

Sviatoslav Richter: Notebooks and Conversations

By Bruno Monsaingeon

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Sviatoslav Richter was a dazzling performer but an intensely private man. Though world famous and revered by classical music lovers everywhere, he guarded himself and his thoughts as carefully as his talent. Fascinated, author and filmmaker Bruno Monsaingeon tried vainly for years to interview the enigmatic pianist. Richter eventually yielded, granting Monsaingeon hours of taped conversation, unlimited access to his diaries and notebooks, and, ultimately, his friendship. This book is the product of that friendship.

Richter reveals himself as a man and an artist. Unsentimentally and with his characteristic dry humor and intelligence, the musician describes his poignant childhood and spectacular career, including his tumultuous early days at the Moscow Conservatory and his triumphant 1960 tour of the United States. His laconic recounting of playing in the orchestra at Stalin's surreal, interminable state funeral is riveting. Most important for music lovers, Richter discusses his influences and views on musical interpretation. He describes his encounters with other great Russian performers and composers, including Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Oistrakh, and Gilels. Candid sections from his personal journals offer his sober and unguarded impressions of dozens of performances and recordings--both his own and those of other musicians.

This volume offers readers the sizable pleasure of lingering in the thoughts and words of one of the most important pianists of the twentieth century. Unlike many other star performers, Richter was also an intellectual who had interesting things to say, particularly about the musician's proper role as interpreter of the composer's art. This alone makes the book worth reading. Sviatoslav Richter belongs on the shelves of everyone with a classical music collection and will also appeal to lovers of autobiography and admirers of Russian musical culture.

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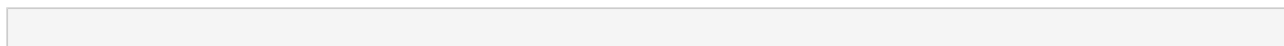
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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

First published in French in 1998, this is a collection of anecdotes and reflections by the Russian-born Richter (1915-97), one of the finest pianists of the 20th century. "The Conversations" section is presented in the first person, although Monsaingeon, a writer and filmmaker based in Paris, actually cobbled it together from hours of taped interviews; this section also contains a previously published essay by Richter on Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev. "The Notebooks" section consists of hundreds of edited passages extracted from Richter's diaries, with the pianist's candid, insightful, and occasionally catty reactions to music and musicians related to performances he played or attended and recordings he heard between 1970 and 1995.

Monsaingeon's editing casts Richter in a favorable light, and skeptical readers may wonder if they are getting a complete picture of the subject. Regardless, this is a fascinating glimpse of the musical world through the eyes of one of its major practitioners. Recommended for public and academic libraries. Timothy J. McGee, Univ. of Toronto

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Monsaingeon's recent documentary about Richter won a large new audience for the late Russian pianist, who is frequently cited as one of the great musicians of the century, and here the filmmaker describes the difficulties of working with his reluctant, introverted subject. He also pieces together from interviews an account of Richter's life, which sheds light on his periods of debilitating depression and on the relentless discipline that enabled him to maintain a repertoire of eighty separate concert programs. What could have seemed a disjointed book is enlivened throughout by Richter's intelligence and his eccentric humor, particularly in the last section, a diary where he has made notes on the music he is listening to. There is praise for Iannis Xenakis and Marlene Dietrich—to whose funeral he sent five hundred roses—and obloquy for Vladimir Horowitz ("Such talent! And such a trivial mind"). Characteristically, his sternest criticisms are reserved for his own recordings: "It's enough for me to listen to them to put me in a bad mood."

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From [Booklist](#)

Sviatoslav Richter (1915-97) grew up in Odessa, Ukraine; at 15 he was playing piano in clubs, and at 19 he was repetiteur for the Odessa Opera. Despite disliking formal schooling, he studied under the pianist Heinrich Neuhaus in Moscow, debuting at the conservatory there in October 1941. He played from the heart and shunned works he didn't understand. In the conversations, diary entries, and notes on recordings and performances collected here, he speaks freely about performing, fellow musicians he likes and dislikes, musical life in the Soviet Union, and his travels. He expresses dissatisfaction with his own recordings because they are frozen in time and inflexible, no longer responsive to his virtuosity. Richter asked Monsaingeon, who made a film about him, to assemble this book. Music lovers should be grateful, for along with his comments on music and musicians, it displays the foibles, opinions, skills, joys, and sorrows of the publicly reticent keyboard titan. Lavishly illustrated with photographs, it should enlighten and delight lovers of the piano and the pianist. *Alan Hirsch*

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Users Review

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