



Blue Candlelight

Series provides an immediate connection to it's audience

WORDS Laurie Shulman

How do two musicians born at opposite ends of the former Soviet Union wind up in Dallas Texas as partners in a concert series – that takes place in somebody's home? Whether it was serendipity or fate, that is precisely what has happened with Blue Candlelight, an eight year old recital series that takes place in the Baron House, one of the most elegant residences in Preston Hollow. Pianist Daredjan "Baya" Kakouberi and violinist Gary Levinson were both born behind the Iron Curtain, but found their way to Dallas via different routes. A passion for music – specifically making music in an intimate setting among friends – brought them together.

Blue Candlelight is unique, because the music-making occurs in a spacious yet intimate living room, much as it would have taken place in the 18th- and 19th-century salons of Paris, Vienna, and other cultural centers. "There's no stage, no separation," explains Levinson, who is Senior Principal Associate Concertmaster of the Dallas Symphony and a regular participant in Blue Candlelight programs. "You're playing in the same room as the audience. It's not us up there and them down there, like in a concert hall. Everybody is at the same level, which makes for an immediate connection. We talk to the audience about the music we perform. The audience feels like they're participating."

The galvanizing force behind this unusual venture is Kakouberi, a vibrant pianist who came to Dallas via a circuitous route. Born in Tbilisi, capital of the Republic of Georgia, she demonstrated musical talent as a small child and passed her audition at age five for Tbilisi's School for the Musically Gifted.

"My parents were both medical doctors, but both of them were very musical," she says, adding with obvious pride, "Musicality runs not only in my family, but

also in the genes of my country and my people. Every single person in Georgia sings and plays an instrument – so it was not such a big discovery in me. It was normal. But obviously I had something more than other regular kids."

Indeed she did. Kakouberi's pianistic gifts soon took her to Moscow. In the 1970s, all the Soviet Republics fed the cream of their talent to the capital. Kakouberi pursued her musical education at the Moscow Conservatory, eventually earning a doctorate. "Basically we earned two degrees, pedagogy and piano performance," she explains. "I am very proud of the fact that I studied with the best professors, great pianists, artists who are still active performers in Russia."

She lived in Moscow ten years, forging artistic relationships that would come back to her repeatedly. She also perfected her Russian (her mother tongue is Georgian). But she knew no English when, in 1991, an opportunity arose to visit friends and play two concerts in Cleveland. The invitation came from Sergei Babayan, an Armenian-born pianist she knew from the Moscow Conservatory. (He has since appeared twice as a guest artist on the Blue Candlelight series.)

Babayan had relocated to the USA in 1989, the same year he won first prize in the Robert Casadesus International Piano Competition, to join the faculty of the Cleveland Institute of Music. For Kakouberi, adventure loomed.

Timing, they say, is everything. Kakouberi recalls, "It was August of 1991. A few days after I arrived in Cleveland, I saw tanks in Moscow on the television. The Soviet Union was collapsing. I was advised to stay in America, because no one knew what was going to happen in Russia. I spoke no English. That was very interesting!"

Separated from her family, Kakouberi relied on friends and learned English rapidly. Soon, fate intervened again. Another former Moscow Conservatory classmate, pianist Valery Grohovsky, was now on the faculty of UT San Antonio. He invited her to Texas. "Gradually I picked up business – teaching and playing concerts -- and started to have a life here," Kakouberi says. "It was still without my family, unfortunately. My son was stuck in Moscow because communication was broken. Nobody was coming out, nobody was going in. I spent three years here without him."

When Kakouberi's mother died, she returned to Russia to settle her mother's affairs and obtain a passport for her son. He was finally able to join her permanently in 1994, shortly before his ninth birthday.

Meanwhile, she built a career. It was pure chance that she happened to be in the USA at a time that turned out to be historic and, ultimately, fortunate. "I was lucky that I was among friends, musicians who helped me."



While she was in San Antonio, a woman from Dallas heard Kakouberi play. "She asked me to move to Dallas. She was about to build a music school. It never came to fruition, but I did relocate in 1995 and started my

new life here." Her reputation as an excellent pianist had preceded her. Invitations to perform were now frequent. She also developed a studio of devoted piano students.

Among them was Lisa Blue, who, with her husband Fred Baron, had a splendid home in Preston Hollow with an expansive music room. "We built the house with the intention of having functions here," says Blue. "We are hosts to three or four charitable events every month, about 35 annually. When Baya suggested a

concert series, we thought it would fit well."

Kakouberi recalls, "It was all quite spontaneous. The idea was born around the table over lunch. We decided to create a little recital series in her house, perhaps a few events each year." She soon learned that no new venture springs up overnight.

One of Blue's neighbors, Richard Barrett, is an amateur singer and pianist. Chatting with Blue at a Christmas party a number of years ago, he mentioned that he wanted to brush up on his piano skills. "I have the perfect piano teacher for you," smiled Lisa. Thus he met Baya Kakouberi and soon developed an interest in her project.

