

Q&A Special: Pianist Lucas Debargue

First interview with 'self-taught' Lucas Debargue who captivated the Tchaikovsky piano competition

by [Ismene Brown](#) Saturday, 11 July 2015

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Lucas Debargue at the Tchaikovsky Competition

Last week the 15th International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow was rung down with a sigh of relief for the home team, with once again a Russian pianist in possession of the gold medal, Dmitry Masleev following 2011's Daniil Trifonov. It was all very satisfactory for President Putin as he delivered his speech at the winners' gala, being Tchaikovsky's 175th anniversary year, but it was not a result that many disputed.

The modest Siberian, 27, is a thoughtful pianist as well as a powerful one in traditional Russian manner.

All the same, [Masleev](#) was not the pianist who will be remembered as the story of the 15th Tchaikovsky. That would be an extraordinary Frenchman, Lucas Debargue, aged 24, whose first and second rounds generated a buzz of excitement among listeners in the halls and viewers of the live streams about his fascinating musicality. His playing of Ravel and Mozart was described as miraculous, his absorbing concentration on sound rather than technique contrasted him immediately with the more virtuosic pianists around.

Amid the torrential activity of the competition between superb young musicians in the four categories, piano, violin, cello and voice, there was a clamour to discover more about the Parisian pianist who seemed so fresh and different. For many commentators after the first and second rounds, Debargue was emerging as the star of the 2015 event. By that stage he was talked of as potentially even the winner, if the magic that he had spun in [Mozart's 24th piano concerto](#), Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* and Beethoven's seventh piano sonata could travel into the mandatory big concert of the final and if he could match the technical excellence known in the other Russian finalists. **(Below, Debargue's *Gaspard de la nuit* in Round II)**

“ He told me whatever people think about my technique, I have something like grace ”

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In the final, I heard Debargue play Liszt's piano concerto no 2 and the monumental Tchaikovsky no 1. It was immediately clear that his ideas were different from those of the orchestra, that this was almost an experimental performance. To the consternation of what by now had become a large muster of Debargue devotees, it emerged that he was actually totally inexperienced in playing with a symphony orchestra. The empathy and intuitive originality that he had conjured with a chamber orchestra in his second round Mozart concerto could not be scaled up for grandiose Liszt and Tchaikovsky with the huge Svetlanov State Symphony Orchestra, nor was his inconsistent virtuosity a match for the command of other finalists such as Daniel Kharitonov, a turbo-charged 16-year-old virtuoso, let alone the experienced Masleev.

Debargue was placed last of the six pianists. But interestingly, not in sixth place. The piano jurors made him fourth, and gave joint third and second prizes to the pianists above him. The Moscow critics then gave him a special award for his creative artistry, and announced a recital for him in Moscow in December.

“ *By the final questions were being asked about how such a green talent had got so far in this awesome competition* ”

Obviously this was a superlatively gifted musician, all agreed. Yet by the final many questions were being asked about how such a green talent had got so far as to be accepted as one of the top pianists in this awesome competition. A Moscow interview published before the finals with his teacher (a Russian working in a private music school in Paris) revealed that Debargue was not the usual professionally trained pianist. She had taken him on four years earlier at the Ecole Normale Alfred Cortot ([I've translated the interview](#)), he had had little systematic training previously, and had learned much music by ear, rather than from the score. He had even spent several years not playing the piano at all. She added that Debargue had been a daunting challenge to take on, in his attitude as well as his playing, but she was struck by how well read he was - an intellectual as well as an intuitive musician.

It turned out that he had won a respected French piano competition a year ago but had been seen playing for a living in jazz clubs. That his parents (a technician and a nurse), having divorced when he was young, had never supported his music hopes or paid for lessons. That he was living with grandparents in a tiny place in Paris without a piano. That in defiance of all expectations in Russia of pianists, who generally start serious lessons very young, Debargue had been effectively a gifted amateur until he started professional training at 20.

The concept of the "self-taught" pianist has been much debated in the past few days since I reported on Debargue and the Tchaikovsky competition [at the start of this week](#). After the competition, three Russian jurors on the piano panel, Boris Berezovsky, Denis Matsuev and Dmitry Bashkirov, expressed a special delight in the Frenchman, and their wish that the blind voting system had put him higher in the prizes, though all judges agreed that he was not ready to win. The veteran Bashkirov (father-in-law of Daniel Barenboim) said two years of proper technical coaching was all Debargue needed to become a major pianist.

