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“Cannons Camouflaged by Flowers”: Burkard Schliessmann Talks about Chopin

By PETER J. RABINOWITZ

Chopin is so central to our musical life that it's easy to take him for granted—but his bicentennial offers a chance to rethink both his position in our culture and the way we play him. Pianist Burkard Schliessmann is currently engaged in a recording project to celebrate the occasion, so this seemed an especially apt time to ask him about Chopin and about his interpretive perspective. We began our series of email exchanges with a discussion of Chopin's stature in the repertoire. He was, after all, but one member of a prodigiously talented cohort of

composers who created what we now think of as the high romantic movement; yet his music has lasted when the music by Herz, Felicien David, Thalberg, Heller, and Sterndale Bennet is all but forgotten. Why?

“Herz, Thalberg, Heller, Felicien David and others were great virtuosos of *their* time, more famous than Chopin himself. They had their own personal styles, but the essence of their music was time-bound, nothing that could occupy generations *after* them. Chopin, in contrast, was someone *special*, someone who was completely different from all other artists, composers, and pianists. So too with his style. As a result, the aesthetic in approaching Chopin is distinctive: interpreting his music is the most difficult of all. For me personally, it’s the *crowning* of playing piano. Bach, Mozart, Chopin: these are *the* three who definitively created musical art in an all-embracing and overwhelming way.”

What in his circumstances made Chopin so different? “Chopin’s biography remains obscure. He withheld himself all his life, in diametrical contrast to the openness and accessibility of his contemporary Franz Liszt. Chopin always conveyed the impression of a suffering soul, not to say a martyr, almost as if this was to nourish or even underpin his inspiration. Striving for crystalline perfection, he never ventured outside his own domain. You know, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is said to have given, as a child, “martyr” as his chosen career. Chopin must have shared this cult of the ‘Pater dolorosus.’”

To be sure, Schliessmann continues, Chopin was a European celebrity—but even in his celebrity, “he was surrounded by an aura of mystery. Even as a practicing pianist, he was a special case. His playing is described by all his contemporaries as exceptionally individual. He rarely appeared on the concert platform, but he was feverishly awaited by his followers. Ignaz Moscheles, himself one of the leading pianists of the 19th century, described Chopin as follows in 1839:

His appearance is altogether identified with his music, both are tender and ardent. He played to me at my request, and only now do I understand his music.... His *ad libitum* playing, which degenerates into a loss of bar structure among the interpreters of his music, is in his hands only the most delightful originality of performance; the dilettantishly hard modulations, which I cannot rise above when I play his pieces, no longer shock me, because he trips through them so delicately with his elfin touch; his piano is so softly whispered that he needs no powerful forte to express the desired contrasts; accordingly one does not miss the orchestra-like effects which the German school demands of a pianoforte player, but is carried away, as if by a singer who yields to his feelings with little concern for his accompaniment; in a word, he is unique in the world of pianoforte players.

This is perhaps the most expressive and beautiful commentary on Chopin’s pianistic status.”

Given his quality and popularity as a performer, why did he play so seldom? Was it simply a matter of poor health? “Chopin himself told Liszt, whose virtuosity he always admired: ‘I am not suited to giving concerts; the audience scares me, its breath stifles me, its inquisitive looks cripple me, I fall silent before strange faces.’”

I suggested we return for a moment to Moscheles’ description: what, in fact, do we know about Chopin’s actual practice with regard to rubato?

“There has been much discussion of this, with his contemporaries greatly differing in their views. One of his students recalled,

His playing was always noble and fine, his gentlest tones always sang, whether at full strength or in the softest piano. He took infinite pains to teach the pupil this smooth,

songful playing. ‘He (she) does not know how to join two notes’—that was his severest criticism. He also required that his pupils should maintain the strictest rhythm, hated all stretching and tugging, inappropriate rubato and exaggerated ritardando.

This recollection polarized whole generations of piano professors in their search for the meaning of rubato, particularly in view of other, more weighty opinions, such as those of Berlioz, who saw Chopin’s playing as marred by exaggerated license and excessive willfulness. Evidently he did not allow his pupils the license he reserved for himself.”

To put it in different terms, Schliessmann continues, “Chopin’s rubato *never* can be handled in a free and uncontrolled way—you will lose the line. It has nothing to do with improvisation. Chopin himself advised his students: ‘The left hand is the conductor, it mustn’t falter and waver.’”

Schliessmann clarified his sense of Chopin’s character by contrasting him with his contemporary Schumann, whose bicentennial also falls this year:

“To approach Chopin, you have to separate him completely from Schumann. Schumann admired Chopin very much and saw him as friend, but—what only few people know— Chopin himself had much less interest in and esteem for Schumann.

