

TRAILBLAZERS OF THE PIANO

Concert by Brian Ganz, March 6, 2021
Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church, Bethesda, MD

The concert consisted of works by Beethoven, Chopin and Debussy, each of whom, as Brian explained in his introductory remarks, brought trailblazing innovations to the art of pianism.

The first work was Beethoven's Sonata in C Minor, Op. 13 (*Pathétique*). It is full of dramatic flourishes on a grand scale. The first movement begins with a *Grave* (slow) introduction, followed by a *Molto allegro con brio* body. An interesting feature of this movement is that reminiscences of the slow introduction reappear several times between the usual elements of sonata form – not with the regularity of a rondo, but interrupting the impassioned allegro with hints of pathos. Brian's execution was flawless – I don't remember if I had heard him playing anything but Chopin, but he is obviously a multi-faceted musician.

The *Adagio cantabile* second movement is in the form of a rondo, with a slow, lyrical melody as the refrain and a more lively pace in the two episodes. It needs not just keyboard technique but an emotional connection to the music, which was in full evidence here.

The *Allegro* finale is also a rondo, with more episodes. It is somewhat of a mirror image of the second, with a quick refrain and slower episodes. I have two recordings of this sonata, by Artur Schnabel and Glenn Gould, and find them very different, especially in the final movement. Whereas Schnabel plays it moderately quickly, Gould tears into it a furious pace. Despite the differences, I like both renditions equally well. Brian played this movement at a tempo between those two, and that too I find fully satisfying. Just goes to show that music presents an infinity of possible, equally valid interpretations.

Next came two pieces from Debussy's Images: *Reflets dans l'eau* (*Reflections in the Water*) from Book 1 and *Poissons d'or* (*Goldfish*) from Book 2. Debussy's style departs significantly from Beethoven's, and is descended from and an extension of Chopin's innovations in piano technique. Here again, Brian showed his versatility in presenting a variety of styles.

Chopin works rounded out the rest of the program. There were four Preludes from Op. 28, mostly on the small-scale side, more intimate than virtuosic, then the Mazurka in B-flat minor, Op. 24 no. 4, whose poignant minor-key harmonies tugged at the heartstrings.

Then the *piece de resistance*: Chopin's Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31. This is my favorite among the four Scherzos, and among my favorites in all of Chopin's oeuvre. It was played with the requisite ferocity in the outer sections, and with delicacy in the trio.

The two works bookending the program – Beethoven's Sonata and Chopin's Scherzo – although separated by almost half a century in time and light-years in style, do have something in common: the composer's deeply felt emotions expressed by virtuosic keyboard fireworks. And Brian brought these out magnificently.

As an encore, he played Chopin's Mazurka in A minor, Op. 17 no. 4, whose minor-key tonalities expressed the supposedly archetypical Polish characteristic of *Żal, Tristesse*.

All in all, a most enjoyable evening, for which we are sincerely grateful. Looking forward to hearing him again soon in live performance.