

Interview with YuanPu & Ivo Pogorelich about the Recital Program 2016/17

On Chopin Ballade No.2 and Scherzo No.3:

Since your very first recording, we have known your stunning performance of Ballade No.2 and Scherzo No.3. Even before that, you had created a new dimension of the interpretation of Chopin via these pieces in the Chopin competition. Years later, your recording of the complete Scherzi shows us another unbelievable achievement. Now more years have passed, and I am thrilled to know that you are bringing these two pieces back to your recital program, especially they are truly revolutionary ones—Ballade No.2 has a completely unconventional way of narration and key arrangement (starting with major but ending in minor), Scherzo No.3 requires the power that Chopin himself could not manage.

I was wondering if it is possible for you to share your wisdom and experience of mastering these two pieces these years?

It is so simple, you look at the music and then you look at yourself and then you see that there is something very beautiful and telling in front and you try to find out what is it that attracts you. It is like seeing an object and trying to get behind it and in doing so I am not trying to relate to how I did before and copy what I did before. The distance helps to establish a new and fresh start and for the rest it again has to do with listening, imagination, fantasy but also a critical eye. The beauty of music of extraordinary quality and inspiration is always richer than the impression of an individual. The truly inspired music is however always welcoming. And here one feels invited into its irrepeatable wealth where there are so many things to discover and explore. I always stressed the fact that in addition to learning new repertoire, which I do, I always think it very important to return and start discovering again. As everyone else I am amazed at how much of a suggestion can come from the composer through the text. It also demonstrates that classical music is resilient and that it is also a voyage and that we touch and seem to be facing what we think is the nicest, the most, beautiful, the most perfect but there is it seems always more and more in front.

Do you see them very differently now?

I do and that is a good thing because I see myself different. Leonardo da Vinci said the water that we touch in the river is last of the water that has already flown and the first of the one that is coming.

How to avoid those cliché and bring the innovation of them to the audiences now ?

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High art is search, and searching in itself is a process. So even when children play, when they are looking for something and they have their vision blocked other children scream "cold, cold, cold" and when an object is near the children shout "warm, warm, warm" and then when a child gets near the object they scream "hot". That means that the object is within reach. Same thing you try and try and try until you find.

Could you be so kind to discuss the innovation of the two pieces in terms of performing technique and composition?

Chopin's technique is innovative, individual and not strictly linked to the tradition of the "school of Vienna". His imagination has brought us some incredibly beautiful and very often hard and awkward to reproduce forms and shapes and that is why there is no recipe. Each passage has to be tried in many different ways as there is nothing standard in Chopin's pianism. Hence the solutions are also not standard or repetitive.

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On Schumann:

It is also impossible for me to forget your Schumann, from Symphonic Etudes, Toccata to Fantasy in C major you performed two years ago. I am amazed by your sound governing and layers of mood in your colorful interpretation.

In Schumann's music, sometimes we see faces, sometimes we see masks, and in Faschingsschwank aus Wien, I was wondering how you see this world of fantasy?

Lets begin by saying that Schumann accomplished very few of his goals he had set in life as a young man. At the same time he left a treasure that is still not valued and understood enough. This is a man who's talent was far greater than his own daily life dimension. It is known that he was aspiring to become a concert virtuoso pianist and there were other aims like the aim of educating people and enlightening people as he fought against bad custom and bad taste in music in his lifetime. He was very brave and much is written about it. He is also the person responsible for the first monument ever erected to Ludwig van Beethoven. What we have today is piano works of such richness and beauty that would need more effort and much more work in order to be understood and presented through interpretations as this seems to be an author who opened the most hidden and intimate parts of the human heart and soul and there is so much more in his music than we understand today. He is not just another so called romantic.

How is it related to Vienna?

Well there are rapports on Schumann's stay in Vienna and we don't know how fortunate he was because this is just a part of his biography. But what is certain is that Vienna could not be taken only physically but rather metaphorically. We know that towards the end of the 19th century Vienna was the biggest city of Europe, bigger than London or Paris and had a strong music industry, whatever it means. Certainly it was seen as the centre of music education and culture at the time. Schumann's own experience must not have been positive or fortunate but then again I don't like it when people rely too much on the account of contemporaries as witnesses. So we are reading something about a person we want to know about, which is really second hand knowledge. For example when I was a student I once read a book of memories on Rachmaninoff written by his contemporaries, friends and family. I was under the impression that all of them and each of them where somehow more significant than Rachmaninoff himself !!! Back to Schumann, it is alright to know certain things about the life of the composer but in the end it loses significance

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because there is so much more in the text of the music itself and do we really need to know what Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms had for lunch on a given Wednesday when Brahms paid a visit to the family.

