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"Chronological Chopin" – Burkard Schliessmann, piano
(Divine Art, 3-CD set) hybrid SACD in 5.0 Surround

The inclusion of an all-Chopin program at the end of a monthly column devoted to the baroque may seem a little odd, but then Frédéric Chopin was a different kind of romantic composer. As the present artist, German pianist Burkard Schliessmann, observes, "Chopin's own sense of Classical form made him a stranger to the world of phantasmagoria" - the world that absorbed much of the creative energies of composers such as Schumann, Weber, Berlioz and Liszt. In Chopin, by contrast, the feeling often strikes us clearer and at a deeper level because it comes to us through the music itself, without any extra-musical associations. With his aristocratic sense of style and his classical training, Chopin is always precise about what he has to say and was not prone to "wander about," as other romantics were from time to time.

From the interpreter, Chopin requires the balance and clarity that Burkard Schliessmann brings to these recordings. Even amid the sound and fury of the most tempest-driven passages in such works as Ballade No. 2 in F, Op. 38 and the Polonaise-Fantaisie in A-flat, Op. 61, powerful chords in the left hand must never be allowed to overpower the poetry, the delicacy, or the poignancy of what the melody is saying.

Nor are Chopin's lighter passages mere decorative filigree. Even in the briefest of his 24 Preludes, Op. 28, a half-dozen of which are less than a minute's duration, there is musical substance, and Burkard is keen in bringing it out. Taken as a whole, Opus 28 is among Chopin's most difficult works to perform as well as we hear it done in the present recording. These preludes mystified critics and performing artists alike for many years. Robert Schumann, for instance, was perplexed by them: "They are sketches, beginnings of études, or, so to speak, ruins, individual eagle pinions, all disorder and wild confusion." The bewilderment exists only as long as one persists in viewing them as individual character pieces, rather than as a whole. Chopin was admittedly inspired to write the Preludes by the example of J.S. Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, though he did not emulate Bach's practice of composing preludes in every major and minor key, separated by rising semitones. In keeping with contemporary notions of harmony, his immediate model was probably a now-forgotten work by J. N. Hummel, a set of 24 preludes in all major and minor keys, Op. 67. Here, as Chopin was to observe in his own Op. 28, the chosen key sequence was a circle of fifths, with each major key being followed by its relative minor.

Alexander Brailowsky always said that the technique used to play Chopin's music should be "fluent, fluid, delicate, airy, and capable of great variety of color." That is easier said than done. One also has to observe the formal structure of Chopin's music in order to bring out the poetry, or else all you will have is incontinent rhapsodizing, which is definitely *not* the impression one gets in Chopin's music or Schliessmann's performances of it. In his discussion of Chopin's Polonaise-Fantaisie, Op. 61, the artist stresses that the *maestoso* character of this work calls for something that will, in the words of Franz Liszt, "bear the load, maintain equilibrium, and yet remain weightless." In the last analysis, that is something that is to be perceived intuitively (a quality for which Schliessmann is well-known, by the way) rather than described and notated objectively. As we Americans say, "You either have it, or you don't." Burkard certainly has it.

In addition to his own booklet notes on his interpretation, Burkard also cites some revealing criticisms of Chopin by his fellow composers. The observation by Berlioz, for example, that “Chopin submitted only reluctantly to the yoke of bar lines; in my opinion he took rhythmical independence much too far.” Again, the Polonaise-Fantaisie comes to mind, and perhaps even more so, the Fantaisie in F minor, Op. 49, where an inward prayer, or rather a benediction, breaks through the fury of dramatic accents, anthem-like appeals to some heroic cause, and a maelstrom of roiling quavers. When the fluidity of a piece is at stake, bar lines be damned.

Another composer’s criticism that jumped out at me when I read it was Alexander Scriabin’s comment that Chopin’s intellect did not match his musical qualities, with the result that he “did not develop at all as a composer. From his first opus onward, he is present as a fully-formed composer with a clearly defined individuality.” Granted that Chopin’s individuality was always well-defined, there remains the question of his growth throughout his career. That gives meaning to the title “Chronological Chopin” that Burkard has chosen for the present 3-disc album. It is his contention that Chopin did indeed grow in stature, and in the grasp and control of his materials, throughout his life. Seen in that light, “Chronological Chopin” is more than just a reflection of an orderly mind. It is a study in how Chopin’s increasing freedom and daring in handling his materials led to an increase in the power of his music to move us as profoundly as it does.

The most obvious places to study this phenomenon of increasing density, musically and emotively, are the Four Scherzos, Opp. 20, 31, 39, and 54, and the Four Ballades, Opp. 23, 38, 47, and 52. They are distributed among discs 1-3 in the order Chopin released them for publication. I don’t mean to slight the Scherzos, in which, time and again, serious musical substance belies their trivial-sounding name (*scherzo* = Italian for “joke”). But for lack of space, I’m going to concentrate on Ballade No. 4, which many pianists consider the most difficult of the four both technically and musically. The first theme alone undergoes transformations involving use of counter-melodies, counterpoint, and surprisingly delicate fioritura reminiscent of the nocturnes. And that is just the beginning. With the development of the second theme, the musical structure becomes denser and the tension heightens as Chopin magically combines sonata and variation forms. Five stunning pianissimo chords lead suddenly into a fast, turbulent coda in counterpoint as powerful and exuberant as it is otherwise subtly crafted in other sections of this particular ballade.

From the point of view of the performer, the key to success, as Burkard shows us, is to be constantly vigilant for changes in metre, tempi, texture, and phrasing, as the music changes from gentle and deceptively naïve to powerfully intense and back again without warning, occasioning various degrees of tension and relaxation. In addition to this, Burkard brings his unique feeling for luminous color to the music to help bring out its inner life. Among pianists, there are so-called “colorists” and others who are basically attuned to form and structure. It is difficult to recall another artist in my recent experience who combines both traits as effectively as this one does. All of which, of course, makes “Chronological Chopin” such a memorable experience.

Dr. Phil Muse