"When Baya first mentioned the idea of the series, I told her it wouldn't work from a funding standpoint, because it had to be a 501(c)(3)," Barrett recalls.

"What's that?" queried Kakouberi.

Barrett explained briefly how non-profit corporations work and offered to set one up for her. Thus was Blue Candlelight established as a non-profit entity. Kakouberi initially sought artistic advice from cellist Eugene Osadchy. "He was with us from the first day," she

says. "In fact, he and I played the first recital. Eugene's support and encouragement were immeasurable." DSO principal horn Gregory Hustis, who has extensive knowledge of Dallas' musical community, also played a major advisory role.

The next step was finding an audience; the room could accommodate between 90 and 100 listeners. It turned out that a lot of people liked the idea



of hearing music in the intimate environment of a private home. Through word of mouth and encouraging early supporters to bring friends, Blue Candlelight events were soon selling out. The format is a winner: a glamorous, comfort-

able venue, a glass of wine or sparkling water, beautiful music, and the opportunity to interact directly with musicians as well as with the other guests.

By now Richard Barrett was actively involved. (He has since become Board President.) "We specifically avoid the words 'chamber music,' because it sounds stuffy and can put people off. People who describe themselves as cultural philistines have come in and they are captivated because of the tremendous contact with the artists.

"We encourage people to bring friends," continues Barrett. "There's a loyal subscriber base, but we have remarkable turnover too, including students. Thus the audience is diverse."

A big part of the allure was the superior artists that Kakouberi was able to attract. "I invited my friends who are spread around the world," says Kakouberi. "They were so kind [after such a] long time. Everybody was glad to come and play. Little by little, we gained the audience's love."

Meanwhile, she was developing strong connections to the North Texas music community. She met Gary Levinson shortly after he arrived in Dallas in 2001. Like Kakouberi, he also comes from a multi-national background. Born in St. Petersburg, he began playing violin as a small child. Both his parents were professional musicians. He came to the USA at age ten, settling in Minneapolis when his father became principal double bass of the Minnesota Orchestra.

At age 18, Levinson went to New York to study at the Juilliard School with the legendary Dorothy DeLay. He joined the New York Philharmonic when he

was only 21; he had not yet completed his masters degree. Then, in 2001, he won the audition for Senior Principal Associate Concertmaster of the DSO.

Levinson became involved with the Blue Candlelight Series in its second season. "I've always loved playing chamber music," he declares. "Actually, all

three genres – orchestral, chamber, and solo playing – were of great interest to me. I continue to pursue all of them. But when I was leaving NYC, all my colleagues were asking, 'who are you going to play chamber music with?' because they knew how important it was to me. I said, 'I'll figure it out.' When Baya asked me to play that first concert for Blue Candlelight, I knew she was someone I wanted to work with a lot."

There were still wrinkles to be ironed out. "Lisa's piano was unsuitable for performance," explains Kakouberi. "We discussed what to do about it. She and Fred were happy to have my musical input, but they also knew they wanted a piano with architectural and aesthetic value, to complement the room."

Lisa Blue describes the décor of her house as tra-



ditional. "The architecture is Georgian. Our architect, Robert Stern, designed both the exterior and the interior, and helped us with everything inside the house. Our art is period and traditional as well. The music room is meant to have a more relaxing environment. We wanted a piano that fit the feel of the house, one that would go with the other furniture."

That meant an instrument with an older look than the sleek, classic piano design that became standard in the 1920s. The piano they selected is a Steinway built in 1896, when keyboards only had 85 keys instead of the now-customary 88. The Baron House piano has elaborate carving on the legs and music rack and a warm mahogany finish, rather than ebony. Its keys are original ivory, predating the era when ivory became a protected substance. It is a magnificent piece of furniture as well as a beautiful and responsive musical instrument. Kakouberi says, "I am grateful to Patty Boyer, Danny Saliba, and James Williams at Steinway Hall of Dallas. They all worked very hard to restore the instrument to our standards."

Now in its eighth season, Blue Candlelight consis-

tently draws a full house and boasts an unusually high percentage of its budget from ticket sales. Kakouberi and Levinson stress that it is still possible to obtain tickets, despite the limited seating capacity. And while they are considering expansion, they are also careful to ensure that nothing compromises Blue Candle-

light's core values. "We don't want to lose the atmosphere or the intimacy," says Kakouberi.

"Baya is amazing," offers Richard Barrett. "Her connections are international and the caliber of musicians she presents is outstanding. Several board members have donated airline miles, which has been a great help in bringing our artists to Dallas."

"We strive for the highest possible quality," he continues. "The series is unique be-

cause of the residential surrounding, which makes for a tremendous connection between the audience and the performers. There's a relaxed atmosphere. The musicians talk about their work."

And for the purists, the music-making is first rate.

