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Exploring Baltic Tides:

A Conversation with Eva Maria Doroszkowska

Interview by **Anthony Williams**

Anthony Williams: To start, could you tell us a little about your musical background – where your interest in piano began, your studies, and how you developed a fascination with Eastern European music, particularly from the Baltic States?

Eva Maria Doroszkowska: Of course. My family is Polish, but like many from that region, our history is complex. My grandmother was born in what is now Ukraine, and my grandparents spent time in Lithuania. My father was born in Poland, but his parents came from Belarus. That whole area – with its interwoven identities and shifting borders – holds a deep resonance for me. My family was very involved in Poland's uprisings, including during the Second World War. Both grandfathers were naval commanders. In fact, I've just been to the Isle of Wight where my grandfather had a connection during the war – a story for another time! But essentially, I grew up with strong cultural traditions and a deep sense of patriotism.

AW: And you were born in England?

ED: Yes, I was. But I also lived and studied in Poland. During the Communist period, we weren't really allowed to go back – though I did manage a visit around the age of 15, just as things were beginning to change. That trip inspired me to return for studies later on. I went to the Karol Szymanowski Academy of Music in Katowice. In hindsight, perhaps Warsaw might have offered a broader experience, but Katowice had an excellent piano teacher – Andrzej Jasiński – who also taught Krystian Zimerman. That's what drew me there.

AW: So, before that, you were educated in the UK?

ED: Yes, I went to school in England. My mother was a piano teacher, though she didn't actually want to teach me! I was four when I first insisted, and she thought I was too young. But I was determined. I'd already begun picking out tunes by ear. Eventually, she relented – but only for a year!

> "In Poland ... you **must** know your music. It's more than culture; it's lifeblood."

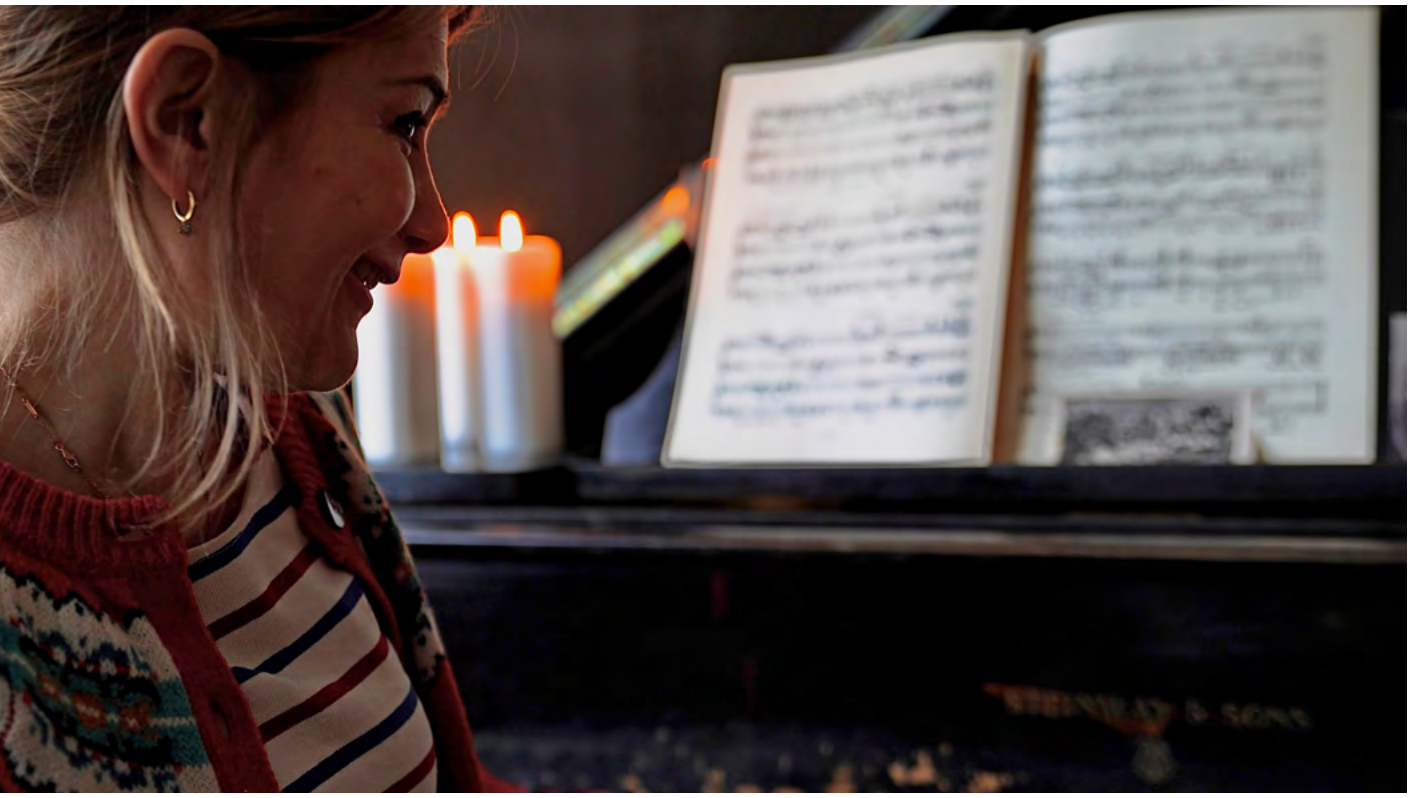
AW: That sounds very familiar – I tried to teach my own children too, and that was a nightmare.