But since last weekend Valery Gergiev, the organizing chairman of the Tchaikovsky competition and Mariinsky Theatre music chief, has added a Debargue recital to next week's White Nights Festival in St Petersburg [14 July - it is to be [streamed live online](#)] - pressure indeed.

Last week, I managed to sit down with the pianist for an hour in Moscow's Tchaikovsky café last week to ask him about his piano playing, how he learns, the terms by which he describes himself, and why he entered the competition at all.

It was a tense time - three hours later the awards ceremony would be held, and Debargue, a wiry, almost adolescent-seeming figure with glasses, born on 23 October 1990, was on edge, flummoxed by the mobs of cameras, reporters and fans closely tailing him. He had only his teacher there to support him, and stood out from the other players as someone very much



alone (**right, Debargue with teacher Rena Shereshevskaya in Moscow**). He told me that having lived for the past four years for nothing except for the piano, alone apart from his teacher, he was having difficulty handling the siege by a music industry "machine" that had nothing whatever to do with his idea of life in music. He realised he had no platform manner, was disconcerted by the ovations and cameras right up in his face. He spoke emphatically, banging on the table in the café.

I cannot imagine the pressure on someone going onto the Moscow Conservatoire stage - where Van Cliburn won the Tchaikovsky in 1958, where all the legends of Russian music had played - to face the Russian audience. Still more if one had never before played with a symphony orchestra and had to play Tchaikovsky's infinitely famous first piano concerto. And still more, if one had no home base, little family support, not even a piano of one's own. The vulnerability of the situation is terrifying, all the more so for Debargue's sudden fame.

“ *He said his English was good because he read James Joyce's Ulysses* ”

This was also his first interview in English, and journalists at all are a new experience, so he showed a certain nervousness, but there must also be a ferocious will and cool self-discipline to make such a success of the crash-course he effectively set himself three years ago when he decided to enter the Tchaikovsky. His English is surprisingly capable, or perhaps not surprisingly, given his quick ear and memory. He said if his English

appropriate to this time



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was good it was because he had read James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It seemed all of a piece with an auto-didact.

We ordered vodka and I asked for some tonic. DeBargue lounged back in his chair and glanced at me: "Did you know Edgar Allan Poe died from drinking gin and tonic? He had nobody to talk with. Now you hear everywhere that alcohol is bad, cigarettes are bad - but no, the major illness is loneliness."

ISMENE BROWN: Does this all feel rather unreal, all this attention?

LUCAS DEBARGUE: Every day is unreal for me, even in daily life. For me it's always unreal. Not just here - everything is unreal. The only real things are God and love, and the true communication between the man and the thing, the man and the world.

How did you learn to play the piano? Do you have your own way of learning?

Yes, I began alone. I had no one in my family who pushed me or helped me discover so I had to do it on my own. I remember when I heard the first time the second movement of Mozart's 21st concerto. I was 10 years old.

Did you have a radio in the house playing classical?

No, but I found some CDs in a discothèque. It was really by chance.

How did you first actually get to a piano?

Because one of my friends played. This was not the important thing. What is important is that I heard that beautiful music, beautiful is not the word - the second movement of the 21st concerto of Mozart. You can put thousands of books and thousands of years of human history alongside this because there is so much truth, so much deep true love in this music. It showed me something I would like to reach. It spoke to me about nature, it was a huge space. You hear the music of Mozart and suddenly you realise - look how great this is, look around you, how great it all is, and it was absurd to have lived before like inside a nutshell, in a cage. But I could not tell my parents about this because they were focused on real life - they were right in some way - they had to have enough money to feed us. At that time it was just me and my little brother but my parents divorced, and my father rebuilt a family with two more children, so I have three brothers in all.

Above: DeBargue's Round II performance of Mozart's 24th piano concerto, 2nd movement, recorded live by Medici TV

Your younger brother is musical?

Yes, truly talented. He is interested in pop music, he is a genius on the guitar. He is 22.

And you can talk together about music?

Yes.

So when you discovered Mozart did you want to play it?

No, just to live in it. It's the most important thing to me that the sound is not only sound, it is a place to live in. It's about real emotions, real sensations.

Do you remember the performer?

I don't think it was a fantastic player but that's what is incredible about Bach or Mozart, that you can hear it with even amateur or even bad singers - but you are still hearing Bach or Mozart. Music is one of the greatest things and people should be grateful for it, but they are not. They are just thinking about rhythm, boom boom, they are not listening to the sweet sounds of music, people talking softly, the good conversations of the 18th century. When people say, oh, I heard some Mozart, and then they go back home and do their usual work - that was when I understood that I was a musician. Because for me it was impossible to play music or hear it and then just stop, clap.

