

CHOPIN'S BICENTENNIAL



After 200 years, Chopin remains one of the most revered composers of the classical repertoire.

By Clara Salomon

almost any composer. I don't mean to say that we should forget about Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky.....it's just that he seems to hold the magical key. He's a composer of the heart, and I think that is perhaps his greatest strength. Of course, you know he even said that about himself: "My domain is the human heart and soul."

Most anyone can appreciate Chopin's music because it seems to be unfolding in the moment, improvised in all of its perfection that very instant. The qualities of immediacy penetrate his works, a spontaneous intensity that draws one in to what Ohlsson terms an "emotional stream of consciousness." And yet, Ohlsson reminds us that, "of course, the paradox is we know that, even though he was a great improviser, he worked like a tortured soul for weeks or months to recapture the essence of that inspiration on the page."

Chopin gave a lot to the world, and what he gave in terms of personal energy in his quest for precision was hard won and costly - as is evidenced by his perpetually consumptive constitution and early death at the age of 39.

All of this would seem so very straightforward, but history, much like a wayward lover imposing his own pathos on the object of affection, has willingly kept a veil over its eyes with respect to the man himself, his personality, and his intentions. It may be difficult for many to really get to *know* Chopin well, to interpret his music, to tell his story or the collective human story as Chopin felt it. Professor Belsky talks about her own students and the high passion - if sometimes overt zeal - with which many often launch an attack into an etude or a ballade.

So compelling is the romance and drama of Chopin that, for the undisciplined musician, it can be difficult to stay true to the lyrical, noble essence of his works without driving the rhythms and darker harmonic sections, with their often radical developments, through the roof. To speak, for instance, of the E major etude, the secondary developmental section is absolutely devilish on all levels. Technically, the chromatic fourths exercise the fingers in ways a pianist is hard pressed to find anywhere else. And as Ohlsson tells us, Chopin is kind of "the Rosetta's Stone of piano playing. He teaches you how to play the piano.....He was instrumental in the development of the human hand and the development of the singing cantabile style."

And yes, in the practice of balancing the technical agility of the human hand and musicianship in the playing of Chopin's works, it is easy to give up good technique, to fail to breathe, and to abandon self control. The ladies and gentleman that formed Chopin's audiences were known to do so at regular turns.

The other thing, as Ohlsson points out, is Chopin's "music is highly emotional and even demonic sometimes and tragic in its intensity.....(and yet) he's fully in control of all the forces. It's not that he's not deeply emotional. He's incredibly (so).....he's not at all cold and calculating, but he knows, in other words, the demons that are pulling his carriage; he's really got his hand on the whip. He's not gonna go out of control. But, (those demons) are gonna take you on the wildest ride." And yet, the student of Chopin must

Chopin's bicentennial anniversary will be celebrated around the world this year, and Chicago is one city that will not be missing out. Ravinia will host world renowned pianist Garrick Ohlsson in a series of concerts that showcase the most important and famous of the piano concerti. Ohlsson first came to the international stage in 1970 when he became the first American ever to win the International Frédéric Chopin Piano Competition, and he has not changed stance on his ardent devotion to the composer since. *Clef Notes* was fortunate enough to be granted an interview with the pianist, as well as with Professor Svetlana Belsky of the University of Chicago, herself an internationally distinguished concert artist, and also the editor and translator of *Busoni As Pianist*.

Both would agree that any serious student of the classical piano tradition must go through a major Chopin phase, stricken at least once in their studies with an intense fever that remits only with the hands and heart entwined in an etude, or perhaps professing their own passion through a nocturne or ballade. With something akin to the intensity and momentary fervor with which a teenager suffers their first love, one could argue that this amorous phase is one which never entirely sees its end.

In his preface to *Chopin, The Reluctant Romantic*, Jeremy Siepmann, former head of music for the BBC World Service, tells us, "Chopin has never suffered even a brief period of eclipse. Unlike Liszt, Berlioz, Mendelssohn and Schumann, his music has enjoyed uninterrupted (indeed, ever increasing) popularity from the time of his youth to the present." A symphony hall that elects to program one of the composer's concerti or a piano recital of etudes typically guarantees itself an excellent turnout. The name Chopin literally strikes a deep chord with so many. Even those who prefer the music of "classical light" seem to be able to endure the complexity and poignant emotional implications of any Chopin piece.

As to why this might be, Ohlsson gives us an answer as immediate as a beloved Chopin melody:

Great musicians, great artists, great musicologists, and great minds feel the same way about Chopin's music. He seems to appeal to a wider spectrum of humanity than

not be carried away on the carriage to Hades. Belsky and Ohlsson both talk about the apollonian control of all of the internal forces in Chopin's works, and about staying true to the poise and balance that are so central to any compelling interpretation.

And for Belsky, it is the stuff of her tutelage to encourage students to *feel* the passion and immediacy of the music in the moment, but also to channel it all, as Chopin once did, into something beautiful and capable of being shared and relevant to anyone.