“In detail: Schumann’s works follow on from a transitional period determined by the successors of Viennese Classicism, particularly Beethoven. Just as the sons of Bach espoused the ‘galant,’ ornamented style of their generation, so the pupils of Mozart and Beethoven—Hummel, Ries, Czerny, Moscheles—took pains to compensate for a thinner musical substance with increased instrumental brilliance and thus prepared the ground for the golden age of the piano and the era of the Romantic virtuoso. Among the multitude of composers writing for the piano at that time, only two—Weber and Schubert—stand out as original creative forces.

“The trends that produced Schumann’s early piano works started out not so much from Weber’s refined brilliance as from Schubert’s more intimate and deeply soul-searching idiom. His creative imagination took him well beyond the harmonic sequences known until his time. He looked at the fugues and canons of earlier composers and discovered in them a Romantic principle. In the interweaving of the voices, the essence of counterpoint found its parallel in the mysterious relationships between the human psyche and exterior phenomena, which Schumann felt impelled to express.

“Schubert’s broad melodic lyricism has often been contrasted with Schumann’s terse, often quickly repeated motifs, and by comparison Schumann is often erroneously seen as short-winded. Yet it is precisely with these short melodic formulae that he shone his searchlight into the previously unplumbed depths of the human psyche. With them, in a complex canonic web, he wove a dense tissue of sound capable of taking in and reflecting back all the poetical character present. His actual melodies rarely have an arioso form; his harmonic system combines subtle chromatic progressions, suspensions, a rapid alternation of minor and major, and *point d’orgue*. The shape of Schumann’s scores is characterized by contrapuntal lines, and can at first seem opaque or confused. His music is frequently marked by martial dotted rhythms or dance-like triple time signatures. He loves to veil accented beats of the bar by teasingly intertwining two simultaneous voices in independent motion. This highly independent instrumental style is perfectly attuned to his own particular compositional idiom. After a period in which the piano had indulged in sensuous beauty of sound and brilliant coloration, in Schumann it again became a tool for conveying poetic monologues in musical terms.

“Like many a Romantic, Schumann found himself up against an artistic dilemma, with various different branches of the arts open to him. Like the ‘art-loving monk’ in Wackenroder’s

rhapsodic essays, the *Herzensergiessungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders*, he poured his enthusiasms into creating a 'golden reflection of life.' In his diary written at age fifteen he was already questing to find the true foundations of his own nature: 'Whether or not I am a poet is up to posterity to decide.' And the momentous realization that 'There does indeed seem to be something unfathomable in me' is an indication that this Romantic artist in the making had a 'daemonic' element in him.

"Undoubtedly the best language for the expression of this 'unfathomable' quality was music. The infinity of musical spheres of expression, independent of rationality, is often perceived as 'unfathomable' by listeners too. The formal principles of order seem to lie hidden deeper in this art than in others. In the twentieth century the great creative minds, when faced with Romantic artistic urges running riot which they believe must be overcome, or feel they have succeeded in overcoming, have stressed the importance of existing rules; they have followed traditional forms, or else, in their search for new ways to connect, have found and set up new formulations and principles. The young Schumann's creative path led in the opposite direction, from classical forms, however deeply revered, to the freedom of subjective self-expression.

"This is an absolute deep contrast to Chopin, who found himself favoring a *classical form* of musical essence. He needs to bring nothing in from outside, the music is nearly 'absolute.'"

Schliessmann elaborates on this difference by looking at Schumann's *Kreisleriana*. "No other cycle among Schumann's great works so perfectly expresses the sensation of dark nocturnal things, of chaos, lurking in the background. The last piece of this collection shows this particularly well. Like skeletons on horseback, shadowy figures flit before us in a soft, sustained rhythm; in the middle section horn-calls enliven the scene with visions of knightly strength and nobility, but at the end the figures vanish ghost-like into night and mystery. Looking into the first volume of Schumann's diaries we find 'Midnight Piece,' a prose passage which provides moving, indeed alarming evidence of his perilously depressive mental state. It contains elements of a highly personal kind which memorably convey the particular quality of his imagination, mortally cold and never far from visions of death. It could have served perfectly as a model for the final, disturbing piece in the *Kreisleriana* set.

"Such abstruse ideas are totally alien to Chopin. The Romantic interweaving of music and literature that was characteristic of Schumann and Liszt was a negligible source of inspiration. Schumann dedicated *Kreisleriana* to Chopin, but in fact Chopin's consciousness for classical strength and form had nothing in common with the exalted, torn, eccentric and confused character of the work.