Why did you enter this competition?

Together with my teacher, Rena Shereshevskaya. She told me three years ago that if I practised well and listened to her advice, I could go to the competition, whatever happened. After the first round she told me, "It doesn't matter when you pass or not, it's really good that you are here to play and I am grateful and proud of you." Because for her the Tchaikovsky competition is something symbolic. And for me too. It became something.

What was that?

“ I spent hours on the net downloading Russian music into my MP3, I learned to read music ”

[Pause] To be part of the family.

You belonged. Yeah.

Because I told my teacher in my first lesson that I had something of the Russian in me. You know, I discovered Bach and Mozart when I was 10, but Russian music was the music of my teenage years, I discovered raw, physical love through music. Prokofiev, Scriabin, Rachmaninov, it was my world. It was like I could understand anything - as if the composers were speaking to me.

How did you discover Russian music?

I was on the net. I spent hours on the net, I tried to download some things and put it into my MP3, I spent so much time on the net, reading the scores.

You taught yourself to read music?

Never teach or learn. I just learned.

Have you learned many pieces just by ear?

Yes, Prokofiev 2nd and 3rd sonatas, Scriabin sonata 4, Rachmaninov second concerto.

Is your playing accurate, having learned by ear?

Not precise. There are some places where there are problems, but the essential thing was there.

How do you do it, by listening to several recordings?

Yes, but... I don't know why, but there are some versions that touched my heart, even if today I can say they are not the best interpretations. For example, when I was a teenager what I preferred for Prokofiev second concerto was Ashkenazy and Rachmaninov 3 it was David Helfgott. But it's really not the best interpretations, but at the time it was feeding me, I don't know why. And for Rachmaninov 1 and Prokofiev 3rd now it's Byron Janis - I think for me the Kirill Kondrashin/Byron Janis versions are simply incredible. He is a genius, one of the greatest pianists.

This is a very unusual way to learn. When you were trying to master piano technique, how did you get the fingers right, scales, arpeggios, the even touch?

“ I had to think up my own way. I cannot say to others that it's good - you need to learn technique as soon as possible ”

OK, that's the point where it is difficult to answer, because I think sincerely and deeply that it's impossible to do anything without a serious technique, without practising octaves and scales. Me, I did this only for about six months, three or four hours each day, scales and arpeggios, three years ago. I would be wrong to say that this is really a way to do it.

This was my way. I had to find some kind of other way. I cannot say to other people that it's good - I have to say to say that it's necessary, you need to learn technique as soon as possible. For me I came very late into professional piano practising, so it was difficult to do, I had to find some other way to do it. My teacher tells me that I have some facility. It's true, I think, that it cannot help me at all when I'm on stage.

What can't help - the technical problem?

There is a kind of sacrifice, that's what I want to say. The more you are safe, the more you are solid, the less you are musical. That's a real problem, a real serious problem. Only a few pianists know the secret how to melt perfect technique to perfect sound and perfect soul. If you listen with attention it's never perfect. Listen to Horowitz or listen to Sofronitzky, they always talked about the perfect technique, but they were never perfect. Sofronitzky is a miracle - we don't need anything else.

So this big Russian piano technique is not for you?

I think it is a caricature when people talk about that. Because Russia opened to the world and it became the Russian way with other elements, it is not the Odessa school. The "Russian way" today is not of Gilels or Sofronitzky, it's the Russian way about how to be the Best. So when they talk about Russian technique, it's only about beasts of the piano. But what I call the Russian technique is how to play with the soul, that's how Gilels, Sofronitzky, Horowitz were playing.

How sure and safe do you feel in your technique? Without a traditional training do you worry it will let you down?

Of course. Of course. It is strange for me to be so far in the competition when I am less solid and experienced than the other contestants, but I am honest, I do my best always.

What are your plans to do about the Olympic that will be next?

What are you going to do about it? Stay in that risk zone?

Impossible. I talked to one of my best friends in France, who is a technical monster. He is unknown but he can play anything as good as the Russians. He worked with Hanon exercises from the age of five to 15, and now he can play whatever he likes, he is just a beast. He was the first person I called when I passed into the second round into the final. I asked him, "What do you think about this? I am here with my own way of playing the piano, and some monsters of the keyboard were eliminated. What's the point of it?"

