

Elisha Abas: “Nothing but wild eccentricity in the genus of the Scriabin family”
Interview with Elisha Abas by Lina Goncharkaya in “Culbyt”

Pianist Elisha Abas began his life as a *wunderkind*, being called the “gift of the century” and “exclusive for his generation.” At age six he already performed in public; at ten his playing of Chopin astonished the great “Chopinist” Arthur Rubinstein; at eleven he played in Carnegie Hall with Leonard Bernstein; at twelve with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra under Zubin Mehta in a nationally televised performance. “He was a very gifted child,” the distinguished pianist and pedagogue Arie Vardi recalls, “He could open a listener’s heart. This is what was so particular about him.” But after this beginning Elisha unexpectedly abandoned music, became a professional soccer player, and even for some time studied law. His career as a pianist took roughly a twenty-year timeout.

And yet he came back. Because Elisha is not just anyone; and, he is also the great-grandson of Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin, the “mad elf,” as Balmont referred to him, who sought to recreate the Earth with his music.

Balmont wrote about Scriabin, “When he plays, there is ancient sorcery in the air, as if in his works live mysterious creatures who change shape under the influence of the magical sounds.” And one feels something of this in the pianism of his descendant – pianism that possesses refined workmanship. Recently Elisha debuted with the Israel Symphonic Orchestra of Rishon le-Zion, with a unique interpretation of Beethoven’s Third Piano Concerto. In Elisha’s version it was astonishing in the way that an absolutely new story came from the concerto’s same old notes. Romanticized—sensual, one could even say: in the place of dotted rhythms were heartbeats, in the place of the dogmatism of “authentic performance” was a discussion with the composer in his own language. And one could hear in the cadence, composed by the pianist himself, Israeli echoes, which added to its naturalness and existentiality.

As an encore Elisha Abas played Chopin’s Nocturne in C-sharp minor with the most marvelous, breathing *pianissimo*. And it was completely clear how music for him is completely inescapable.

-Elisha, despite the evident musical talent of Scriabin’s descendants, there have not been any well-known pianists before you. But somehow in the fifth generation the genius suddenly woke up. Do you feel a sense of kinship with Alexander Scriabin, with his mysterious ideas and his conjurations of sounds?

-Scriabin is a mystic figure in my life. Perhaps it’s not difficult for me to play his music because I feel it from the inside. After all, he sought to achieve a mindset of spiritual ecstasy, freed from conventions, in pursuit of the pleasures of a sensual world. Insofar as I’ve never limited myself, I came to the idea a long time ago, that spirit prevails over matter. You can’t inhibit your senses; otherwise your playing

loses its naturalness. If you want to discuss musical kinship with him, then I'll say that the pieces of his which I feel closest to me, are his early works, his etudes, the Third Sonata, with its nickname "States of the Soul." These works are my Scriabin repertoire, but considering that next year is the hundredth anniversary of the composer's death, there will be a lot of Scriabin in my programs.

-You descend from Scriabin on your maternal side, dating back to Scriabin's daughter Ariadna. How is it that Ariadna ended up in Israel?

-The Scriabin family, after the sudden death of Alexander Scriabin in 1915, dispersed throughout the world. His daughter Ariadna, my great-grandmother, from his second wife, Tatiana Schloezer [*Translator's note: sister of the critic, musicologist, and translator Boris de Schloezer; the name appears in various ways, including "Schletzer"*], went to Paris. She was unique in her extreme exaltation and relaxedness, which I believe I inherited. Her behavior even shocked cosmopolitan Parisian bohemians. She married three times, and after her marriage to the poet Dovid Knut she converted to Judaism. She was an excellent poet, wrote prose, and also, by the way, played the piano. Her rebellious character led her into the ranks of the Jewish Resistance in France: She participated in militant operations and in assisting Jewish refugees trying to enter Switzerland. In 1944 the police tracked her to an apartment of conspirators in Toulouse and she was shot during an attempt to arrest her.