ED: Exactly! She passed me on after a year. I continued to study in the UK and eventually went to the Royal Northern College of Music for my undergraduate degree. After that, I was awarded a government scholarship to study in Poland. That was a turning point. My sister had also studied there for a time as part of an exchange, so there was a bit of a precedent.

AW: Was she also a musician?

ED: She's a primary school music teacher. And music was a big part of our home life. My brother played drums, someone else played the French horn – everyone played something! You didn't have to pursue it professionally, but you had to engage with it.

AW: What was it like moving from the UK – with its abundance of resources – to study music in Poland?



ED: A shock, honestly! At the Royal Northern, we had access to Steinways and beautiful facilities. In Poland, the pianos didn't always work properly. But that contrast was also liberating. There was a rawness and intensity to the environment, and a very strong connection to contemporary music – particularly jazz and modern Polish composers. Everything was interconnected in a way I hadn't experienced before.

AW: And it was your choice to study in Katowice rather than Warsaw?

ED: I think it was more of a happy accident. I remember receiving the scholarship letter and thinking: this is an incredible opportunity. My mum had written to Jasiński, knowing he taught there – although I didn't study with him immediately. At first I was given another teacher who tended to work with international students. Eventually, things shifted, and I had lessons with Jasiński himself. It just felt like the right place to be – musically, culturally, personally.

AW: And how did your interest in Baltic composers develop?

ED: It really began during my time in Katowice when I first heard the music of Grażyna Bacewicz. This was over 25 years ago, and I was completely struck by it. Hardly anyone in England had heard of her. Later, I performed her work in my debut recital. I couldn't understand why she wasn't more widely known.

That curiosity extended to other underrepresented composers, especially from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. I discovered Ester Mägi, an Estonian composer, and was amazed by her music. Getting hold of scores wasn't easy – especially post-Brexit, with postage complications! But once I began playing her work, I felt a strong connection. It led me naturally to Latvian composer Lūcija Garūta. Someone recommended her preludes, and I was instantly captivated.

What fascinated me was that Bacewicz, Mägi and Garūta were all born around the same time. Bacewicz even performed in Riga, so it's quite possible they crossed paths. These composers share a sensitivity and strength that feels deeply rooted in their cultural landscapes.

AW: Are folk traditions and song embedded in their work?

ED: Very much so. That's why I chose the Penderecki quote for the concert brochure – about music being rooted in the earth. There's a palpable connection to the land in these countries – in their folklore, storytelling, music and poetry. It's something I've always been drawn to.

When I visited Estonia, I realised how much can't be found online. I did an artistic residency at the Arvo Pärt Centre, which gave me time and space to explore the landscape and dig into the archives. I even found unpublished handwritten scores by Mägi. The music isn't always well documented – a legacy

of Soviet occupation, where archiving was inconsistent or lost altogether.

AW: I once visited Tallinn with students – Estonia is such a musical country. I remember a massive stadium used for their national singing festivals. Even our bus driver talked about music!

ED: Yes! The singing tradition is vital to their identity. The fact that the Baltic States achieved independence through song – the Singing Revolution – is extraordinary. There's a Slavic proverb: *song is the soul of the nation, while a song lives the nation lives and it is not in vain.* I think that's true. Song keeps culture alive. In Latvia, they have one of the largest collections of poetry in the world. In Estonia, people sing constantly – it's part of daily life, from birth onwards.

I think there was even an article recently in *The ISM Journal* about Estonian singing traditions – how it's just... it's just embedded from babyhood. It's so deep-rooted.

AW: Yes! The bus driver who was taking us around over there – he wasn't a musician himself, but he waxed lyrical about singing, choirs and the music culture. You wouldn't get that here. Bus drivers over here don't talk about music like that!