He told me, "You know, it's true, you have not the best technique in the world, you are weak at some points, but you will have the time to manage that, to find a way to make you stronger, the experience of the stage will be good for that, so it will be quick for you." He told me whatever people think about my technique, he told me that I have something like grace, I know how to catch the grace. And he said to me that was the most important thing.

You must feel a real sense of achievement here. You've played with an orchestra for the first time, you've captivated people.

It should always be like that - I'm here only because some people don't do it. It should be always like that. I'm here and I'm not the best, and some could do this with the perfect technique and perfect soul, but nowadays we see the division. People can play with perfect soul but they cannot play on stage because they are too emotive, and others are just cold technique, they can play anything 300 days a year - ok, but no music. And then people go to the concerts are used to hearing that, and they think *that* is the music. It's a real problem.

Is it true you stopped playing for a while?

Yes, I was autodidact from 10 years old to 15, then I stopped completely the piano from 15 to 20. To study literature, but first to get some friends, because I had no friends.

Because of music?

Yes. All my life before then I was inside, so I had no friends. I had to make some friends, and then I was in a rock band, playing bass guitar, and that was some success and became interesting. But then I decided to leave because they were too *parasseux*, lazy. I left my family at 17 to come to Paris, because I had my first girlfriend and I was very proud of it. I thought, because I was a silly man, you know, I thought this was the woman of my life. But she was not. I spent two years with her and my rock band.

You were not at school?

I registered at university though I was not very serious. Then she left me for another guy.

And broke your heart?

“ I was completely alone. I worked in a supermarket to earn money. It was five years ago ”

Of course! I am human! [laughs] No, everything was okay. Then she became a *femen* - you know the *femens*? Very strange. So I was completely alone. I worked in a supermarket to earn money. It was in 2009, five years ago. And then I started reading

classical literature. A friend of mine was in the university too and he helped me very much to come back to life and get out of my depression, because I was really depressed. And I read literature a lot and talked about art a lot with him, with Martin. It was very important for me.

Which authors did you like?

Balzac first.

Did you study for a degree?

It's not very important. You can just aggregate it. I studied on my own, I read all night, pages and pages, books and books. Then June of 2010 someone called me from the city where I lived as a teenager and she asked if I would like to play something for the *fête de la musique*. I was happy to have something to do, so I did some things for that, and she asked me if I would like to have a teacher. For me it was impossible, because I was 20, and not seriously involved in life. I had started studies, but not seriously - and I felt like a poet, a bit, because I read so many books and believed in all that. I was at a distance from life - I wait, anything can happen, I can die, I have no money, nothing to do. But I tried to meet a teacher, and I met a *monsieur* who was very nice, gentle with me, very human - he helped me feel good, and he told me about Rena Shereshevskaya, my teacher now, and he said to me, "You have two ways now. If you want to be safe and earn money as a teacher you can go to that school, and if you are crazy and want to make some kind of sacrifice, you can meet Rena Shereshevskaya, because she prepares people for competitions."

So she's a private teacher?

No, she teaches at the Rueil-Malmaison school. It's a *superieur* regional school for professional music study. She graduated from the Moscow Conservatory under Lev Vlasenko.

How did you relate to her?

I think I have always been *culotté*. A *culot*. [It means a kind of bolshie contrarian] I cannot do anything without provocation. When I entered her class it was a kind of provocation. And what was fabulous is that for her it became at once a great challenge. I could not expect that, because I went there only to provoke, because I knew she prepared for competitions, and I loved music and believed in music and laughed at competitions. And I wanted to show her how involved I was in music, because I am able to play some things by ear only - I have a great memory. I tried this, for provocation, but she took it very seriously from the beginning. For me I began to be scared, because I could not realise she would go so far. Me, no, at the beginning, but her, yes.

That was four years ago?

Yes.

I am trying to understand how this "auto-didact" is here at this competition.

Yes, it's a bit crazy for me. I find it funny to see some people who go to lessons about writing music. For me it's a joke. I would like to say to them, "Ok, stay at home, open the score and enter it, in it for hours, live in it, and then you will understand something." But some teachers stand up and, "Oh it's me who knows how to compose in the style of Mozart or something." I am a little bit angry, I think. It's something I cannot stand.

Were you feeling angry when you went on stage to play those concertos in the final?

I was very tired. I just tried to do my best, anyway I could - that's all I can say.

How did you feel with the orchestra? Did you feel them with you, or were you trying to culotter them?