Her daughter Betty, my grandmother, was born from her first marriage to the French Jew Daniel Lazar, who was a composer and conductor. Betty, together with her mother, also was a member of the French Resistance and after the war participated in the underground organization "Warriors for the Freedom of Israel" ("Lehi"). She served in the American army with the rank of lieutenant second-class, received a Silver Star, and was wounded... She also was eccentric, crazy, like everyone in the family. She coordinated for "Lehi" subversive activities in London, wrote books, went to America, married a Jewish American soldier. They had three children, including my mother Arianne, who was named after her grandmother Ariadna. Later Betty returned to Israel and opened a nightclub-cabaret named "The Last Chance," where Jacques Brel used to perform, and she had a wild lifestyle. At age thirty-eight she left this world early, as her mother and grandmother had done. My mother was left an orphan at the age of fifteen. She moved to a kibbutz, where she met my father. They quickly married, and when she was twenty, I was born. For many years, my mother never spoke about any of this (evidently on account of her childhood trauma), we have no photos of her relatives, and this topic was not touched upon. Only recently did my mother share with us the history of her ancestors. Alas, I've never met any of the Russian branch of the family. Although there was an attempt: not too long ago I played in Saint Petersburg; I wanted to visit the Scriabin museum in Moscow and wrote them beforehand but didn't get an answer.

I know that we have relatives in America, but none of them ever became a professional musician. In Israel, in Rosh Pinna, lived Betty's brother, Eli Magen, the son of Ariandna from her second marriage with the littérateur René Méjean. He served in the navy, played the guitar, and was an illustrator. In Holon his second brother Yossi Knut still lives. He is a poet and, when he was young used to play the violin, but when he was in the army he decided to amuse himself a little—with our familial extravagance, so to say—and played an Israeli version of Russian roulette, but with a gun. Rotten luck had it that he shot himself in the head, leaving himself an invalid without movement of his arms and legs. So the violin is obviously now out of the question.

My brothers are very talented as well, but none of them wanted to dedicate himself to music. My middle brother started to play the piano only at twenty. My twelve-year-old son can sing by heart everything that I play; he used to play the violin but stopped.

-Evidently, though, a firm authority figure was needed, like your father, the children's author Shlomo Abas, who at times forced you to practice...

-Yes, I began to play thanks to my father – and it was he in particular who found for me my teacher Pnina Salzman. She lived in Tel Aviv, and to study with her we even moved from Jerusalem to Hod ha-Sharon. And when I decided to quit music a decade or so later, my father recited me a parable about a king who left his kingdom. Years later he decided to return, to pick some flowers, only to find out that he was not allowed to pick even one flower. The moral of the story is obvious: You can leave music, but you can never come back to it.

-And was he wrong?

-Yes, he was wrong, fortunately. I've played soccer, read philosophy, practiced yoga, and studied law—somehow I even worked a week in a law office. After nodding off at the computer I understood that this was not for me. Something was always missing for me, some kind of heartbeat. I couldn't express myself, and felt myself muted. Well, my return to music happened, as is often the case, by the greatest of chances. I had a car with a CD player, in which I constantly listened to "Pink Floyd," "The Beatles," and Eric Clapton. One day my car was stolen and the insurance company gave me a loaner. This car had a tape player rather than a CD player. Since I spent a lot of time in the car, I looked at home for a cassette tape and found one with Brahms's Second Piano Concerto played by Wilhelm Backhaus. For three weeks I listened to that recording and realized how much I still loved classical music. After that, I began to go to philharmonic concerts almost every night. One time after coming out of a concert around 11:30 at night, I called the directory to find out Pnina Salzman's number and telephoned her. I told her it was Elisha Abas and that I wanted to meet with her. She didn't quite believe it, but nevertheless said to come

over right now. I went and we sat and talked, laughing, as if all those years had not passed. Then I went to her master-class in Tel Hai, and one of the students there, a seventeen-year-old girl, confessed to me that she was a fan of mine. "Of my soccer-playing?" I asked. "No," she said, "at Pnina's house I heard recordings of you." That young lady made me remember who I really am. (Later, by the way, she married my little brother.) After this I called Pnina again and said that I wanted to play again, that I wanted to return to my kingdom, where I was the king. She remarked that in history there had never been such cases of returning to music at age thirty and becoming a professional pianist. But she added, "Well, let's try."

-However, making a career at such an age, even if one is a genius, is rather difficult.

-My father says, "A career is one thing, and success is another." Success is what you are capable of making. A career means how much money you make, how many concerts you have per year, how many recordings you put out. I'm not interested in a career, in how many concerts I have. I can perform in a small hall for a few dozen people, because it's interesting for me. On the other hand, I don't take proposals that don't inspire me because they are not interesting for me. So, in April I'm going to perform in Australia and New Zealand because I've never been there and so, it will be interesting for me. You know, if I didn't have children, I'd become an angel flying around the world from place to place.

-And how is this consistent with your having played soccer for so many years?

