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LINDSAY GARRITSON

America's rising star unveils her
first world premiere commission

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Inner tigress

Lindsay Garritson is an exceptional pianist whose sweetness and modesty belie her impregnable technique and keen intelligence. **Stephen Wigler** met this shy but far from retiring young artist in New York to discuss her new album of works by Australian composer Carl Vine

Profiles of pianists like Lindsay Garritson typically appear in *IP*'s 'One to Watch' column, which introduces readers to young, talented and relatively unknown performers. They are often artists who have received prizes in important international competitions such as Seong-Jin Cho (first prize in Warsaw's 2015 Chopin Competition), Nikita Mndoyants (first prize in the 2016 Cleveland International Competition), George Li (second prize in Moscow's 2016 Tchaikovsky Competition) and Yekwon Sunwoo (first prize in Fort Worth's 2017 Van Cliburn Competition).

That Garritson has been selected as this month's cover artist may, therefore, surprise some readers. The closest she has come to winning a top prize in an internationally celebrated contest was in 2011 when she came second in the Montreal Competition, finishing behind the now celebrated Beatrice Rana. Garritson has also competed in several bigger contests, such as the Cliburn (2013) and Sydney International Piano Competition (2016) – but in both cases she did not make it past the semi-finals.

'I don't fare well in those contests,' Garritson tells me over dinner in New York. She doesn't like them – partly because she abhors the notion of judging pianists as if they were racehorses, and partly because competitions nowadays video every note played by participants. 'It's worse than the recording studio,' she says. 'You never forget that you are being captured forever in posterity. It's unnatural.'

So why had I travelled to New York from Boston to interview a pianist that a cynic might argue was in the process of passing from obscurity into oblivion? The answer is that Garritson's two recordings (a Liszt-Schubert-Schumann disc released in 2018 and her new album dedicated to the music of the Australian composer Carl Vine) convinced me that she could be one of the biggest talents of her generation. It's an opinion shared by several people I respect: the great Cuban-American virtuoso Santiago Rodriguez, Vine himself and several of *IP*'s writers. Moreover, I believe Garritson's career deserves to be given a boost as a matter of urgency. At 31, she is still a young woman, but past the age limit to enter most competitions and win the sort of prize that establishes a musician's career. An important talent could be about to disappear because too few have recognised it and too many failed to listen carefully.

I must plead guilty to that charge. When I first heard Garritson's debut album in 2018, I only listened to the opening of her performance of Liszt's *Rhapsodie espagnole*. I never bothered with her performances of Schubert's

three late *Klavierstücke* D946 or the four-movement 1853 version of Schumann's Sonata in F minor. I remember thinking that I didn't hear the stupendous sound – powerful enough to rattle the fillings in one's teeth – that I expected of the Liszt from my favourite recordings by György Cziffra and Lazar Berman.

I declined to review it on the basis that there are dozens of pianists who play the *Rhapsodie* as well as or better than Garritson. The gauntlet was taken up instead by Colin Clarke who wrote an enthusiastic review in which he described Garritson's *Rhapsodie* as 'teasing, witty, meltingly beautiful and with excellent legerdemain'. Singling out her Schumann sonata for particular praise, he wrote: 'This is a highly considered reading, with a driving Scherzo and the variations (on a theme by Clara) containing an impressive slow fourth variation.'

So when I heard that Garritson was about to record an album entirely devoted to the music of Carl Vine, including the first recorded performance of his Sonata No 4, written specially for her, I eagerly requested an advance copy. Vine is a composer I admire enormously. A fine pianist in his own right, he understands the piano more completely than any other living composer. The fact that he had agreed to write such an important new work for Garritson made me realise I must have missed something.

The album's first item is Vine's dazzling Sonata No 1. It is frequently performed at competitions because – like Balakirev's *Islamey*, Stravinsky's *Three Movements from Petrushka*, Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* and Prokofiev's Sonata No 7 – it is a landmark of virtuosity that calls upon the pianist to demonstrate *everything* of which he or she is capable. Its rich chordal movements, unusual flowing harmonies and tonalities, great energy and dynamic extremes make it technically very demanding. The music's rhythmic complexity adds yet another dimension to these challenges.

Originally composed for the Sydney Dance Company, Vine's First Sonata reflects its physical origins as a dance. The music is dotted with very strict changes of tempo that require exact adherence, challenging performers to resist using rubato. The work is as popular among Russian virtuosi as it is among pianists trained in the West. I've heard it played by several remarkable artists, including the Russian-trained Armenian Sergei Babayan (who introduced it to American audiences in the early 1990s), the Russian Sergei Tarasov (like Babayan, a student of Lev Naumov) who played it when he took first prize in the 1996 Sydney Piano Competition, and the Korean-

American Joyce Yang (who performed and recorded it during the 2005 Cliburn contest in which she won second prize). Garritson's performance was as good as, perhaps even better than, any I had previously heard, which made me return to her first recording.