"Yet in a relatively short creative life of twenty years or so, Chopin re-drew the boundaries of Romantic music, and his self-imposed restriction to the 88 keys of the piano keyboard sublimated nothing less than the aesthetic essence of piano music. It was his total identification with the instrument which, in its radical regeneration of the lyric and the dramatic, fantasy and passion and their unique fusion, shaped a tonal language which united an aristocratic sense of style and formal Classical training and intuition with an ascetic rigor. Chopin's precisely marshaled trains of thought permitted no experiments, and so he did not 'wander about' within his stylistic points of reference as Scriabin was to do." Chopin's works may seem light and improvisatory, but they are "planned in meticulous details, exactly and well calculated."

Ascetic rigor? I asked Schliessmann to elaborate. "This doesn't mean something like 'renounce' or even a 'lack' of something. No, it means, in philosophical manner (and especially in the historic Greek sense of 'Askesis'), a special kind of *internal yearning*, a special power wherein, despite all depressions, defeats, and failures you develop a new power to 'keep' to

something, to *create* something. It's something like an *obsession*. Bach, Mozart, Schubert, they all (and their *oeuvre*) are filled from this phenomenon, and it's this spirit which keeps this music so vivid and alive – and fashioned for all times and generations.”

A big anniversary seems a good time to think about where we've come from—what's Schliessmann's sense of the history of Chopin performance and his position in it?

“I'm very interested in the 'Culture of Interpretation.' I'm convinced that each great artist has his own personal style, but it is his artistic responsibility in developing this style to respond other interpretations, either prior or at the same time. I'm convinced that Rubinstein would have presented us another Chopin if Cortot had not existed. Cortot presented very romantic Chopin interpretations—really masterly, outstanding, but confused. Rubinstein's immediate answer was a very classical Chopin. He was really the first to point out the classical line and structure in his *oeuvre*.”

No surprise that Schliessmann's most admired pianists recognize this classical element. “Chopin has to be 'controlled.' So, Michelangeli is one of them I was inspired most. The young Pogorelich also played a passionate, but also 'classical' and completely controlled Chopin. I regret so much that – after the tragic death of his wife – he lost his 'mentor.' Also Stefan Askenase, an 'old fashioned' pianist, but someone with a special view into and onto the complete *oeuvre*, celebrated Chopin in a more classical way. And someone special: Mieczyslaw Horszowski.”

I ask Schliessmann what, precisely, he means by “artistic responsibility.” He answers using Bach performance as his example: “After the re-discovery of Bach by Mendelssohn, Bach was interpreted in a very romantic style. This had nothing to do with Bach. Leopold Stokowski made arrangements for orchestra. O.K., the public had a chance to know the works, but it also had nothing to do with Bach. So Tureck and Gould”—despite their substantial differences—“came and made something completely radical. Only in this way was there a chance to 'correct' the 'picture' of interpretation and move in the right direction.” A direction, he points that, that continued to give a new way, even to later generations. “This is artistic responsibility.”

Already in 2002, I pointed out, Schliessmann's Chopin playing showed awareness of this responsibility, tempering the drama of Cortot with the classicism of Rubinstein. I asked him—is anything different now? “I myself had worked for a long time to reach a well-balanced combination to keep close together all parameters”: both the classicism and the romanticism. “Of course, I have increased my technique to bring out these insights, and so it all has a much more virtuoso effect than years before. My priority has been to bring out Chopin as an *aspect of human realism*, as I already did it with Bach and the *Goldbergs*. So my new edition is a big challenge for me to surpass myself.”

Schliessmann has closely studied the descriptions of these pieces written by musicians at the time: Liszt, Tausig, Schumann, and Hanslick, among others; and he has a growing sense of the ideals behind the music. He especially admires Schumann's famous description of Chopin: Chopin's works are cannons camouflaged by flowers. In this his origin, in the fate of his nation, rests the explanation of his advantages and of his faults alike. If the talk is of enthusiasm, grace, freedom of expression, of awareness, fire and nobility, who would not think of him, but then again, who would not, when there is talk of foolishness, morbid eccentricity, even hatred and fury!”

How does this description influence Schliessmann? “This has been my ideal since earliest childhood. One cannot describe Chopin better. Here you find the 'explosion,' which is hidden under a 'surface,' which means something completely different!”

Granted, these 19th-century ideals are complex: even Liszt himself had trouble understanding the Polonaise-Fantaisie. But Schliessmann feels that he is getting closer to meet the “the challenge of shaping this work so as to do justice to its content: compelling, balanced organic structure throughout, with a view of its greatness, despite the risk of losing oneself in the limited execution of its wonderfully thrilling details. I give the work more intimacy; by maintaining the chamber-musician and classical clarity and structure in the different *variations*, the symphonic line is more of a single breath, and the different scenes are better proportioned. The *big line* is, I’m convinced, more enlightened now. The end and stretta are much more touching, also much more virtuoso and overwhelming.”