-I always played sports, from when I was six years old. My father said, "If you play the piano, I will let you play soccer." I'm really a *small-town boy*. Boys from my environment didn't understand what exactly was a "concert pianist;" in our town it was not a norm. The duty to be a *wunderkind*, performing for masses of people in different countries, was stressful for me. Some people enjoy it, but in those years I didn't want to play *solo*, but rather "to play on a team." When I was nine, my school friends signed up for the "Apoel Raanana" club, and I did too. At the same time I continued with the piano. At eleven I played in Carnegie Hall. But at fourteen I quit music and began to dedicate myself to soccer professionally. Incidentally, I was a good player, I played on all Israeli teams, and got into the top league. It seemed good to me to be on a team, where victory is shared, and defeat is too... And what was to come after, you already know. My next concert in Carnegie Hall was twenty years later. Pnina said to me sometime, "You're the best in the world, your father convinced me of this, and finally you start to believe it."

-But getting into shape technically after a twenty-year-long timeout – there are not many who would be capable of it.

-I had a very good first teacher, Ester Medvetzky – I started to study with her in the Jerusalem Conservatory when I was four years old. When I was six, I switched to Pnina Salzman, and from then on no one talked to me about technique. In Paris during the 1930s, for example, it was considered degrading if a critic writing about an artist or musician said he had remarkable technique. I always rely on instinct, and therefore I'm very free in my musicality. You asked me how I was able to get back into shape after a twenty-year break. It is actually thanks to inner freedom. Because the body remembers. You see, the body comes before the hands. The body and the spirit. Also, in my view the piano is the easiest instrument, because it's symmetrical. The violin, the cello, the flute – they all are asymmetrical. If you begin playing them very young, your body grows used to them.

-Here's something interesting: you said "the spirit" and not "the head..."

-The spirit and the head go hand in hand. If we try to be technical in our thoughts, then our brain becomes the supreme commander. After all, we are matter that produces spirit. My uncle Eli from Rosh Pinna said in a way, "Everything is easy and great, until it reaches the hands." It's possible to feel and understand everything until it reaches the hands. You have to speak with your hands as in your native language, since in music the main thing is truth. The notes do not mean anything if life does not breathe in them. A musician should be extroverted, letting his emotions pour out.

Spontaneity and instinct cannot be studied; they can only be felt. I was very lucky that I did not study in any specialized music institutions—my education was limited to private lessons with Pnina—because current musical institutions are factories destroying musicians, but not forming them. The graduates of such institutions, as can be expected, are afraid to express their feelings. But since I never studied in these places, never participated in contests, never played works I didn't like, I stayed true to the feelings and to the freedom of saying what I want.

-So you do not consider the idea of "school" so important?

-I don't know to what school I belong. Pnina studied with Alfred Cortot and was true to his school. And I was lucky that my father was crazy enough to call her when I was six years old. That's all the school I have. And then there's Horowitz: his school is the school of God.

I love people for whom music is a serious thing. Music is an action, not a show. When you saw Rachmaninov, you felt immediately that he was serious. And sometimes you see how a musician carries him or herself even before he or she begins to play, and you understand that she or he has nothing serious to put forward.

-Apparently you don't have a high opinion of your contemporaries...

-The problem is that today many pianists play very coldly, controlling themselves. But between such playing and the music there is nothing in common. It's the same as standing before an abstract painting in a museum and contemplating its concept. The average observer does not understand anything in abstract art and the remoteness of this art does not awaken in him or her any emotions. This art is a naked king. If an artist throws onto the canvas a few handfuls of dirt that show the profile of a shark, it's shocking but it's not esthetic. But art, by nature, is esthetic. It's the same in relation to music. Contemporary composers create music "setting up a principle where capacity lacks," as Nietzsche would say. It's not possible to sing this music, because everything comes from the intellect. But music should flow through the whole body. It's true, though, that lately something is coming back: more composers are writing beautiful music, with harmony and melody. So, there is light at the end of the tunnel, insofar as music cannot exist apart from human nature. And human nature wants to see and hear beauty. And as long as humankind exists, it will always have its Icaruses, who fly to the sun and encourage their comrades to set themselves free. As Pnina said, "Who finds his own sound? He who knows that this sound exists somewhere deep within him."

-To what extent do such senses depend on the artist's teacher?

-The teacher should be truly brave and put the student on the right path, giving the student the capability to express him or herself in music and express his or her instincts and emotions. I was fortunate in that my teacher, Pnina Salzman, showed me how to find my way...how not to destroy one's individuality with various fears, such as the fear of not being understood.