My response was now quite different. I found her *Rhapsodie espagnole* sonically beautiful, teasingly seductive in its wit and lyrical in expression. Her disciplined, sensitive and beautifully phrased playing in Schubert's *Klavierstücke* reveals the profundity of these pieces which many young pianists miss. Her rendition of Schumann's Sonata in F minor Op 14 is as lucid, meltingly beautiful and heroically exciting as Evgeny Kissin's superb performance last year in Carnegie Hall.

When I told Garritson how much I liked this disc and her performances of *Vine* on the new album, she smiled – rather as if she seemed embarrassed by, if also grateful for, such praise. During the two hours we spent together, she seemed more comfortable chatting about the performance of Massenet's *Manon* she had seen the previous night at the Met, or Verdi's *Macbeth* she was due to attend that evening. She is – for someone who makes her living performing the piano in public – an unusually modest, even shy, young woman.

'That's exactly what she is,' says Rodriguez, who has been teaching Garritson since 2016 on the University of Miami's doctoral programme, which she joined after earning a Master's degree and Artist Diploma from Yale School of Music. 'From the moment she began to play, I knew I was listening to someone special. Even in this era of incredibly talented and well-prepared students, you rarely come across a person blessed with so many gifts. As well as an impregnable technique honed by superb training, she had profound musicality and possessed keen intelligence.'

'But you also sensed something else,' continues Rodriguez. 'Her shyness was inhibiting her playing until I understood she didn't need help – she needed to be herself. Basically, all I've had to do in the past three years is encourage her, telling her that she had all the talent in the world, but that she had to learn to believe in herself. Now she's accomplished that. She's still the same, sweet and modest person, but she's learned to tap into her inner tigress. She now knows she belongs on the stage.'

Garritson thinks as highly of Rodriguez as he does of her. 'I loved being at Yale and had wonderful relationships with my teachers, especially Boris Berman; he gave me ideas about how pieces should sound. But it was only by studying with Santiago that I learned how to be a pianist.'

Garritson will give the world premiere of *Vine*'s Sonata No 4 at Carnegie Hall in November, the UK premiere at the Royal College of Music in January 2020 and the Australian premiere at the Melbourne Recital Centre in April 2020. Although the piece has been written specially for her, she has been careful to 'keep a distance, so to speak, and let Carl explore wherever he wanted to go'. The result promises to be very different from his first three sonatas, which Garritson feels 'are all greatly contrasting with one another in terms of their style of writing and sound-worlds'.

'The way Carl writes for the piano is incredibly idiomatic,' she explains, 'and his style of virtuosic writing is always tasteful and extremely colourful. He sent me some samples along the way, and I'll admit that my only requests were to keep adding "fireworks"! I think the format of three movements conceived as a larger whole (without pause) works very well with the pacing of the piece. Carl builds on the energy and emotion of each successive section so organically. It's a fabulous work.'

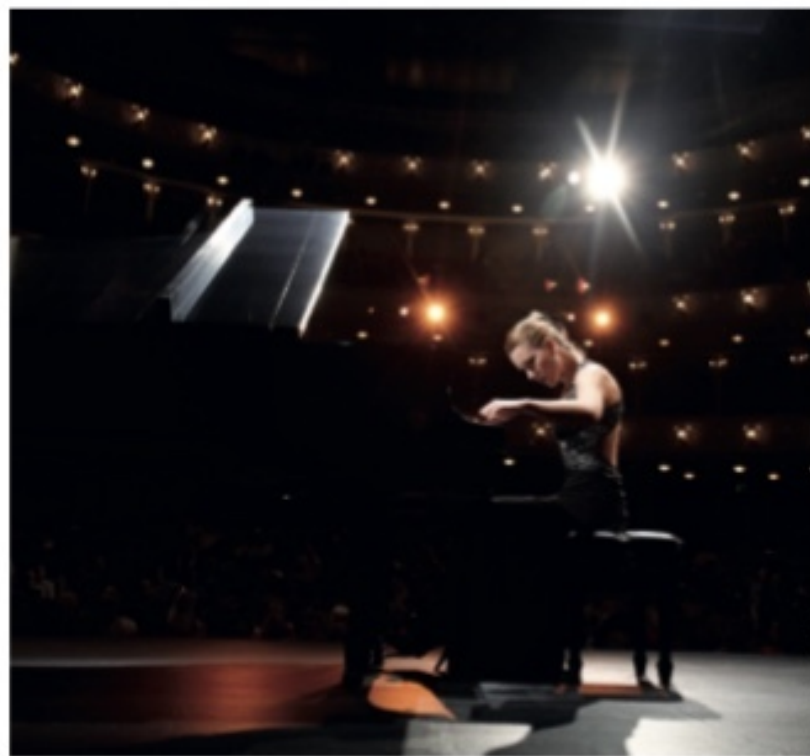
Garritson was born in a small town outside St Louis. Both parents were musicians: her father, a clarinettist, was a professor of music at the University of Missouri, and her mother, a violinist, was a professor of music at Principia College – where Lindsay earned her bachelor's degree before leaving for Yale.