He sees similar changes in performances of other works: “The Barcarolle I play in a more erotic way, much more sensual, but much more virtuoso and so much more extreme. The *Fantaisie* now has a more virtuoso-line, more explosion and fire, so that the Agitato is transferred in a more ecstatic way; I have given much more drama to the octaves (e.g. in bar 153/154). The contrast between the intimacy of the middle part—which we can call a ‘hymnic choral’—and the Attacca of the Agitato gives this piece a special excitement.” With these new and sharper intuitions, he hopes to move the listener more deeply.

Schliessmann has especially strong opinions about performances of the Berceuse, which he plays with more virtuosity than other pianists do. “Too many pianists (I don’t want to name them) make the mistake of using too much *rubato* in the right hand.” In so doing, they not only “lose the *glitter*” which is written into the piece, but they also “miss the line of the left hand, changing the tempo (and consequently the character) of the left hand, an ostinato-line, which provides the main structure. If you lose this line in its strength as well as clarity— but also simplicity and lightness—you lose the meaning and real characterization of the whole piece and its elegance. The *cantilène*, the *endless* and *eternal song*, the ‘*chant*’— and in summary the *architecture of this work* is destroyed. This *mustn’t* be!

“To the Ballades I have given a more ‘*narrativo*’ element, intensifying the ‘*stile parlando*,’ but increasing the virtuosity at the same time.” The ultimate aim is coherence—fitting together the lyricism, the poetry, the ‘speaking,’ and the virtuosity, maintaining, at the same time, the big line as a single breath.

The key point? We return to the classic essence of Chopin: “Nothing should be arbitrary. When we have a look to his manuscripts, we learn that Chopin worked very hard on his ideas and had something special in mind. Very often he wrote something, then rejected it and made many corrections, coming up with a completely different version, or, curiously, sometimes coming back to first version.”

I close our conversation with a final question. One of the biggest changes since 1960 Chopin celebration has been the growth of the period performance movement. Schliessmann remains committed to a modern instrument. Why?

“We know, that Chopin preferred the sound of Pleyel, which was much clearer, intimate, slim (nearly chamber-music-like) than the Erard Liszt used, which was much more rich-toned and orchestral. I personally never even wanted (how crazy and terrible!) to play on an old or historical piano, because the technique itself wouldn’t be sufficient for my demands.

“For this edition I used a special Steinway, one that I own, the same one on which I also played the *Goldbergs*. It has an extreme clarity and sonority, extreme colorfulness and unlimited ranges of registrations in all parts. It is an exceptional instrument that is ideal for music of *classical style*. Georges Ammann, world famous technician of Steinway, again did again a great

job and had been on my side all the time. He has exclusively been looking after my instruments for years.

“For this music you absolutely need a special *tone*, a *special sound*. And something special the instrument *must* have (of course, you as pianist have to play it, but if the instrument can't, you also can't, because you are *dependent* on the instrument): It's the phenomenon of *Jeu perlé*! The instrument I'm using reacts here in perfect manner, and when you hear—for example—the closing figures of the Barcarolle or the Fantaisie, you know what I mean and how it should be!

“I also divided the recordings between the halls. The works which need a more intimate atmosphere (like the Berceuse, the Barcarolle, the Waltz op. 64/2, the Polonaise-Fantaisie) were recorded in the studio-hall of Teldex in Berlin, a hall with phenomenal acoustic. That's where I also recorded my Goldbergs. The that need nearly something “orchestral” (like the Ballades, the Scherzos), however, I recorded in another hall in Berlin, in the Big Hall of 'Rundfunkzentrum' in Berlin, which has outstanding acoustic possibilities and a very special warmness of sound. I again used one of my own Steinways, and again worked with my Teldex-Team, Friedemann Engelbrecht as Recording-Producer and Julian Schwenkner as my Recording-Engineer. To bring out such an result requires the combination and synergy of all powers. If only one link is missing from the chain, the complete project is 'out.'”

To conclude? “The things that are most important to me in such a project are perfectionism and *truth*. *Truth of interpretation, truth of sound, truth of the instrument, truth of the hall, truth lastly of all*. This means 'Artistic Integrity' to me. Coming back to my artistic aims in *my new Chopin*: It's a special combination of lyricism, poetry, virtuosity, noblesse (!), classical strength but also romantic enthusiasm and passion, in bringing out this 'obscure man *Chopin*' and creating an experience never before heard.”

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