

EWA POBŁOCKA

MY CHOPIN

Another Chopin Competition is approaching. When five years ago, in the bicentennial of the Composer's birth, I was asked by the "Zeszyty Literackie" ['Literary Notebooks'] editorial team to write about my Chopin, I was unable to complete this task. I attempted it several times, but my phrasing lacked melody, the shape was incoherent and the completion was impossible, as *dolce* and *delicato* sounded unconvincingly. Today, the experience of the years past is on my side. I might even perceive the world, and certainly Chopin's music, in a different way. This without a doubt results from the effort I put into the recently recorded Chopin's works. Albums with a repertoire I could have composed myself. A set of waltzes along with a recital of ballads, scherzos and selected waltzes – edited differently. Why waltzes after one turns fifty? Where does this understanding of phrasing flexibility and gentleness of expression come from? Why did the word *nostalgia* suddenly become key for understanding...?

From my early childhood, I remember my name day one year, on Christmas Eve. My parents woke me up in the morning to gift a large, exquisitely packed box with a set of Chopin's complete works released by Polskie Nagrania ['Polish Records'], recorded by Polish musicians. I could not resist listening to it. Instead of having breakfast, decorating the Christmas tree or grinding poppy seeds for a traditional Christmas cake – I listened to Chopin all day. And it was not my first encounter with his music. I had already listened for hours to the Chopin Concerts broadcast back then on Sundays by Polish Radio 1. Even today, I can see the blue "eye" with which you had to set the right radio waves in the receiver my mum brought from the Netherlands in 1959, after she won a singing competition in 's-Hertogenbosch. The sound of that radio was warm, velvet smooth and intense. Spacious. Not only when you listened to music. It also fabulously conveyed spoken word and actors' voices. For apart from Chopin Concerts, I also listened to the Polish Radio Theatre and radio dramas, strongly reacting to any "special effects" such as the sounds of a storm, of glasses shaking during a feast, or a southing river or forest. This was all brought to me by my *Blaupunkt*, now replaced by Hi-Fi systems full of electronics or plastic transistor radios with no soul or sonority. Chopin Concerts also brought order to my Sunday time. I postponed various activities to listen to them, writing down the pianists' names in a special notebook, together with the repertoire. To my great surprise, but also satisfaction, I have recently discovered that the composer Henryk Mikołaj Górecki also kept such a notebook in his early years. In this article, I could not fail to list the names of the pianists I got to know at that time. They were: Halina Czerny-Stefańska, playing with a natural, beautiful tone, in a grand and noble way; Władysław Kędra, playing brightly, wittily and lightly; Regina Smendzianka — smart, balanced and elegant; Witold Małcużyński — a living legend, monumental, but also lyrical. They were my models whose performances shaped my musical taste. Naturally, Artur Rubinstein should be added to the list, as my mum brought me his records from nearly every foreign trip, from many different parts of the world. Names of other eminent pianists came in later, such as Józef Hofmann, Ignacy Friedman, Murycy Rosenthal, Dinu Lipatti, Martha Argerich and Maurizio Pollini.

The first Chopin Competition engraved in my memory was the one in 1970 with Garrick Ohlsson as the winner – I could not stop listening to his album with Chopin's sonata; it was with me every day, for months. Besides Ohlsson, I remember the famously "different" Jeffrey Swann. Then, I can recall 1975 when we all celebrated Krystian Zimerman's victory (marvellous, joyful, perfect performance!), and I was also

captivated by an interpretation of *Mazurkas op. 30* by Katarzyna Popowa-Zydroń. Finally, 1980 – the time of great political transitions in Poland – but also of "my" competition. My dream! I had been preparing for it for years. As far back as in primary school, playing this first "forgotten" Waltz in A minor at many school ceremonies and concerts. It was my introduction to a vast Chopin repertoire. My Chopin Competition is not just memories of my own emotions and performances, but also inspiration from great colleagues — Dang Thai Son, Tatiana Shebanova and Ivo Pogorelič. You could not be indifferent to their achievements, splendid play and interpretation. A few years ago, the Vietnamese winner of 1980 recorded both Chopin's piano concertos on a historical instrument, accompanied by an 18th century orchestra conducted by Frans Brüggen during the "Chopin and his Europe" festival. It is a magnificent record!!! It was awarded numerous prizes, and even became a platinum record, which is such a rare feat in classical music. *Concerto in E minor* is particularly brilliant, breathtaking, making you start to believe again that the beautiful, good, worthwhile and unconventional - does not necessarily have to defy tradition and be newly designed. At this point, I cannot help quoting Kierkegaard: "The very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new". What draws my attention when I listen to Dang is simplicity, melodious, long sounds, artlessness and a certain philosophy. He takes his time, does not rush or seek shortcuts in his expression. He is like that in real life too. In 2010, the Chopin Year, I had a chance to perform together with Dang Thai Son at several concerts in a piano duo. We played music of various eras, from Mozart through Schubert and Chopin to Poulenc, four hands and on two pianos. What a glorious sensation! And experience. Not only full concentration and an open mind at rehearsals, but also complete attention to pure music at concerts. I think it is also thanks to this experience that I now understand playing the piano and music itself in a different way than I did five years ago. Perhaps, before that I was not ready to play Chopin. Maybe this is also why I was not able to write about *My Chopin* back then?

Today, Chopin for me is gentle, thoughtful, engrossed with music, tender, but also sensual, passionate, rebellious, poetic and harmonious, songful and melancholic. I can picture him both in a tavern and in a salon, and I start to understand him as I read about his nostalgia. Now I know better, which does not mean that I have stopped searching. One can always play in a more beautiful and true way.

This is a great advantage of our profession, which is not exactly a profession – the constant pursuit of excellence, as each concert is just one moment and even now I do not know what it is that can make it a moment of happiness or frustration... Our main activity as pianists is - continual practice in the studio. Far away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life, we keep on searching.

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