

# American Journey: A Conversation with Avguste Antonov

BY ROBERT SCHULSLAPER

Pianist Avguste Antonov may have had a conventional musical education, but his decision to devote himself exclusively to performing the music of living American composers stamps him as something of a rarity, even in the 21st century. To learn why he chose this distinctive path, read on.

*Whenever I meet someone from a formerly communist country I wonder how they experienced the society around them, and if they're musicians, how the tensions between East and West affected their training, repertoire choices, and professional opportunities.*

Born in 1978 in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, I was started at the piano by my grandparents when I was five years old and the entire family (grandparents, mom) was supportive. I studied there until the age of 11 (1989), but because I was very young towards the end of the communist era and the fall of the Berlin Wall, I am not well placed at all to comment on any distrust between West and East. However given the current situation and tension over Ukraine, I am sure the atmosphere back in the 1980s to early 90s was just as tense.

*When did you leave Bulgaria?*

In 1989 I moved to France to live with my mom and my stepfather (both cellists). Between 1989 and 1990 I studied in Paris at the École Normale de Musique and then moved to Bordeaux, where I studied until 1999 at the Conservatoire Nationale de Région de Bordeaux. Although all of my teachers were influential, the person that had the most influence on me and whom I consider as my mentor is Hervé N'Kaoua, who was my last teacher in France (1997–99).

*You went on to study in the United States: How does the French approach differ from the American?*

I haven't been in France since 1999, so my comments can only apply to my experience while I was there. However, compared to what I did in the United States between 2000 and 2008, I think in the United States musical education

is more based and focused on academics than on performance. Personally I think it should be the opposite....

*How did you find your way to Texas, where you now make your home?*

In 1999–2000, my family decided to move to the United States. Needing a change of scenery, I followed my family and my first stop was the University of Missouri-Kansas City, where I studied for one year with Robert Weirich and Stanislav Ioudenitch.

In 2000–01, I enrolled at the University of Kansas and I studied with Jack Winerock until 2004–05. After graduating from the University of Kansas with the Bachelor of Music in piano performance, I took a year of sabbatical and then in 2006 I went to graduate school at Texas Christian University, where Tamas Ungar was my teacher for two years.

*Some may find it surprising that a pianist with your background would chose to devote himself to contemporary American music. What led you to that decision?*

I discovered American music and specifically living American composers at the University of Kansas while a member of the University of Kansas Wind Symphony under the direction of Maestro John Lynch. In 2001, Maestro Lynch was looking for a pianist to join the Wind Symphony and I was the only volunteer! I spent three wonderful years performing with them. Thanks to them I discovered composers such as Carter Pann, John Mackey, David Maslanka, John Adams, Michael Colgrass, and others. And thanks to the University of Kansas Wind Symphony and John Lynch, I was able to participate in many conventions and in the recording of the Naxos CD *Redline Tango*, which features composers such as Carter Pann and John Mackey.

When I went to Texas Christian University in 2006, my first order of business was to connect with the wind symphony and its music director, Maestro Bobby Francis. Between 2006 and 2008, I performed at different conventions around the country, including the CBDNA [College Band Directors National Association] convention.

Having fallen in love with the music of American living composers and realizing that I needed something to make me stand out from other pianists/performers, after I left Texas Christian University in 2008 I decided that my recital repertoire would be exclusively focused on living American composers.

*Do you play any contemporary music from other countries?*

Although my focus is living American composers, I do pay attention to what composers from other countries are doing and sometimes I may add one or two of their works to my repertoire. Over the years, I have added compositions from Italy, Israel, and Japan.

*Even though you've said that you limit yourself to contemporary American composers, the CD booklet mentions that you sometimes perform a mix of traditional and new music.*

Generally speaking, I do add traditional repertoire only if and when requested by presenters. Usually this is done as a way to take audiences from a familiar repertoire to a new repertoire, especially when they're not used to a full recital of modern music.

*How do you think the music of the past relates to the music of today?*

In a way, traditional music complements modern music, especially when we consider that most living composers have had to study traditional ones at some time (Bach, Mozart, and so forth) and that many of them have been influenced by traditional music.

*Is modern music a "hard sell"?*

My concerts are well received by audiences young and old, regardless of location, and many in the audience mention how delighted they are to hear new music.

A major point to understand and keep in mind regarding audiences is that, in general, they're not used to listening to new music. Presenters do not showcase new music often enough for audiences to truly appreciate new composers/performers and for new music to acquire a serious following. This is partially due to finances. It is much easier to get audiences to attend a Rachmaninoff concert than a concert featuring living composers.

This trend actually is beginning to change and we see many presenters slowly starting to introduce their audiences to new music.

*As artist in residence at The Master's Touch School of Music & Performing Arts in Grapevine, Texas, you must do a fair amount of teaching.*

Teaching is an integral part of being a musician and I definitely like teaching. I usually teach about three to four days per week.

*Do you try to expose your students to as much contemporary music as possible?*

If and when they have the appropriate level, I definitely get them to work on contemporary music. But one of the issues with contemporary music is simply that there is not enough modern music written for students. And in a way, I do think that if living composers begin to write educational books, that would help spread new music.

*Tell me about your new CD, An American Journey.*

This CD project was actually a bit of a last-minute idea. Last year (2013–14) I had concerts in Ohio, New York, and New Jersey. A few weeks before those concerts, William Vollinger (a composer featured on the recording) mentioned the possibility to me of making a recording while I was in New York. It was an exciting opportunity and I am happy we were able to get it done.

