“A Gentleman in Moscow” is a refreshing look at a noble Russian through the positive lens of the author rather than the typically dark and evil representation portrayed by modern Western media. Towles’s protagonist, Count Alexander Rostov, represents an admirable character in preserving the noble core of his upbringing and his values despite his imprisonment in a hotel, the famous “Metropol.” Rostov maintains his nobility throughout the ups and downs and twists and turns of his new life, despite his drastically reduced social standing while in captivity. He adapts to his new life without the loss of or compromise with his principles and moral code as he navigates the morass of fear, love, deprivations and losses. As an attentive observer, you begin to understand the idea that nobility in its finest form is not something taught but inherent in that class of people. In this sense, the novel serves as a dedication to true nobility without necessary reference to a particular race, culture or place.

I found Towles’ use of the fantastical element of the NKVD/KGB imprisoning someone in a luxury hotel personally quite interesting. My grandmother experienced a torturous NKVD/KGB interrogation in the very building that later served as my music conservatory. The atrocities committed on a daily basis by this agency are markedly different from those represented in the book. The NKVD/KGB represented a terrible scourge on life in the Soviet Union. It was a rare case when a family would not suffer from involvement with this government agency. Interrogations left terrible scars. It was only in later years that I learned why my grandmother never attended a single concert of mine while I attended the Conservatory.

I personally appreciated Towles’ footnotes, which are of significant assistance for a Western audience to better understand the cultural context of his novel. This was especially helpful in the approach he takes to depict the political regime. Towles allows his audience to observe the changes occurring in Soviet Russia through the prism of the “gentleman,” who is somewhat insulated from the repression and horrors occurring outside the Metropol. While various angles are considered and analyzed, Towles takes a neutral position, neither scolding nor glorifying.

The character Nina offers an interesting juxtaposition to the Count’s life. With her “penchant for yellow,” she represents the beam of light at the end of the tunnel of the era’s darkness. Nina’s naïve yet serious attitude to life, her curiosity and courage, are the perfect combination of characteristics to revive the Count, whose carefree days of youth are long in the past. Nina’s parting gift in the form of a master key serves “to unlock” the reasons to live and die, to wonder, to discover new and unknown, to find answers. The next radiant light in the Count’s life was Sofia, his “adopted daughter.” I could relate to Sofia in her becoming a pianist and in her leaving her native country, but with this caveat. When playing music of the great Russian composers, no matter the
place in which you find yourself, the imagery, compositional language, and your connection with the music magically transports you, evoking those childhood memories of the places where you grew up, and your love for home. In this sense, as a musician, even if you leave, home is always within reach.

While I was disappointed in the end to find the Count would not spend his future near Sofia, whom he sets free, the Count returns to his place of noble birth, just as the coda of this beautifully written novel remains in the mind and heart of the reader.

Anna Billias, Accompanist