Artists must take risks. They must always walk on a tightrope, feeling the balance between control and freedom. Very few can do this. If the tightrope walker at the circus works with a safety wire, it's not interesting. And without it... then there's art already. And without a safety wire he never falls, because he feels the tension, and his thoughts are in what he is doing. Any performance is a risk. And when you understand that risk doesn't scare you anymore, then success already awaits you.

Once during a session with Pnina in which we were working on Brahms's Second Concerto, I played a part of the first movement very emotionally. Pnina looked at me and wrote on the score "38 degrees." And she explained: "You should play this fragment at this temperature. Not at forty degrees, at thirty-eight." Unfortunately not everyone understands the difference. Especially today. Thus I'm friends with old musicians. My best friend is Ivry Gitlis, ninety-one years old [*TN*: In the original Gitlis's age was wrongly given as 93]. He's also very eccentric, but he plays like God. Non-conventionally. He says that once everyone was great, one here like Everest, another one there like the Himalayas... He recalled how in London he heard Sergei

Rachmaninov—a “good Russian pianist,” as he put it—and, as soon as Rachmaninov came onto the stage, everyone held his breath.

-You know, there's the saying “Those were the days...”

-In the past each performer had his own signature. Each performer's style was recognizable. And nowadays the majority of pianists play alike. By their sound, it is not possible to determine who is playing. And Asian pianists are like sewing machines. But Rachmaninov, Paderewski, Ignaz Friedman – they played even faster in constantly undulating tempos. When Horowitz played Brahms's Second Concerto, it was five minutes shorter, also Tchaikovsky's First. But the pianists of the past played fast because they felt it like that. Today's pianists play fast just to show they can play fast. My father says, “Take a Chinese pianist who plays a Rachmaninov concerto, and propose to him that he spin a plate on his nose at the same time, and he will do it easily.” But consider whether there is really a connection between the circus and music. However, I repeat, the revolution has already begun, and there are now appearing young pianists who play beautifully.

-Do you consider that beauty is the determining factor in interpretation at the piano?

-And what's wrong with playing beautifully? Why should a phrase not be beautiful? Why is it necessary to play *Urtext*? Why does one have to play on a fortepiano or a harpsichord? After all, we have at our disposal an excellent instrument: the grand piano. The notes in the score are like words with whose help it's possible to tell a story. Who determines the style of this or that work? Juilliard? Tel Aviv Music Academy? Musicologists? For me, the heart determines everything. Each person who comes to the concert hall has a heart, if they didn't they'd be buried in the cemetery already. And it's necessary to play embracing the heart and not the intellect.

-However in the last couple of decades there has been a fashion of authenticity, or *historically informed performance*. In other words, the contemporary interpretation's conformance to original, “historical” representations. And now not only early music, but even Beethoven and romantics are implied in this. What is your position on this?

-It seems to me that this is a kind of alibi for performers with blinders on. For it knowingly assumes self-restraint, sometimes quite noticeably. And the return to playing on period instruments produces only an external effect. Playing on an instrument from 1800 is not original. Not external, but rather more internal is instinct once again. In my opinion, all great musicians, writers, and so on, are children more than anything else. And if you're a child, everything comes to you by

instinct. But when you grow up, there appears a set of patterns, of routines, that you try to fit into. And really there are just a few great people who remain true to their underlying childhood instinct. Here is an example: I often play *Kinderszenen* by Schumann, and I approach the work with a child's mindset and a child's spirit. The last two pieces of the work are "Child Falling Asleep" and "The Poet Speaks." In the first of these the child is actually falling asleep; however, he knows that he is falling asleep as a child... for the last time. The next day he will wake up already having grown up. He knows that it will not be easy. He resigns himself to this, but with sadness. Although there is grief, it's not necessarily bad; there is also such a thing as bright sadness... Still, he fights against sleep until the end. But the next morning he is already a poet, already an adult—and it is necessary to play this as an adult, but with cynicism. "What can be done? I'm already a grown-up," he says with sarcasm. This is what I feel.

-However, there is also the point of view that the performer should primarily play the role of the composer, not himself...

-Well, have you ever met Beethoven? Me neither. From where can we know what he had in mind? When a composer conceives a piece, he wants the interpreter to reconceive it. Otherwise, everything would always be played the same. When Horowitz moved to New York, he was introduced to Rachmaninov, who had been told, "Here is a young Russian pianist who often plays your Third Concerto." They met in Steinway Hall, two pianos were there, and Rachmaninov played the orchestra part and Horowitz the solo part. Afterwards Rachmaninov said, "When I wrote this concerto, I didn't know that it was so great." And from then on he never performed it. "Henceforth the Third Concerto belongs to Mr. Horowitz," Rachmaninov said, "He plays it better than I do."