What are the hidden meanings or implications of ball and masks in Schumann's music (or in this piece)?

Counter question: What does a smile of Mona Lisa mean? I suppose the answer is different things to everyone who stands in front of the painting. What I am trying to say is that Schumann's music is often underrated. In reality it is an enigma and has as many steps (moves) as the game of chess does. What I mean to say is that there is something infinite about the trepidation that music both processes and invokes in listeners.

Pianistically, there are many tricky parts in it, especially how to deal with the overtones and create colorful and clear sound. Is it possible for you to reveal your secret to us?

In the question before you mentioned symphonic Etudes by Schumann. So symphonic comes from Beethoven who began treating the piano as a representation of an orchestra. If we look at Schumann as a composer we can see that it often took him years to complete a particular movement or piece. Equally none of his works can be learned quickly or easily and the fact that some of the motives are very likeable and pleasant to the ear does not help at all and is often misleading. It sounds nice when you first read it but for it to sound convincing much has to be invested in terms of an effort and dedication before it really becomes alive.

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On Mozart Fantasy:

Another revolutionary piece in your program. It's still hard to believe that this piece is written in 1785! The mood and modulation are shockingly modern. Unfortunately so many people simply regard it as another Viennese classical work and perform it in a boring, conventional pattern.

Could you be so kind to share your ideas of this piece with us?

I am perplexed by the logic and perfection in writing of that composer. He is presenting to us in a short work of music tremendously impacting pages with such contrasts and elegance that are exemplary. At first I did not really know what to do with it but the more time I gave to it the more of its inner logic came to my aid and gradually I became aware of the personal and at the same time universal message of that work called Fantasy. It is as if his fantasy did not only have to do with him but it was also a visionary flight into the future epochs in classical music. The simplicity of the writing and the elegance was taken over later on by composers such as Prokofieff, Bartok and Strawinsky for example, at a completely different time and it is truly shocking to feel that Mozart had such a short life.

Was Mozart ever *avant-garde*?

Mozart has given us a look into the future in his music and his life ended too soon for him to have developed it further.

How is he misunderstood by people?

Like anyone who carries something significant is often not understood because people are content to consume something that does not require much effort. So what they normally do, they scratch the surface and say how nice!! People also don't feel comfortable when their heart is really touched to the point of feeling unsettled by music. Anyway, when I was young, people would dress up for concerts and ladies would wear elegant dresses and man would wear ties. We don't see much of that nowadays.

How do you see the modulation pattern and pianistic language in this fantasy?

Revolutionary

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On Rachmaninov:

When you started to perform the Sonata No.2, there were still not so many pianists playing it on the stage. Now it becomes young pianists' favorite and we can hear it in almost every competition with emptiness, loudness and plain colors.

Rachmaninoff complained that it's not a popular one and tried to promote it in vain. Horowitz did promote it, but also led the interpretation to a quite narrow direction. I was wondering if you can tell us how you start to know and learn this piece at the very beginning, and how to see this piece through years.

In addition, if possible, would you be so kind to share with us your thoughts about Rachmaninoff, as composer and as pianist?

Let's begin by saying that the piece was inspired by the city of Roma Rachmaninoff visited. When we say Roma we have a picture of images associated with it. We, who have visited the city, have also our favourite parts of the city. I can imagine that someone as gifted as Rachmaninoff has been struck as if by lightning, by the significance and importance of the combined imagery and history of that city, provoking a stream of associations, transformed into musical pictures and experiences. Rachmaninoff often returned to his music, reducting it and offering a different version of the piece. I, for example, am playing the later version of the piece. That means that in his desire to give the meaning to listeners he tried to condense the form and make it more compact. So people are often searching in that piece for something that is not there. What is there is Rachmaninoff, his imagination, his passion, his inordinary wealth of motives and harmonies and his southern blood in front of the gates of Roma!!

