

NEPTA Minutes – January 25, 2010

Sandra Rosenblum – Perspective on Chopin' Music and it Performance

Sandra Rosenblum drew from her broad, deep knowledge of Chopin to give us a morning of insight into various aspects of the composer's music.

Undergirding everything is the profound musical connection between Chopin and his beloved Poland. Though he became an emigre in Paris for the second half of his short life, never to return to Warsaw, his musical roots are deeply Polish: his mother's folk songs and twenty years of absorbing the song and dance of his native land. Sandra played a haunting recording of a Polish folk song, a unique, hard-to-describe sound from which she showed us connections to his music. Pointing out the descending line F, E flat, D flat, C, as in the Fantaisie in F minor, Opus 49, and his use of Phrygian and Lydian modalities, she made clear how the Mazurkas especially, but Polonaises and much more, reflect Polish rhythms and distinctive melodic contours. Paris found the composer's Eastern, Slavic flavor new and fascinating.

New, too, was Chopin's phenomenal improvisatory skill. He often improvised in concert and, loving variety, he seldom played his own works quite the same way twice. In lessons, he would make changes when his students played his music to him, and he had a terrible time deciding which way things should be published.

We heard the F minor Nocturne Opus 55 #1, (note descending F, E flat, D flat, C) on an 1836 Pleyel piano with not a harsh sound anywhere. The Pleyel was a gentle instrument but, in Chopin's hands, a dramatic one. His huge range of emotion from quiet sentiment to fiery brilliance gave his playing the quality of great story-telling. Indeed, his compositions were often narrative in nature, e.g., the first and second Ballades. In the F minor Nocturne, Sandra hears anger in the explosive middle section, perhaps referring to Poland's terrible struggles culminating in the 1830 uprising and the Russian victory in 1831 which drove Chopin to Paris.

His music was a "diary of his soul's journey regarding all things Polish." It was full of oddities, original harmonies, irregular accents, (some of which might be foot stamping), and Slavic flavors, all so far unheard in the salons of Paris. Editions that regularize his ideas are not good. He intended this strangeness and he transformed with original ideas every genre in which he composed.

How much tempo flexibility - rubato is allowed in Chopin's music is an ever-constant question. He himself wrote "strict rhythm," seldom "rubato," but to play metronomically is patently wrong. Better to think, "no exaggeration" or "elasticity." We often try keeping a steady bass and a free melody, i.e., melodic rubato (reminiscent of the aria in opera which he loved). This contrasts with structural rubato when both hands play freely. "Try to keep a balance between Chopin's meaning and your own, and never fail to bring out the drama."

We heard Ignaz Friedman, Polish and a Leschetitzky student, play the A minor Waltz, Opus 34 #2 - rubato, poetic, personal, infinitely sad, and absolutely magical. It was as if Friedman understood what Chopin meant, because he knew those feelings, too.

When asked about editions, Sandra said: 1) a new Peters in progress is very good 2) Paderewski only lent his name - "not a reliable editon" 3) Henle - poor fingering and no access to Chopin's students' books 4) Polish National - very good 5) Mikuli - although a student of Chopin, he must be taken with a grain of salt, e.g., he changed phrasings; use with a second edition.

Because of time constraints, not much was said about ornaments: 1) long trills can begin on or above 2) we think short ornaments were on the beat.

Hardly touched pedalling: we know Chopin used pedal for different effects and that he didn't always write down how he actually pedalled. However, some pedalling is minutely careful. Everything depends on the piano.

(There was a microphone problem which hopefully can be remedied next time).

Suggested reading:

CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO CHOPIN - Jim Samson CUP 1992 "very good essays"

CHOPIN - Jim Samson Schirmer 1996

CHOPIN PIANIST AND TEACHER as seen by his students J. Eigeldinger CUP 1986 "Excellent"

MUSIC IN CHOPIN'S WARSAW Halina Goldberg OUP 2008

AFTER THE GOLDEN AGE; ROMANTIC PIANISM AND MODERN PERFORMANCE Kenneth Hamilton
OUP 2007

Koczalski wrote two books, one in French and one in German