that his piano had left. I still didn't know much about him at that point, but I realized that other people thought he was God's gift. The seed was planted, though, and, as I got older, I gravitated more and more toward the idea of re-creating music—bringing the music to life and tapping into the unconscious memory and emotional experiences of the listener—rather than simply playing the notes. Cortot, along with many of the great pianists of that era, was a great exponent of that concept."

Robilette is devoted to what is sometimes called the "Golden Age" of piano-playing, and, generally speaking, he finds the greatest satisfaction in listening to the recordings of pianists from that era. Whether he is a throwback to that era, as some have claimed, is not, however, something he is eager to endorse. "I don't like to label people," he says. "I think we're all mysteries, and we needn't confine ourselves to any pigeonhole. I am what I am to whoever is listening at that moment." He admits, however, that some of the aesthetics of such pianism have filtered into his bloodstream, "as if through osmosis."

In the 1980s Robilette created a classical music–based intercultural program for the Reagan administration. The program, which Robilette directed, spread as far as 63 countries around the world, and in Latin America in particular. "Before the advent of the summer music-festivals, many great musicians, such as Artur Rubinstein, would go to South America during the summer—which was their winter—to continue making a living. Once, a friend of mine in Brazil, who was just a teenager in the mid 1940s, was taken to a Saturday-afternoon house party by his mother—she wanted him to learn about Debussy and his music. He got to that house, and there was Walter Gieseking! That stopped after World War II, but the tradition remains. As the program's director, I also went there and played. I was treated very well, not just because I was a musician but because I had arranged for so many musicians to come there to perform and to give master classes. I've been back several times, particularly to Brazil."

Currently, Robilette also teaches piano at Catholic University in Washington, DC. He has written a book about his experiences in the Reagan administration. "I started writing it for my own pleasure, but then I showed it to friends and they encouraged me. It just grew. Even though it's mostly true, most of it is so incredible that it is being marketed by my literary agent as a satire! Can

you imagine me, an artist, someone who has never had any experience in government, being placed in this ruthless atmosphere, with these suits, in an executive agency that reports to the White House? You'd walk down the corridor and someone would slap you on the back with a meat cleaver. Can you picture me playing this power game, when all I'd ever played was this big black box? It was quite something. I had to learn very quickly to survive. It all came about because I had given someone piano lessons when I was a student in California. He never forgot it. He was a close of ally of President Reagan, and when he came to Washington with the president he called me to start up this program (I think he wanted more piano lessons!). He said I had carte blanche, and I thought, 'Well, here's a wonderful opportunity,' so I thought I would do what I could to help my profession. There are so many extremely talented musicians who can't get through the front door in New York City. Because they were anxious for the chance to prove themselves, they'd be willing to make sacrifices, and they would be great ambassadors. This was my innocent idea, an 'everybody wins' kind of situation. However, because I was brought in by this politico, my friends and enemies were made for me before I even walked in the door."

I asked Robilette for a particularly amusing story from those years. "One day, I got a telephone call from someone whom I liked and also admired because of her loyalty. She was a strong, tough-minded woman. She used to vet all the president's political appointees. A critical word about her employers never left her lips, even though her immediate boss was a real character, with everything from a hair-weave to a hair-trigger temper, and she found her loyalty to him tested from one moment to the next. Well, that day when she called, she was crying, which was completely out of character for her. I rushed upstairs to see what was wrong. With a handkerchief in her other hand, she gestured towards the door of her boss's office. 'Do you see the small child out there in the secretarial pool?,' she asked me. 'That's the eight-year-old nephew of one of the secretaries, and he's been there every day for three weeks. His aunt taught him how to work the copy machine, and he's been doing errands. Recently, he's been answering the phones, and today the White House called! I told my boss what was going on, and he said, "I've been watching that kid, and I want him out of here by close of business. He hasn't accomplished a damn thing!"'

"As I understand it, no musical ambassadorship is going on in the federal government today, and that's a great shame. The arts are a wonderful way to pursue diplomacy overseas and to highlight the best aspects of the United States. Our government isn't like many European governments, where there is a cabinet-level minister of the arts. What I did in the 1980s was really an aberration; I just snuck in the back door. A lot of bureaucrats were shocked at the success of the program, and then they got on the bandwagon, but I could never understand why there was such opposition to it in the first place. There's just no tradition in our government to do such things. There also has to be a demand from the American people for such federal support, and unfortunately the popular culture that we are living in today puts that kind of beauty in the back seat. There's no demand for it. That's why some people are very worried about the future of classical music." Does Robilette share their worry? "Of course I do, but I'm fatalistic about it. I just pursue my vocation. I have no choice but to keep forging ahead with my blinders on. I can't control the world around me, but I can maintain my own truths and hope that I am able to make a difference, in some way."