ED: Absolutely, yes. I remember once I was working on some Lithuanian music and I met a Lithuanian barista in a coffee shop. I mentioned a composer, and they knew who I was talking about. I just don't think that would happen in a Costa Coffee here in the UK – if you brought up a British composer, I'm not sure the average person would know who you meant.

AW: No, I doubt it.

ED: It's the same in Poland – you *must* know your music. It's more than culture; it's lifeblood. And I think that comes from a history of occupation – music becomes your tangible heritage.

> "Once you start digging, you fall in love with the life behind the music.

So originally, I had planned to include Bacewicz, but then I quickly realised there were already a lot of recordings of her work. She didn't need my help as much – although I didn't come to that conclusion until halfway through recording! With Garūta and Mägi, I'd found these children's songs, and even though they seemed simple, I found them fascinating. They were the opposite of the more complex, layered sea pieces I had – sometimes with children's songs, you get right to the essence of a composer, where the seeds are planted. Her love of polyphony and folk music really shone through.

Then I encountered some Latvian music, which is when I hit a bit of a wall. I could find *some* of it, but not all. I'd read a thesis that referred to etudes written for the sostenuto pedal. That stopped me in my tracks – I thought, wow! No one writes specifically for the third pedal! I'd done a bit of research; I knew Busoni had written some contrapuntal pieces that touched on it, but these seemed unique.

By that point, I'd already fallen in love with Garūta's preludes – they were just so me. And then, of course, once you start digging, you fall in love with the life behind the music. I noticed all these connections – both Garūta and Mägi were largely self-taught, both pianists, both suffered injuries – though quite different in nature – and yet they shared so much common ground. Even the titles and characters of the music had parallels. I was still considering including Bacewicz at that stage, but eventually, I realised I'd have to make some cuts. The more I discovered, the more I saw that Mägi and Garūta had more in common with each other – more programmatic, poetic music. Bacewicz's was more abstract, serialist, neoclassical. Her piano music was brilliant, but quite different in tone from what I was shaping.

I started getting to know the repertoire I *did* have, and then I stumbled upon the mention of the etudes again. But I couldn't access them. I contacted Kristiāna Vaickovska, who had done her dissertation and master's thesis on Garūta's choral music and had written programme notes for recent recordings. I'd been listening to those 2023 CDs while trying to locate the etudes.

I kept writing to the Latvian Music Institute asking for help, but they kept sending me the wrong pieces!

AW: Really?

ED: Yes! They'd send something and I'd think, "Oh! This is beautiful – I must learn this!" So I kept discovering new gems, even if they weren't what I originally asked for.

Eventually, I realised the Kristiāna I'd been writing to was *the* Kristiāna who had written all those notes and assembled the recordings. I asked if I could meet her and offered to come to Latvia. She agreed, and I set

aside just a few days – three or four.

About a day before my flight, she told me Garūta's great-grandnephew wanted to meet me. Then she asked if I'd like to visit Garūta's house.

AW: Of course you said yes!

ED: Of course! It all happened very organically. I told her I wanted to visit the archives, the library, to dig deeper. And then we arrived at her house – where we later filmed the video.

AW: You said it was sparse and candlelit – was that intentional?

ED: Well, at first, I thought it was symbolic. We arrived on December 13th – Garūta's name's day.[1] I thought the candles were burning in celebration, but I quickly realised it was *freezing:* the roof had a hole, and there was no heating! It wasn't ceremonial; the building was just falling apart. It was part of an old tenement block. I asked whether it could be preserved – it holds such cultural value – but it's complicated with buildings like that.

It was a spontaneous, inspiring experience. On the same trip, I went to the archives and uncovered more music. At that point, I had enough for a full and meaningful CD. The project started with Polish music, but it evolved quite naturally.

AW: Which makes it more personal, doesn't it? You embarked on this journey and found yourself drawn in – to the music, to the composers, and to bringing their work to new audiences.

ED: Exactly. And there's something about the piano – it contains the essence of song. Both Garūta and Mägi were pianist-composers, and you feel that in the way their music sits under the hands. You don't write like that unless you really know the instrument. Garūta, in particular, had a significant performing career.

Mägi's was cut short due to injury, but both women played an essential role in promoting music in newly-independent Latvia and Estonia. What made it personal for me was their resilience. They didn't give up. They endured war, displacement, incredible challenges – and just kept going. That spirit reminds me so much of the women in my own family.

AW: It sounds like you share that drive. Not everyone follows through on a project like this.

ED: Once I latch on, I don't let go. When it came to those etudes, I was like a dog with a bone. So many dead ends. But I was born in the Year of the Ox – I don't give up. Very stubborn!

