

## Solo Piano Recitals

**Brian Ganz, February 1 2020**

**Thomas Pandolfi, February 23 2020**

### **Pianist Brian Ganz in His Continuing Series of the Complete Works of Fryderyk Chopin**

On February 1, 2020, Brian Ganz gave the tenth concert in his series. The theme was "Chopin and the Growth of Genius" – it juxtaposed some early works with later, more mature ones of the same form. I had been exploring this through recordings for years, and was glad to hear a live performance based on this premise.

The concert opened with two posthumously published Mazurkas, in C Major and A-flat Major, Nos. 57 and 58 in the so-called "Paderewski" Edition. They were composed in 1833 and 1834 respectively, when Chopin was 23 and 24 years of age, so are not as early as his first compositions (polonaises). Although both are written in major key signatures, they exhibit much chromaticity, often dipping into minor tonalities.

This was followed by the four Mazurkas of Op. 33, composed in 1837-38, barely four years later, yet showing a growing sophistication in the development of musical ideas. These are no mere folk dances, but miniature tone poems of great depth. No. 1, in G-sharp minor, is a slow Kuyaviak with heart-tugging pathos. No. 2, in D Major, is a scintillating cascade of notes in the rhythm of an Oberek, a fast form of Mazurka with some sections reverting to Kuyaviak tempo. Brian pulled it off with brilliant virtuosity, modulating the fast-slow transitions adroitly. The third, in C Major, again exhibited many minor-key sonorities. No. 4, in B Minor, lives up to its key signature in a slow Kuyaviak tempo.

Next came a set of Nocturnes: E minor, Op. 72 No. 1, from 1827 and published posthumously by his friend Juliusz Fontana, despite Chopin's directive that all of his unpublished works were to be destroyed. That dying man's wish was thankfully overridden by his sister Ludwika who authorized Fontana to publish them. Many priceless gems were thus spared from eternal destruction. Unlike most opus numbers that collect pieces of the same genre, this is a catch-all opus linking a Nocturne, a Funeral March (see below) and three Ecossaises (Scottish dances). This Nocturne was Chopin's first attempt at the genre, and is close to the template established by the Irish pianist John Field, who invented the type, depicting a calm and peaceful night through rippling passages.

The two Nocturnes of Op. 27, written in 1835, exhibit a much more sophisticated harmonic and melodic structure. Interspersed among the tranquil nocturnal themes are moments eliciting a "dark and stormy night," and Brian delineated the contrasts superbly.

Polonaises were the first compositions of a young Chopin, beginning at age seven (1817). As an example of an early work of this kind, Brian chose one from 1828, posthumously published as Op. 71 No. 2. It displays more maturity than the juvenile works of 1817-22, but is far from the sophistication of later works of this form. Op. 26. No. 1 was the first to be published during Chopin's lifetime, and already shows a departure from a dance for the feet to one for the heart and soul, where feet cannot follow. The final effort in this genre, Polonaise-Fantaisie Op. 61 of 1845-46, is more fantasy than dance piece, and departs significantly from the pattern established by the previous six polonaises of Chopin's mature period. Brian gave it a deeply moving introspective reading.

After intermission came two Funeral Marches. The first, from 1827 or 1829, is a study in slow rhythm and is a foretelling of the most famous Funeral March which forms the slow movement of the B-flat minor Sonata, Op. 35, which Brian played next. Usually, I do not favor sonata movements plucked from their surroundings, but in this case, it was fitting as an indication of Chopin's evolution of the genre. And besides, it is said he composed the more famous march first, then added the surrounding movements to create his sonata (which Robert Schumann dubbed "a collection four of his maddest children").

The final set was waltzes. The early work, in E-flat Major, dates from 1830 and is in a square style of a German Landler that predates the more familiar Viennese form. That was followed by the one in G-flat Major. Op. 70 No. 1 from 1835, a shower of notes very reminiscent of the Mazurka Op. 33 No. 2 played earlier, pointing out the close relationship between the two dance forms. Three waltzes of Op. 34 (1835-38) and one of Op. 42 (1840) were again a demonstration of how Chopin transcended dance forms to create miniature sound poems for the soul, not the feet.