What I would like to do is to conduct myself. Not because it's me, I am the star and all that. It's because I found some things in the score and it would be great if the orchestra could do this - well, if they could not, never mind, but I wanted them to know how I felt. I had no time to tell them what I felt about this place or that place in the music, but I just wanted them to know.

So the orchestra and the audience had to listen, to wake up.

Something happened.

How many concertos can you play? If an agent comes and wants to book you?

Mozart 24, Bach F minor, Beethoven 2nd, Liszt 2nd, Prokofiev 2nd, Rachmaninov 2nd, Tchaikovsky 1st, and I would like to learn Brahms 1 & Rachmaninov 3. So maybe six.

But you have such a memory that I imagine you will learn the repertoire quickly.

What is important is to play great music. Grigory Sokolov plays one programme for the whole year. No discussion - he is the best.

Richter used to do the same thing, didn't he? During this whole experience, was there a moment when you felt happiness as you played? Glad in the moment.

My second round. The solo recital part and the Mozart. Now I can say that I felt warm then. It was impossible to say immediately after, but now I can say that.

Were you frightened when you went through the final? You said you were very tired.

Physically. What is most exhausting is not the playing but the waiting. I played last year in jazz clubs, four or five days a week from 8 to midnight, it was not exhausting. and the rest of the day I was practising. The jazz clubs was to make money but it was ok, because I don't have to wait. But here I've been here one month and only played about three hours total. It is all that waiting that makes me tired.

Have you made friends here?

Yes, Alexander Ullman from Great Britain [who exited in round 1], and Sergey Redkin [another finalist], who was my room mate, very talented.

How do you relax?

I don't relax. I don't believe in relaxing. You are English - do you know of the composer Doreen Carwithen? She is a fantastic composer who wrote concertos in post-romantic style like Rachmaninov. British music is incredible, you know. There is Britten of course, but... what is the name of that cello sonata? Edmund Rubbra. And Frank Bridge. I know it's strange because many pianists are not interested in the literature of music. I play Medtner and Alkan, friend of Chopin. Fantastic. So many people say it's boring, but I will show them.

What will your next concert be?

I would like to do a recital of Scarlatti and Scriabin. I would like to record all Medtner's sonatas.

There must be so many people here in the industry who can help you.

It's been strange for me, because for four years I have been alone in Paris with only my teacher. Alone. Completely alone, with my little beer at night, the windows, the books, the cigarettes. And now there is something happening, and it's "What do you want to do, what do you want to play?"

Is it nice? To be part of the family?

Yes. But I am only using 20 percent of my brain here, my life is not normal, I have to rearrange it.

Will you go back to Paris?

No. I will stay in Moscow for some time.

My friend who likes jazz wants to know who your favourite jazz pianists are.

Thelonious Monk, then Duke Ellington, Erroll Garner and Peterson. They are real heroes to me, better than classical pianists, because they are laughing, they are not polite, they are just laughing at death. I would like to be just like them.

- [Lucas Debargue's Mariinsky Theatre concert hall recital on July 14 is to be live-streamed online](#)
- [All the Tchaikovsky competition rounds are preserved on Medici TV](#)
- [UK dates on the Tchaikovsky competition winners tour, under Valery Gergiev, are 26 October at Cadogan Hall, London, and 28 October at Symphony Hall, Birmingham](#)

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Debargue recorded by an audience member playing Chopin's 4th Ballade in Moscow on 18 September

Comments

Submitted by [Martin Smith \(not verified\)](#) on Mon, 17/07/2017 - 19:35

Lucas has worked everything out perfectly, exactly as Glenn Gould did two generations before. What interests me is his cosmology. He seems to draw music down from some secret place. Between movements there is a definite sense of his travelling too and fro mentally; and when he plays, he is somewhere else. I hope that his intellectual acuity will help us work out far more about this than has been discovered so far. We really have only Payzant on Gouldian ecstasy to date. The short word for this is mystical. It is mystical playing and he sense the reality of God - a Horowitz did.

[Reply](#)

Submitted by [Martin Smith \(not verified\)](#) on Mon, 17/07/2017 - 19:49

The other thing that I think is really extraordinary is learning music by ear. Merely the prejudice arising from a tradition of reading notes from scores makes this seem odd. I remember seeing an accomplished local organist in my home town play some Messiaen - the easiest of his pieces. I was able to note this man's completely tactile understanding of the music: he was not reading it from the score. When I rebuild my now vanished piano and organ techniques I would ask my teachers to start from ear and eye, only secondarily from the score. In other words, I have an intuition that Lucas is on to something important.

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