AW: Did your conversation with Garūta's grandnephew shed light on your interpretation?

ED: Yes – hearing about her life was so enlightening. She was clearly a very emotional person, and she poured that into her music. She faced so many personal setbacks – her music was banned under Soviet occupation. One cantata, *God, Thy Earth is Aflame*, written in the 1940s when Latvia was being torn apart by war, was banned for being too emotional and nationalistic. It resurfaced in 1988 and is now part of the sacred canon.

She was also a poet, writing some of her own texts, which was fascinating to see – including her letters. She had a deep love of flowers, like my mum, whose two passions were music and flowers. Garūta's first song was inspired by the flowers she encountered on the way home from school. As a child, I used to make up songs too – I still do, really.

She also had a niece she was very close to, and she dedicated her Piano Concerto to her niece, who died as a child. The emotional catharsis she experienced, the setbacks in her personal life – you can read about these things, but hearing them from someone who knew her makes a much deeper impact. Seeing photos of her, surrounded by flowers, or her name-day cake decorated with a treble clef and manuscript… the volume of students and musicians packed into her little flat! She clearly held an important place among those who knew her.

And the grandnephew told this story – which is on the video – about her teaching. The harshest thing she would say to a student was, "This is not very nice." I couldn't help laughing! So much more patient than I am.

And then seeing her shoes – she had tiny feet! Yet her music is full of massive, thick chords. It's not delicate music.

AW: And did you have a lot of music to choose from for the recording? Or is there music you wish you had included?

ED: Actually, I didn't have *that* much music. I had some more from the Polish side — I'd done some other recordings I didn't use. Garūta wrote more, like variations, but I didn't want to explore that direction. The pieces I chose were for a specific reason – like the *Legends*, which connect well. One piece, *Pasaka par kokli*, has a very complex Latvian title. I recognised *Pasaka* from the Latvian fairy tale ice cream at my local Eastern European shop, but I couldn't work out the rest. No one seemed able to translate it! Eventually, I realised *kokle*

1 Name days are celebrated in the Baltic states and much of Eastern Europe, to commemorate the saint an individual was named after. It's similar to a second birthday party. Each day of the Christian calendar is associated with one or more saints; Saint Lucija's day is 13 December.

was the Latvian word for *kantele*, the dulcimer – Estonians and Lithuanians use similar terms. The fact that both composers had written pieces based on this idea felt meaningful. Programmatically, they worked well together. Including something much larger in scale – like her variations – would have disrupted the thematic unity.

AW: Have you introduced these works to the concert hall?

ED: Yes, I've been playing them, and they've gone down really well! I recently played a concert on the Isle of Wight, connected to my grandfather – so I played Polish music: Szymanowska, Chopin – but also Garūta and Mägi. People were really taken with it. The first time I played Garūta's *Meditation* and some *Preludes* in concert, people stood up right after the Preludes – right at the beginning of the concert! That had never happened before. A really strong, immediate reaction. It was such a lovely surprise.

AW: They really engaged with the repertoire. They're wonderful pieces.

ED: Yes – especially the *Aetudes*. I learned a lot by listening differently, particularly using all three pedals, treating resonance in a unique way. One funny thing – I had a manuscript in Garūta's handwriting, in Latvian, with lots of detail. Beautiful but very sloping traditional script – hard to decipher. I didn't want to bother Patriks Zvaigane (though we're often in touch), so I tried everything. I even downloaded an app that deciphers handwriting! I used all my Latvian contacts, Google Translate – lots of guesswork. At one point, Google Translate gave me an absolutely rude phrase: "an infinite array of pedals" turned into a shocking swear word! That's when I realised I needed to do some proper research... eventually I got Patriks to help me!

AW: And where is this going to take you now? What are your future plans?

ED: What I would *like* to do – it might not be possible – but I'd love to get some of that Latvian music published, because not all of it is currently available. Even with the *Legend*, I had to make some editorial decisions, and I'd really like to make it more accessible to others. I think that would be an interesting project to follow up, if the opportunity arises.

AW: Yes, because in that video, you're looking at one of the manuscripts – was it the *Preludes*? I can't quite remember – and you said there was a lot more detail there than you'd seen before in the score?

ED: Yes, that's right. A lot of it comes down to the fact that she'd written instructions in three languages – French, Latvian... I can't recall exactly what that moment referred to, but yes, some of the *Preludes* are in addition to the published score. They *are* published, but for example, I had such difficulty tracking down the Études for the pedal. I don't think those are published, and neither is the *Legend*, as far as I know.