I asked Robilette about what he hoped to accomplish in his career. "There's so much literature that I haven't played yet. I've played maybe 10 of Beethoven's sonatas, and there are 32 of them. I've never played either of the Chopin concertos. There are many places I've never played in. I don't think I need to place any grandiose life challenges upon myself—these challenges are enough!"

What is he like as a teacher? "I try to bring the student up to the level of the music, whatever it is that he or she is playing. I don't do it the other way around. I don't make that many compromises. I try to make the student realize the almost limitless freedom that is inherent in the score, and also in the student himself." Both as a teacher and as a performer, he is equally satisfied by solving the technical and the interpretive challenges set by the musical score. "As someone once said, musical understanding without technique makes you an amateur. Technique without understanding makes you a machine. In Paris, I heard a girl playing the warm-up exercises that she had been assigned by Mme. Bascourret. She played double thirds, she played scales in sixths, contrary motion, and so

forth, and it was *dazzling*. I felt rather intimidated by what I was hearing, and thought that there was no way I could play as well as she did. But then, when she sat down to play the piece itself, she had all kinds of technical problems with it because she couldn't relate all those exercises to what the composer was asking of her. Ideally, one should be able to produce the sounds that one hears in one's imagination. There has to be a blend of technique and musical understanding. The technique is a crucible through which you express an artistic ideal. I've seen techniques that were beautiful as an end in themselves, but that isn't what makes a lasting impression. What really matters is the music that you make. There are pianists with very ugly techniques—I can think of one in particular who is deliriously popular!—who can achieve tremendous results in their own way."

What *is* popular with recital audiences today? "That really goes to the heart of it, doesn't it? That goes to why the recital is dying, in my view, and to the heart of the culture. There are two ways to look at music, and I'll tell you two contrasting stories that will give it away. The first is about William Masselos, who told me that he lost the Naumberg competition because he began the opening cadenza of Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto by playing the low E♭ with his right thumb. Rudolf Serkin was on the jury, and he disqualified Masselos for this. Later, he felt bad, and he took Masselos out to dinner where he told him that he must never, ever do anything like that again; all music was to played exactly as written and no other way. The second story is about Harold Bauer, who, in his autobiography, recounts the experience of turning pages for Paderewski during rehearsals for a chamber-music concert. Paderewski and the cellist got into a bit of a dispute over the score. The cellist complained that the score indicated crescendo, yet Paderewski was making a diminuendo. The pianist answered that what was written in the score was not as important as the *effect* that was produced. An attitude like Paderewski's is anathema today. We hear his recordings, and we're embarrassed! Culture is the water that we swim in, and it shapes everything, including our hearing. We live in a time of literalism; the score is approached like a legal brief. That attitude is everywhere—in conservatories, in competitions, and in record producers. When you layer the musicological aspect over such an attitude, the ante is raised even higher. Musicologists try to figure out the thought processes of the composer, based on the times in which he lived, the letters that he wrote, any eccentricities in notation, and so on. The only problem with that is that you can't really know how those composers thought, because they're dead!

"Take Bach and today's 'Bach specialists.' We're 250 years away from Bach, and yet we feel we're closer to him than any other generation. Schumann came along just a century later, and he wrote very Romantic accompaniments to some of Bach's unaccompanied violin works. That was his understanding of Bach's counterpoint. We don't know how Bach would have played his works on a modern piano. All we have is what's handed down to us through the generations, and it's been filtered through our own culture and taste. I played a Mozart sonata for Aube Tzerko at one time, and, after I was done, I asked him if my playing was stylistically correct. He answered, 'Who knows?' Tzerko could be abusive, but he also had musical integrity, and I think the answer he gave me was the correct one.