*There seems to be something of an Ohio connection between the composers featured on the disc.*

Robert Rollin, Richard Zacharias, and Samantha Hogan are based in Youngstown, Ohio and they are all three involved with the Youngstown New Music Society. In 2010 I was invited by Robert Rollin (New Music Society artistic director) for performances, and he introduced me to both Richard Zacharias and Samantha Hogan.

*Blue Fantasy* (by Robert Rollin) was originally written for a young pianist and in 2009 Robert Rollin asked me to premiere the piece. It is one of my favorite pieces to perform and it has been in my repertoire ever since.

While working with Robert Rollin, I was introduced to the compositions of Richard Zacharias and Samantha Hogan. When my 2013 concerts in Youngstown were scheduled, it was only natural for me to add a piece from each of them.

Richard's *First Romance* was a piece that I had heard a few years back and had wanted to perform. Regarding Samantha's piece, she had asked me to take a look at it and I was immediately attracted to the simplicity and the counterpoint.

Matthew Saunders was the music department chairman at Oklahoma Panhandle State University and he is currently the music department chairman at Lakeland Community College in Ohio. I met him in 2011 when he invited me for a residency at Oklahoma Panhandle State University, and during my visit he introduced me to his piano compositions (*Starry Wanderers*, piano sonata, and others). *Starry Wanderers* was the first of his compositions I looked at. The entire work is comprised of 10 pieces and the cycle depicts the eight planets in our solar system. The cycle looks at each body through the lens of science or its place in contemporary culture. On this CD, one can hear three excerpts from the cycle: "Venus," "Earthly Hope," and "Stillness at the Edge."

I met William Vollinger at the Society of Composers Region VI 2012 Convention. I expressed an interest in playing his music; we began talking about a collaboration and he composed *Dreams Before You Awake* for me. The piece tells the story of a person having a night full of multiple dreams. As I've mentioned, it was William Vollinger who raised the possibility of doing a recording, and it was through him that I was introduced to Dennis Dougherty and Hartshorn Classical. Hartshorn Classical is an independent recording label based in New York. Their current and previous releases are available at CDBaby and other online stores.

*Although I'm a firm believer in quality over quantity, some reviewers may quibble over the CD's rather short duration. Was there a reason that things turned out that way?*

For a CD involving living composers, one of the most important items we had to deal with was the legal right to record the selected works. Originally, my planning was to include the works of six composers totaling about 45–50 minutes of music; however, I was not able to secure the appropriate permission for the last composer from either the composer or the publisher, hence the diminished total timing (27:10).

*The piano on the CD has been tuned according to an innovative system that I haven't encountered before. Can you tell me anything about it?*

The best description of the tuning is provided by the program notes: “Hartshorn Classical has joined the ProArte movement and supports a natural approach to tuning instruments with fixed pitch (piano in this case). We have also increased the clarity and expressiveness of the recorded sound while maintaining a rich sonority for both instruments and voice by lowering the concert pitch to reasonable past standards.

“What you will notice are harmonies that are now in tune in all musical keys. Major and minor chords are once again gloriously consonant. The intent of dissonant harmonies becomes obvious and much more expressive. Contrapuntal lines are much less blurred and therefore easier to distinguish. Melodic tones ring with a bell-like resonance while vibrating for an extended time. By tuning more carefully this way, the individual strings become more in accord with their harmonics. They also become easier to excite and therefore require minimal hammering from the performer to obtain desired results.

“This phenomenon gives the piano a much less percussive quality. The familiar and disturbing ‘wow, wow, wow’ as chords fade out is eliminated. Smaller pianos (like the 7 foot Steinway used here) obtain a rich and lush character that surpasses what we have come to expect from the largest and most expensive instruments.”

Personally I was not familiar with this method of tuning until I met Dennis Dougherty a few days before the recording. It is a bit difficult for a person used to a normal tuning to grasp the nuances of this alternate approach. Although I cannot speak about the technicalities involved, on a personal note, I have taken notice of very subtle differences between the methods. In my mind, the tuning used for this CD allowed more clarity, better sound differentiation between voices, and overall better sound quality. One very good example I could give of its effectiveness concerns the piano—a small upright—I used for a performance in Youngstown in October 2014. Dennis came and tuned it and this small piano immediately started to sound like a concert Steinway.

*The hall in which the recording was made—the Threefold Auditorium in Chestnut Ridge, New York—is also of an unusual design, with “all surfaces, including seats [made of] wood. Also, there are no right angles or parallel walls in its construction.”*

The hall was provided by Dennis Dougherty and Hartshorn Classical. The little time I spent in the hall was positive and I definitely found it appropriate for both concerts and recordings.

*What plans do you have for the future as to new recordings and live performances?*

Regarding upcoming concerts and future repertoire, I am currently working on scheduling the 2015–16 and 2016–17 seasons. There's not much more I can say about that at this time as it is all tentative. What I *can* say is that as a dedicated performer of living American composers, I often get emails and packages from composers requesting that I perform their works, and every season I consider whether adding new works or not makes sense. Generally my decision is based on previous commitments, performance opportunities (present and future), and my own personal taste.

As far as recordings, there are ideas for future releases and one of those involves Matthew Saunders's *Starry Wanderers* and piano sonata. I also hope to record his piano concerto someday, especially as it was written for me. To keep up to date with coming events, projects, and other news, you are invited to check out my web site at [avgusteantonov.com](http://avgusteantonov.com)

AN AMERICAN JOURNEY • Avguste Antonov (pn) • HARTSHORN no catalog number (27:10)

VOLLINGER Dreams Before You Awake. ZACHARIAS First Romance. SAUNDERS Starry Wanderers (excerpts).  
ROLLIN Blue Fantasy. HOGAN Cumulis Humilis