Like most people who become solo musicians, she was a child prodigy. Unlike most, however, she was a prodigy on two different instruments – the violin, which she began learning aged two-and-a-half, and the piano, which followed when she was five. She did not really decide to concentrate on the piano until she went to college.

'Honestly, I don't know why I chose the piano over the violin,' she says. 'The piano has the greater solo repertoire and is capable of suggesting a wider array of colours than the violin. But the violin offers a musician more internal pleasure. It's an instrument that you hold in your arms, while the piano demands that you work at a huge machine that is a product of the Industrial Revolution.'

Garritson's mastery of the violin can be gauged by her presence during her high school years in the concertmaster's chair of the St Louis Symphony Youth

Stage artist: Lindsay Garritson performs at the 2013 Cliburn Competition in Fort Worth, Texas



Orchestra. Rodriguez says that her knowledge of the violin makes her a particularly superb collaborator with string players. 'The piano parts in pieces like Fauré's A major and Prokofiev's F minor sonatas are among the most difficult challenges a pianist faces,' he says. 'Lindsay makes them sound not only effortless, but also beautiful.'

It is difficult to say why she did not win more gold medals during her years on the competition circuit. Her second-place finish behind the equally talented Beatrice Rana in the 2011 Montreal Competition was probably a consequence of the concertos they chose to play in the finals. Rana chose the Tchaikovsky First, which is a crowd-pleaser that every good orchestra can play well because they perform it so frequently. Garritson chose the Prokofiev Second and, by all accounts, gave a dazzling performance of this piece, which not only makes greater demands on the soloist than the Tchaikovsky, but is also much trickier for orchestras because it is performed so infrequently.

She had more bad luck at the Sydney Competition in 2016, where she was knocked out after the semi-final. Composer Carl Vine was on the jury that year and says he was 'shocked' when Garritson failed to make the finals.

Every competitor in Sydney is required to perform at least one work by an Australian composer. 'I suppose so many contestants chose to play my music because I was serving on the jury,' says Vine. 'Lindsay's performances of my music were far and away the finest I heard. And I enjoyed her performances of the standard repertoire even more than of my own works. The rule observed at the Sydney is that contestants and jurors are to have no interactions. But when she was not named as one of the finalists, I rushed to reach her and told her how much I had enjoyed her playing.'

By the time she got to Sydney, Garritson's failures to be named as a finalist were a puzzlingly frequent occurrence. Almost exactly the same thing had happened in Fort Worth at the 2013 Cliburn. After what were said to be dazzling performances in the semi-finals, she failed to be named among the six finalists. Rorianne Schrade, who covered the 2013 Cliburn for *New York Concert Review* (nyconcertreview.com), made an interesting observation about the then 25-year-old pianist: 'I would have enjoyed hearing her again [in the finals] as she is an extremely gifted pianist. Don't let the "all-American girl next door" look fool you – this woman can play! Her Liszt Ballade in B minor was exceptionally good, with dazzling left-hand passagework, and her Prokofiev Sonata No 7 was powerful and exciting.'

Lindsay Garritson's Aphorisms: Piano Music of Carl Vine will be available from the independent online music store CD Baby from 1 November 2019: store.cdbaby.com/Artist/LindsayGarritson

lindsaygarritson.com



Rodriguez certainly believes that 'all-American girl' stereotyping has prevented Garritson from winning the recognition she deserves in competitions. He says most great pianists during the last century were or were descended from Eastern European Jews. Nearing the millennium, there were an increasing number of pianists of Latin American heritage. And now there are dozens of terrific pianists from China, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam, or whose parents are from those countries. Where female pianists are concerned, the piano world is filled with exotic-looking women from Georgia, Russia, and the countries of the Far East. When you look at Lindsay you see exactly what she is: a wholesome-looking young woman from America's heartland – with very fair skin, blue eyes and blond hair. There is nothing that is white bread about the way she plays. But compared with how we now expect pianists to look, Lindsay seems out of place – even though she definitely isn't.

Such a suggestion takes us into perilous waters as notions of body image and ethnicity are understandably complicated. Besides, this may be a uniquely American problem. I can think of at least two young, female pianists with blond hair who are making headway in their careers: Sofya Menshikova, who recently took a prize in the Junior Schumann in Germany, and Eva Gevorgyan, who won the Cleveland Junior Competition and came second in the Junior Cliburn. Both come from Russia, not St Louis. Perhaps if Lindsay Garritson's name was Anastasia Vladyskaya and she hailed from Moscow, she would have been treated differently. **IP**