Or, for instance, in music there are dotted quarter notes followed by a rest. When a composer writes this, what does he have in mind? He clearly does not write it so that the performer sits there counting the lengths; rather, he wants the silence after this dotted figure to be a certain magical moment. In the language of music this means: after the quarter note the performer must wait a little, as much as he feels. The same with *rubato*: it should always remain natural. Therefore I am free from stagnation. My *rubato* follows the content of the music itself. By the way, Igumnov said about this, "However much you borrow from the tempo, is however much you must give back to it."

For the last sixty to seventy years in the musical world, control has ruled. Musicians forget that there is also something much more important: expressiveness. But if you take old recordings of Beethoven from the 1920s, you hear a romantic Beethoven, filled with ideas, beauty, and expressivity. By the way, the pianists who played Beethoven in those years were closer to him historically: they were students of those who had been in his milieu. Thus, they were more authentic.

-Are you performing Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto now for the first time?

-Yes, and I was very afraid. I was dying of fear before coming onto the stage. I was afraid of myself, not of the audience, although it's necessary to pass the exam in front of the audience. But at the same time the audience electrifies, it is an opium that you need and without which it is not possible get what you're looking for. There is a joke about what are the two luckiest days in a soloist's life: the day he gets invited to perform and the day the performance is canceled. And so, in the last moments before the concert you think, "if only they would cancel it!" But, on the other hand, you know, after all, performances are what you live for.

I liked the conductor, Ruben Gazarian. He agreed with everything I proposed to him, even though it was risky. I like to rebel: if some conductor doesn't agree with my feeling of the music, then in the rehearsals I play as he wants, but in the concert I always make a "surprise," playing my way.

-It's been written that you compose music, even getting involved in *color music*, thereby paying tribute to your great ancestor...

-I've composed a few pieces, but I can't call myself a composer. I write my own cadences, as in former times when pianists were supposed to play their own cadences; otherwise it was simply a shame. A lot of legends about me have accumulated, such as that one about *color music*, with which I have no relation at all. For example, a friend of mine, who is a student of the Jerusalem Music Academy, said that during a lesson one day at the academy the phenomenon of child prodigies was being discussed. Someone said, "It would be interesting to know how a six-year-old child can play a concerto with orchestra." The lecturer responded, "Well, not everyone is like Elisha Abas, who played Beethoven's *Emperor* Concerto when he was six." But I've never played this concerto in my life!

-And what did you play, being a *wunderkind* as you were, for Arthur Rubinstein?

-I played for him Chopin, Schubert, and Schumann. Here, look, this watch is a gift from him. [*On Elisha's wrist is a gold Rolex with the inscription: "To Elisha. Good luck. Arthur Rubinstein"*] Five months before his death I was at his house in Switzerland; he had invited me to play a whole program in a concert at his home, and so I had a recital there. The next day he invited my father and me again. His companion Annabel gave me a walkman (this is when this thing was really cool – I cherished the idea that I was the first person in Israel with this novelty!) and cassette tapes with recordings of Rubinstein. And he himself presented me with a little box, which I supposed was chocolate, but it turned out to be a watch.

A few months later I was in London, where I was supposed to play with orchestra in honor of Israeli Independence Day, when I heard about Rubinstein's death on the TV. From this news I got sick and canceled. I loved him very much. On the anniversary of his death there was a gala-concert in his honor at Carnegie Hall, and I performed in it with Leonard Bernstein, and also with Isaac Stern. I played Chopin in Rubinstein's memory. And I still wear the watch till this day. After all, a musician should dress accordingly, to express style not just in his or her playing. Look at Beethoven or Chopin...

-Oh, and are you nostalgic for past times?..

-Yes, I'm a young old guy. I was born an old man, even though by mistake everyone considered me a child prodigy, and with the passing years, I'm growing younger. I'm actually following the process backwards, as in a fantastical tale. I'm forty-two years old now and I never before felt more full of life, more wild, more unrestrained, akin to that wild, passionate, and free soul to which Scriabin dedicated his Third Sonata. But when I was thirty, I felt completely drained. It was exactly then that I came back to music... And you know, I'll tell you, what connects music and sports, is performance. For instance, it takes a gymnast two years of preparation for a performance on the beam that lasts forty-five seconds. In these forty-five seconds she must show all she can do. For this it is necessary to possess a huge mental and spiritual strength, and, of course, to be *exceptional*. Like Nadia Comăneci. It's this exceptionality that unites outstanding athletes and real musicians.

(Photographs of the concert: Miri Shamir)