The same passion and emotional weight imbued into Chopin's works has also been imbued into history's perception of the man himself. It is easy to understand, then, how history has looked at Chopin and persistently misinterpreted his character. Take, for example, the two most popular depictions of Chopin by contemporary artists. In the more famous Delacroix interpretation of Chopin, he has the pallor of an already advanced syphalitic, his face gaunt, his gaze weary of his own humanity, with an expression suggestive of one who has been passed over, perhaps deeply misunderstood. There is also an aura of mystery – half of his face is concealed from us, and the hint of movement in the painting would suggest he is about to quietly waste away into an ambiguous background.

The Ary Scheffer rendition of the romantic icon, however, presents Chopin as a resolute young man. Like his music, there is a pronounced gentleness in Sheffer's youthful Chopin that is juxtaposed by the intense determination detailed in the bold representation of the musician's jaw. Extreme sensitivity marked by an equally pronounced clarity of form faintly echo the composer's own, self-proclaimed forbears, Mozart and Bach. Belsky, remarks that during Chopin's life, the piano was in a state of constant and rapid evolution. While he typically performed on a Streicher piano, when presented with the new Pleyel, he remarked that "Pleyel pianos are the last word in perfection." The Pleyel, is a much softer, incredibly subtle and coloristic instrument capable of tender pianissimo or very soft playing. It was also the favorite of Claude Debussy, another pianist who was greatly influenced by Chopin and known for his light touch, warm harmonies, and a rich pallet of color.

With equal parts humor and exasperation, Belsky notes that most audiences and students of Chopin would heartily identify with the Delacroix painting – and also the more dramatic of the pianos – as more apt representations of the composer's temperament and music. They fit well with the view of Chopin as the romantic icon, a dark and distracted genius tortured by fragile health and unrequited love. According to Belsky, however, depictions of the composer in his day were much at odds with Chopin's perceptions of self.

Unfortunately for Chopin, history has had a way of creating myths about his life, in particular, his alleged affair with the older, famed writer Amandine Lucie Aurore Dupin (who wrote under the pen name of George Sand and who commonly referred to Chopin as "Le Chopinet"). Much has also been written about his supposed delicate nature, and his premature death at 39, tinged with tragedy. And his stage persona would most probably not prove congruent with the image of a conquering hero concert artist.

Unlike Liszt, Chopin did not like to play public concerts; the celebrated pianist/composer did not enjoy being the center of attention. His piano technique, like his well-structured compositions, was simple to behold (if nearly impossible to emulate) and in no way related to the stereotype of the romantic genius lowering his head to the piano, hands like talons poised to swoop down and tackle the keys. Chopin was always extremely

PIANIST GARRICK OHLSSON
WILL PERFORM TWO CHOPIN
PIANO CONCERTI WITH THE
CSO IN RAVINIA'S CELEBRATION
OF THE COMPOSER'S
200TH ANNIVERSARY.



PHOTO BY PAUL BODY

straightforward about his own correct placement in the canon of music history, even as it was being made. Whereas Schubert is most often associated as classical romantic, Chopin considered himself to be a decided classicist. His book of *preludes* was very self-consciously modeled after Bach's well-tempered clavier, each study a devoted exploration of one of the twelve tonalities from both the technical and harmonic perspectives. The melodies within those works, while utterly lyrical, bel-cantoesque (he was greatly inspired by the opera of the day), and free-spirited, were never truly unruly, and they always remained tethered to a discrete, if often arpeggiated, bass line.

Yet, in spite of the extremely stable structures, the clear recapitulations and developments that characterize Chopin's music, the incredible amount of labor music, as Ohlsson describes it, seems to materialize from "an emotional stream of consciousness. It doesn't sound premeditated or constructed." This quintessential facet of romantic music, that sounds and feels almost improvised, effortless, is due to a highly self-disciplined composer's feat of *nascondere l'arte* or the "hiding of the art," a precision of form and a naturalness of lyricism that leaves a listener or pianist with an *impression* of grace and universal "rightness." One has a tendency to forget that Chopin labored intensely to reconstruct what was, at its inception, simply an improvisation - as if he sought to maintain the ethereal quality of something bestowed from a higher universe.

Ohlsson talks about the challenge every artist must overcome to appropriate the technique already latent in the music. The paradox of playing Chopin is very much evident: "No composer feels as natural to me as a pianist as Chopin does. I mean, he fits the hand incredibly well even though he's extremely demanding of the hand. But, it's done in such an organic way that the music, while not necessarily feeling comfortable, feels thrilling...with some other composers you're struggling more. I feel like I breathe more naturally with Chopin, and there's a kind of a relaxation even though there's a tremendous intensity in the music. For example, if I play a mixed recital with two or three or four composers, and let's say I have Chopin at the end, when I arrive at the Chopin section (I feel), 'Ahhh this is what I wanted to do all along.'"

Since this examination of Chopin has spoken much of contrast, it seems aesthetically justifiable to conclude with one. In love, Chopin set his sights upon George Sand, volatile, flamboyant, and descended from nobility. She actively cultivated the company of peasants, whereas her "Chopin" was conspicuously urban and formal, reserved, of positively humble origins, and constantly courting (or being courted by) nobility. Chopin's music is a mixture of qualities, with its most coarse and drastic developments and features always strongly grounded by elegant, careful form, and surrounded on all sides by a tremendous, if often tragic, lyricism. The little worlds that are each and every one of Chopin's unique works inspire within us much impetus to wonder about the man himself and the world through which he speaks to us: his music. ♦