

Every year on Polish Independence Day (Nov. 11), the City of Warsaw puts on a grand artistic event. This year it was a concert by the National Philharmonic conducted by its current musical director Antoni Wit (successor to Kazimierz Kord). The program consisted of two works for piano & orchestra: Paderewski's Polish Fantasy, Op. 19, performed by Karol Radziwonowicz, and Chopin's Concerto No. 1, e minor, Op. 11, by Rafal Blechacz, first prize winner (from Poland) in this year's International Chopin Competition.

The Paderewski piece is not music of the highest order. It is pompous and brash, with only the vaguest hints of mazurka and kujawiak rhythms, interspersed among more pronounced krakowiak characteristics. Radziwonowicz specializes in Paderewski (he has recorded the entire body of piano work), and did a creditable job.

The Chopin was quite something else. Although the concertos are not among my favorites of Chopin works (he wrote them at age 19, under the influence of an unsophisticated "Style Brillante" which he outgrew in later life), they are warhorses of the repertoire, and comparisons with other pianists are inevitable. Here, Blechacz gave up nothing to anyone. His playing combines fantastic technique and bravura style with a sensitivity, delicacy and expressiveness that puts him, in my estimation, in the ranks of the greats. Perhaps there was a phrase here or there that was a bit rushed, and perhaps a rubato here or there was held a millisecond too long, but overall the dynamic thrust of the work was well maintained, and it was in toto a most satisfying listening experience.

He played three solo encores. A mazurka which I could not identify was played much too quickly - perhaps he was tired and wanted to get it over with. Then came the Heroic Polonaise, A-flat, Op. 53. Played brilliantly, with a beginning in an appropriately slow, stately rhythm required by the nature of this dance, whose original name was "chodzony." Most pianists rip into it at much too fast a tempo. Some internal parts, however, Blechacz played a bit too fast. Last was the Minute Waltz, D-flat, Op. 64 nr. 2. A somewhat idiosyncratic rendition, with widely varying tempos in the various repeats, but very interesting and in general true to the nature of the piece.

He shows remarkable musical maturity for a 20-year old. He is of small stature, and like Krystian Zimerman (PL, first prize, 1975) and Vladimir Ashkenazy (USSR, second prize, 1955), has to raise himself up from the bench to pounce on the keyboard for creating the loudest sforzando effects - unlike, say, Garrick Ohlsson (US, first prize, 1970), who is built like a football player and can produce those effects by swinging his arm from the elbow.

I also bought and listened to a recording of Blechacz made during the competition, and found those performances to be near-perfect, generating fewer quibbles than at the live concert. I certainly hope he will prosper with a successful professional career, although sadly careers are based less on how you do than on who you know.