Some elements frequently appear in Rachmaninoff's music, such as orthodox ch[^]nt, funeral ceremony/ burial service, nightmare, bell sound, nostalgia , and Sonata No.2 probably has them all. How do you see these elements and how do you decode them?

Rachmaninoff was once asked whether his music was melancholic. No he said his music was sad. Now this is what he said about his impression about his music. Anybody else, including myself, does not have to follow that concept at all. If his music was sad to him, it does not necessarily mean that it is sad to me, on the contrary, music has a way of surpassing the human being and becoming something much greater, much more voluminous and also can change the message, like individual feelings. In this particular case of Rachmaninoff as person loses significance compared to the wealth of music he

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left behind. In that music there is much more than what was even felt by the composer, the person at the time when he wrote it. Today his music is contrary to sadness and reaching our senses, our imagination. Where he felt melancholy, inspiring us with the beauty of the motives and incredible harmonic moves and modulation and rather than making us cry, is filling us with vigor, with lifestream and with everything that makes us feel that life is and living can be beautiful and worthwhile living. This is the paradox of music and the paradox of a genius.

I often think it's Rachmaninoff's dark prophesy to the world going to come (the 1913 version), and I was wondering if it is possible for you to reveal your interpretation of it?

In my previous reply I tried to explain that we should not be slaves to a conventional way of thinking and that we should not look at a particular composition or even a particular author in just one or two dimensions. Chronology, history, epoch, ambience, situation are all to be respected. However from time to time in the history of music a work jumps out of the orbit and assumes its own fear and becomes its own planet circling above our heads.. The transformation could be surprising and the meaning of true art is to discover, to unveil and to open up people's senses. That in short is the description of my job.

In addition, through 1913 and 1931 the two versions, what can we learn from Rachmaninoff's revision?

Each page written by a composer is precious. Here we have an example of an author wishing to redefine the work by introducing some changes.

Is there anything you miss in the 1913 version?

As I said the decision of the author has to be respected.

Would you consider to make your own version from the two?

Not really.

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He had great technical ability, but in many pieces, taking Piano Concerto No.2, the one you are going to perform for example, his interpretation is somehow too light and only touches the surface of the work.

I never really understand the reason behind that

We can not really understand as we were never in his concerts. There are different reports regarding the impression people had as listeners in his concerts and it is very difficult to trust recordings. Apparently he was not very much willing to record but this is what we don't know. There are also some accounts quoting some kind of physical loss of strength or related to problems of blood circulation as he was a heavy smoker. But this is all anecdotal. What is not anecdotal is that Rachmaninoff exploded very early as a talent and was not really much trained by any important piano figure of the epoch and was not as lucky as his cousin Alexander Ilich Siloti, who had luck to study with Liszt. I can also say that it often seems to me that when a chef prepares fish for clients, the same chef would probably eat bacon for lunch. And if he prepares meat for a client, he would probably have a sardine for lunch. What I mean to say is that we should not regard Rachmaninoff's interpretation of his own works or Prokofiev's interpretation of his own works as an ideal standard simply because they are very close to the material as they wrote it. So there is no distance and fascination that works provoke in other people and the third factor is that when you are composer and a pianist you have to divide your time between the two activities. And so there is not all the time in the world for concert or recording preparation available.

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On tempo and speed:

Please be so kind to forgive me asking this offensive-may-be question: Your interpretation, still taking Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No.2 for example, is attacked by some as "too slow". Of course, those who make such a comment definitely lack the ears and brain to appreciate the sound structure, various colors, contrapuntal reading, deep emotion as well as philological thoughts in your performance.

However, I was wondering if it is possible for you to share some words on tempo and speed in general?

There is the sound that has its length and there is the character and the sound exists within the character. It also exists in a particular acoustic in a concert hall, a particular piano etc. I believe that the question of sound is also the question of space and also the question of volume related to the space. For example when I make a recording my attitude towards space changes because the sound is absorbed by microphones and there is therefore less freedom that I can have in terms of what is described in a primitive language as speed. I prefer to call it space or pulse but certainly not speed. That means to say that you can feel more liberty and in terms of the length and the curve of sound at a concert hall as it is a live event and has individual characteristics. For example in open air concerts, because of different acoustics, the curve of the sound and the volume is again very different and hence the pace or pulse also changes.

What kind of suggestion can I give to those who never think that an artist should take a road that no one has taken before?

Tell them to go back home and take a long and restful sleep.