Brian was careful not to "overplay" the early pieces from Chopin's youth, keeping them in the simple mode in which they were written. I have heard too many recordings of these early works where pianists invest them with more virtuosity than the composer intended, robbing them of their innate simplicity when paired against the sophistication of more mature works of the same genre.

## **Polish American Arts Association of Washington DC Annual Chopin Concert Pianist Thomas Pandolfi**

On February 23, 2020, PAAA held its annual piano recital of the music of Chopin and other Polish composers at the historic building (once owned by President James Monroe) which is the home of the Arts Club of Washington. Pianist Thomas Pandolfi made a well-received return appearance (he last performed for PAAA in 2018).

The opening number was the A Major Polonaise ("Military"), Op. 40 no. 1, played with bravura technique but in a tempo that was not at the breakneck speed that other pianists too often use to show off technique at the expense of emotional expression. I have a very personal relationship with this piece. When I was in my early teens, taking piano lessons, I began to pick out the right-hand melody by ear. "How hard can this be," I thought, so I bought a book of Chopin works to learn the piece as it was written. One look at the notes of the Polonaise – OMG! I had to give up on that. Eventually, I did learn to play it, but in the meantime played more accessible pieces like waltzes and nocturnes. Many years later, our daughter learned this piece in secret, practicing it when we were out of the house, and surprised us with a performance on our wedding anniversary.

Then came the E-Flat Nocturne, Op. 9 No. 2, the first one published during Chopin's lifetime (some earlier ones were published posthumously). This is a special favorite of mine, as I played it in my youth on my way to tackling that infamous Polonaise. Its calm, gentle melodies were a perfect foil to the sonic fireworks of the preceding piece and the one that followed, Fantaisie-Improvisation in C-Sharp Minor, Op. 66. This Fantaisie was left unpublished at Chopin's death, it was spared from the destruction that he decreed for his unpublished works by the decision of his sister, and is today one of the most performed of his pieces.

Six Etudes selected from Opp. 10 and 25 followed, preceded by Tom's verbal commentary on the technical pianistic problems posed by each. Chopin revolutionized the genre with these works – whereas previously composers wrote such pieces to be performed in the practice studio (a gym for fingers, Tom called them), Chopin's were miniature tone poems that not only exercised the fingers but also provided music of substance and beauty, fit for the concert hall.

The six were:

- Op. 10 No. 12, C Minor ("Revolutionary")
- Op. 25 No. 1, A-Flat Major ("Aeolian Harp")
- Op. 10 No. 8, F Major ("Sunshine")
- Op. 10 No. 3, E Major ("Tristesse", "Žal")
- Op. 10 No. 4, C-Sharp Minor ("Torrent")
- Op. 25 No. 12, C Minor ("Ocean")

They were performed flawlessly, with proper contrasts between the stormy (Revolutionary, Ocean) and the delicate (Tristesse, Aeolian Harp).

After intermission Tom played a piece by Leopold Godowsky, who wrote piano music that was on the verge of unplayable. This piece, "Old Vienna," was not that convoluted, but still had some intricate interplay between the hands. Then two pieces by Ignacy Jan Paderewski – Menuet in G Major, Op. 14 No. 1, and Nocturne in B-Flat Major, Op. 16 No. 4. The former is the only work of Paderewski that most people remember.

The final set returned to Chopin, with three dance forms:

- Mazurka in A Minor, Op. 67 No. 4
- Waltz in C-Sharp Minor, Op. 64 No. 2
- Polonaise in A-Flat Major, Op. 53 ("Heroic")

All are written in  $\frac{3}{4}$  rhythm, yet have different characteristics of how the beats are distributed over the measure. Again, Tom provided commentary that explained the differences. The Waltz is another memory from my own playing of Chopin. The Polonaise was done to perfection – not hurried, so the rhythm could breathe with the spirit of the dance which evolved from the "walking dance" of village folk into the aristocratic processional for nobles in "kontusz" (colorful silk or satin tunics), soldiers in uniforms and their ladies in ball gowns.

We sincerely thank Tom for providing a technically adept and emotionally moving experience.