

Annual Chopin Concert at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland
Saturday, February 12, 2011

By Ted Mirecki

This year's concert, unlike most previous ones, did not consist solely of music by Chopin, but included several pieces by Samuel Barber, who was born in 1910, exactly one century after Chopin. Thus the concert celebrated the bicentennial of Chopin's birth and the centennial of Barber's.

The pianist was Lara Downes, who is Artist in Residence at University of California Davis. The opening work was Chopin's Nocturne in B-flat minor, Op. 9 no. 1, the first of Chopin's Nocturnes to be published. This was followed by Barber's Nocturne, Op. 33, sub-titled "Homage to John Field." The Irishman Field, Chopin's contemporary, was the first to use the title "nocturne" for a keyboard piece, and published some 20 of them. The pair created an interesting contrast – Chopin's long, flowing lines of melody painting a sound image of a peaceful night, while Barber's spiky atonality, but with no harsh unmelodic elements, evoked a "dark and stormy night."

The centerpiece of the program was Chopin's Sonata in B minor, Op. 58. In the first two movements, Lara's disciplined approach brought out a characteristic which is not typically associated with romantic piano music – counterpoint, the simultaneous sounding of multiple musical lines, as opposed to a single melody against a non-melodic accompaniment such as an oom-pah-pah bass. The most prominent practitioner of counterpoint was Johann Sebastian Bach, whom Chopin greatly admired, and used this technique extensively in his work, but 20th-Century performance style had tended to mask it. It takes a very clean approach to phrasing and fingering to bring it out, and Lara certainly succeeded.

In the third movement, *Largo*, there were several instances where the flow could have been smoother, and the volume softer – more on this later. The virtuosic finale, marked *Agitato*, was a truly bravura performance. Tempos were varied in ways very appropriate to the nature of the various passages. The right-hand descending runs were taken at breakneck speed, but cleanly, with no slurring – each note was plainly distinct and the inner voicing was clearly brought out.

Next on the program were two of Barber's four Excursions for Piano, Op. 20. As in the nocturne, the atonality added a piquant accent to the music, without harshness. All three of the Barber pieces showed his clear invocation of a modern incarnation of romanticism, although not of the lush Rachmaninoff variety.

The final number, Chopin's Andante Spianato and Grande Polonaise in E-flat major, was dedicated by Lara Downes to solidarity with Belarus and the Belarusian people – which she announced prior to performing the piece. The Andante is a slow, melancholy piece, which here was played somewhat too energetically. The ensuing Polonaise is not among the best of Chopin's efforts in this genre, having more flash than substance. Although originally written with accompanying orchestral flourishes, it is usually performed, as it was here, with the flourishes transcribed into the keyboard part. It is a great virtuosic showcase, and in that regard Lara did it justice.

The one characteristic I found wanting in her playing was a rather limited dynamic range, meaning the volume differences between loud and soft passages. Specifically, soft passages of the Chopin Nocturne, the sonata's Largo and the Andante were not soft enough for the cameral scope of the Embassy's salon, detracting somewhat from the dramatic effect that Chopin's works should have.

Lara was born and raised in San Francisco in a musical family; her roots are Eastern European Jewish and Jamaican. She began music studies in her native city, then continued in Vienna, Basel and Berlin. The teachers who had the greatest influence on her were Hans Graf in Vienna and pianist Rudolf Buchbinder in Basel. Presently, she is actively involved in bringing musical education programs to schoolchildren in grades K – 12.

PAAA wishes to thank Ms. Malgorzata Szum and Mrs. Krystyna Sikorska of the Cultural Section of the Embassy of the Republic of Poland for their outstanding cooperation in organizing and executing this concert.