When I was exploring some of her songs, I found similar issues. Some were in Latvian, others in Russian, published in old library books with Russian titles – which was simply a result of the time and place. It's not anyone's fault, but it's just not easily accessible. I obviously don't plan to publish *all* her music – it's not for me to do – but I'd certainly like to publish *some* of her piano works, if the stars align.

AW: It's quite inspiring. And how does this all tie in with your teaching? I've heard you adjudicating and know you're a passionate teacher. Does this work feed into that, or is it separate?

ED: Oh, I don't think anything is ever really separate. Everything feeds into everything you do. That's one of the things both of these composers have taught me – they were both passionate teachers themselves. Ester Mägi was one of the longest-serving teachers in Estonia. She had such an influence on other composers, and so did Garūta.

They both taught composition and theory, and those are areas I feel strongly about too. I don't formally teach composition, but some of my students compose, and I do my best to support them. I try to bring in elements of improvisation and theory – it's all interconnected.

More broadly, I think we're always learning, and what we learn transfers directly into our work with students. It's a kind of shared magic circle.

AW: Do you find yourself encouraging your students to explore music from the Baltic states – or more generally, lesser-known composers?

ED: Absolutely. One of my students recently played some Latvian music. I also introduce

a lot of Ukrainian music. I think I have a bit of a reputation now – everyone knows I'll suggest something a little out of the ordinary!

But there's a very rich tradition of educational music and piano repertoire from that part of the world. I encourage my students to explore not just the composers I've worked with, but others from the region too. There's so much good music, especially in recent years, and it teaches you so much.

ED: And for me, working with this music meant I had no recordings to reference. I had to make my own decisions, which gave me a greater sense of responsibility and depth. I did a huge amount of research – not just musical, but cultural. I went to Baltic film festivals, read every Baltic book I could find, delved into poetry and history. That kind of holistic research is so important. These arts are never in isolation – they always connect.

AW: Absolutely. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you wish we had?

ED: Not really. I know I sort of worked backwards through the story, but what's been lovely is reflecting on how personal this journey has been. I found connections that weren't immediately obvious. If anything, it's taught me that it's really worth digging deeper – beyond what's instantly accessible. We've grown lazy thinking everything's a click away, and it's just not the case.

AW: I couldn't agree more.

ED: I really hope that people might become a little more curious about what the Baltic States have to offer culturally. I think there's a lot we could learn from that part of the world.

AW: Yes, and with so many Ukrainian refugees now here in the UK, many of whom are musicians, there's definitely been an impact – at least in the circles I move in. But I'm not sure it would happen the other way around.

ED: No, I don't think so. But actually, something I didn't mention: I discovered that my grandmother's half-brother was a famous Ukrainian poet. She was also distantly related to Karol Szymanowski. That all came out during the research!

AW: You have such a rich heritage – it's fascinating.

ED: Yes. And over there, music and poetry come first. I think that's something we're really lacking at the moment – it's quite sad. If children don't sing, they don't develop that natural connection with music. A lot of students can *play*, but they don't understand intervals or the expressive nuance between them.

AW: Yes – and Chopin insisted: you must learn to *sing* first and *play* second. I sang in choirs as a child without really knowing why, but it's influenced everything I've done musically since.

ED: Exactly. Singing is instinctive – language evolves from song. You can sing an interval expressively without even thinking about it. To replicate that on the piano takes effort. But if someone sings a phrase, they intuitively know what to do. So yes – let's get more people singing!

AW: Absolutely right. Thank you so much, Eva. It's been wonderful talking to you.

Postscript from Eva:

Actually, something I forgot to say in the interview at the time – Anthony asked if I had anything more to add, and I said no, but of course as soon as we ended the call, I remembered what I should have said. At the end of the CD booklet, I mention my love of mythology and include a tribute in the acknowledgements to Saule – and there's a reason for that.

This whole CD is, in many ways, a tribute to the strong, independent women I was surrounded by growing up, and to the stories passed down through generations, embedded in Slavic and Baltic culture. Both composers on this disc represent that lineage. It connects back to a time, long before Christianity, when women held significant roles – spiritually, culturally, and socially.

The Balts, of course, were the last after the Slavs to be Christianised, and in both traditions there's still a strong pull towards those older, pre-Christian roots. That's why I referred to Saule – the female sun deity in Baltic mythology. She's associated not only with the earth and fertility but also with the arts. She rides across the sky in a chariot drawn by horses, setting by the sea at the end of the day. She played the harp and was seen as a patron of music and creativity – and she was the most important deity. In most other mythologies, that role would be male, but not here.

So yes – that mythical, matriarchal thread was very much in my mind throughout the whole process of making this CD.