

## Music at the Meetinghouse: A conversation with pianist Lura Johnson

By Mike Telin



“Choosing a recital program can be so selfish,” pianist Lura Johnson quipped during a recent telephone conversation. “Of course you want to play pieces that you love but you also need to find a way to present them from a point of view is useful and relevant to the audience.” This weekend [Lura Johnson](#) returns to her hometown of Oberlin for a performance on the Music at the Meetinghouse (First Church) series on Sunday, May 17 at 4:00 pm. Johnson’s program, titled “Opus One: Something to Prove,” will feature the first published works of Alexander Zemlinsky, Alban Berg, Sergei Prokofiev, Dmitri Shostakovich and Johannes Brahms.

Johnson, a Steinway Artist and principal pianist of the Delaware Symphony as well as the pianist of choice for the Baltimore Symphony since 2007, said that when selecting the works for her program she looked for pieces that were well-written, and didn’t have any serious weaknesses even though they might lack some maturity. “There aren’t as many opus 1’s as you might think,” Johnson said, adding, “and a lot of times an opus 1 is not a great piece because the composer was so young and their skills were still undeveloped when it was written. For example, Liszt’s opus 1 is a set of etudes and they’re nowhere near as good as his later works. I’m excited about this project and I think that ‘Something to Prove’ is an interesting concept that has a variety of pieces available — great music that also offers some intellectual things to think about.”

Sunday’s program will begin with Alexander Zemlinsky’s eleven-movement *Ländliche Tänze*, Op. 1, which was published when the composer was 21 years old. “Zemlinsky takes these pieces to interesting places with incredible color and surprising harmonic and metrical changes that really reflect a great sense of flexibility for such a young composer. They’re just yummy,” Johnson said with a laugh. “They’re so Viennese. Some are just

lovely bon-bons yet others push the envelope a little bit. It's a nice way to open the program."

Alban Berg's *Sonata in B Minor*, Op. 1 was published when the composer was 25. "I love this piece. It's so fragmented and dissonant in the most beautiful way. Berg envisioned it as a four-movement sonata, but he told his teacher, Arnold Schoenberg, that he had completed the first movement but was having difficulties completing the others. Schoenberg looked at him and said, 'I think you're done,' so it became a one-movement work. I won't take the exposition repeat — I think it works better as kind of a hallucinatory dream sequence rather than trying to stuff it into the sonata form box. And it holds its shape much better."

Like the Berg, Sergei Prokofiev's *Sonata No. 1 in F Minor*, Op. 1 is also a single-movement work. Johnson thinks it does suffer from being somewhat monothematic. "I do love this piece, too. It's like a tornado that seizes you straight out of the box. It's incredibly rhapsodic and romantic, though he does get a little stuck using the same material. But even with this compositional flaw, it's fascinating to see how much Prokofiev matured over short period of time. He was eighteen when he composed opus 1, and three years later he completed his first piano concerto, opus 10. I think the first concerto is already a lot more complete — you can tell he had a few more lessons. It's very well-organized and has lots of contrast, but there's still that young passionate quality."

How does Johnson describe the difference between Dmitri Shostakovich's *Three Fantastic Dances*, Op. 1 versus his later works? "It's like night and day," she answered quickly. "The Dances are so evocative and imaginative. I think his later works had become intentionally suppressed in order to hide from Stalin — he had to find a way to mute and temper his musical personality. These pieces are like a fresh breeze, they're light and colorful and full of spontaneity and charm. There's none of the beaten-down, frightened Shostakovich that we know from his later works."

Like the Prokofiev, Johannes Brahms's *Sonata No. 1 in C Major*, Op. 1 was not his first contribution to the solo piano repertoire. It was written after his second sonata but was published first because he thought it to be a better piece. "Brahms was known to be incredibly self-conscious. He was a serious young man who had a driving ambition, but carried the weight of Beethoven on his shoulders. It didn't help that when he went to visit the Schumanns and played his opus 1 sonata for them, Clara later wrote in her dairy that it was as if he was sent from God. And Robert referred to him as the musical Messiah in his journal *Die Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (New Journal for Music). Poor Brahms, he was already self-conscious, and then he gets this mantle delivered to him by the musical king and queen of Europe."

In addition to her symphony orchestra positions, Lura Johnson is a frequent chamber music collaborator. Her recital partners include Baltimore Symphony concertmaster Jonathan Carney, clarinetist Anthony McGill, cellists Ilya Finkelshteyn, Amit Peled and Kenneth Slowik, and flutist Marina Piccinini. She is a founding member of three duos: the Jennings-Johnson Duo with flutist Christina Jennings, Times Two with violinist Netanel Draiblate, and Duo Lalu, a cabaret duo with soprano Lara Bruckmann. She also performs with VERGE Ensemble, a new music group in residence at Washington D.C.'s Corcoran Gallery. Since 2002 Johnson has taught at the Peabody Conservatory, and in 2013 was named Director of Chamber Music at Georgetown University.

“I certainly benefit from a career that has me switching roles constantly, from the back of the orchestra to the front, as well as playing solo recitals and chamber music. I really love the variety that I’ve managed to compile — every week is a totally new project. It’s quite a life. I’m very lucky.”

Johnson said that she has had the benefit of many wonderful teachers, in particular Leon Fleischer. “I studied with him for three happy years and I always look forward to seeing him. He gives master classes at Peabody, and to be in the same room with him and to hear him talk about music is the best shot in the arm that anybody needs. What he says about music resonates so deeply. He is an amazing man and I’m so grateful for what he’s done to bring me to life.”

Born and raised in Oberlin, Johnson didn’t decide that she wanted to be a professional musician until the age of fifteen. “I clearly loved the piano and music, but it was at a chamber music camp in the Berkshires of Massachusetts where I realize that I wanted to do this for the rest of my life.

“Growing up in Oberlin I had the benefit of having great teachers at the conservatory, and a lot of exposure to great music making. I also come from a musical family — everybody played something. It was a wonderful place to grow up. It’s kind of fun to be from there and to do what I do because so many people ask me if I went to the Conservatory, and I say, ‘I went to Oberlin High School.’ But when it came time to go to college, I had spent eighteen years there and I just felt like it was time to go someplace else, so I went to Rice and then to Peabody.”

When she’s not concertizing, Johnson devotes time to another enthusiasm, competitive ballroom dancing. How does she find time? “Well, concerts end at 10:00 pm — I can’t go straight home and go to bed,” she said with a laugh. Johnson discovered ballroom dancing while attending graduate school. “I had tendonitis and was told that because I was practicing so much, my shoulders were being pulled to the front of my body, so I took up ballroom dancing as therapy, and I was bitten by the bug. But I discovered my real passion, which is West Coast Swing, about seven years ago.”

I asked her to explain, which she was happy to do. “West Coast Swing is a relative of all the swing dances. Examples of [East Coast Swing](#) are jive and jitterbug, but [West Coast Swing](#) is an amazing dance because it’s almost completely improvised. There are only about four steps, and then there are variations on those steps. There is a high premium placed on listening to the song and doing something with your body as if you are choreographing as you go. And your partners respond to you, so it’s really like chamber music. And because every new song is with a new partner and basically a brand new dance, you don’t get bored. The swing community here in D.C. is incredibly friendly, so it is a very nice social outlet.”

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