"You need to realize that the ideal of the music is not in the notes themselves. The notes are just the skeletal outline, and the performer has to put flesh on those bones, or, to use another analogy, he has to read between the lines. The music is above the dots, and behind the dots, and underneath the dots. It is not simply the dots themselves. Although it's not a popular point of view, I think that the failure to realize this is why recital attendance is down. People are bored. Interpretations have become standardized and homogenized. It's a pity. On a good day, pianists like Cortot and Edwin Fischer could really move you. And they did have good days and bad days. Today, no one is allowed to have a bad day, so there's no risk-taking. Louis Kentner told me, 'Don't enter a big competition, because you could win the last round, but you couldn't get past the first round.' It's a risk to be human, to allow whatever's in you to take over as you play—far riskier than practicing the same piece a thousand times and then playing it another thousand times. If you go out onstage, you're in what a Buddhist might call 'the eternal now': You could be depressed, or have a cold, or whatever, but that's the exciting aspect of being a performer. I should think that this would keep people on the edge of their seats. Audience members should be taut with the suspense of waiting to hear how the

performer is going to filter those printed patterns of notes through his emotions at that particular moment in the lexicon of time and eternity. That's a thrill you can't get from CDs, and you rarely get it from recitals now, because pianists try to make their recitals sound just like their CDs.

"Recently, I read a review of Cortot's recording of the Schumann Piano Concerto in your magazine. The reviewer wrote that it wasn't a great reading, and he went on in the next sentence to say, 'In fact it is downright sloppy.' That was revealing. To that reviewer, a great reading is craftsmanship, which really should be a given. It's a cliché to say that Cortot had a bad technique. He didn't; he had enormous virtuosity. Hitting wrong notes doesn't mean that there's something wrong with your technique. What this reviewer doesn't understand is that musicians like Cortot had a sense of poetic virtuosity that was coupled to a flight of imagination. At any moment, it could take off. Sometimes it would work, and sometimes it didn't. When it worked, it made people feel something. When it didn't . . . well, in those days, once you had a career and a big name, you could play like a pig and you'd still get a standing ovation because you might play beautifully the next time. Those days are gone."

Robilette is dismayed by American musical education. "Parents aren't encouraging their kids to study music anymore. When kids do study music, they go to only the best schools, because competition is so fierce. Enrollment is down everywhere else, and, in these other schools, musical education has become an economic proposition. When I started teaching I was told that I was too hard on the kids. 'It's our job to keep them happy,' I was told. 'Put their thumbs on middle C and red flag them.' Can you imagine anything more crass or artistically corrupt than that? And yet that's de rigueur. Now the expectation is that the music has to be brought down to their level, not vice-versa. That's not the way that I was trained. Even with a student who has no great aptitude for the instrument, small triumphs can be achieved unless the student is completely devoid of talent. There's no value in simply playing the notes, no matter what level you're at."

With his pianism Robilette seeks to "uplift people and give them pleasure, to help raise people a little bit above the mundane level of human existence." Perhaps, given the realities of today's culture, that goal becomes harder and harder to realize, but Robilette isn't someone who easily lets other people set his expectations for life and art. Just as he believes that there's more to music than the dots on the paper, he seems to believe that there is more to life than the days on the calendar.

In addition to the Musicians Showcase Recordings already mentioned, Robilette can be heard in a recital of music by Franck, Fauré, Poulenc, and Chopin (Pro Arte/Fanfare CDS 3491) and in music by Robert Schumann—the Piano Concerto and *Carnaval* (Pro Arte/Fanfare CDS 3464).

# Leonardo Leo: A Forgotten Baroque Master Reclaims Center Stage

**BY BARRY BRENESAL**

> *Now, thought I, now's the time: so turning to Antonia, I remarked, "Antonia knows nothing of such singing as that, I believe." At the same time, I struck up one of old Leonardo Leo's beautiful, soul-stirring lied. Then Antonia's cheeks glowed.*
>
> E. T. A. Hoffmann, *The Cremona Violin*

Music in the Renaissance Italian states was a cultural expression of joy and grief, but at the courts it was also a calculated political gesture with far-reaching consequences. Money was poured out of aristocratic coffers to train local composers and musicians. Diplomats in the pay of a sovereign power (or several) would covertly attempt to buy the services of renowned singers working for other courts. The amount of gold and silver coin that changed hands in the pursuit of great sacred and secular music-making was quite staggering by contemporary standards—not unlike the ownership of popular modern sports clubs by corporations. The works and performances that