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Chopin by the Numbers? A Perspective by Burkard Schliessmann

By Jerry Dubins

When last I interviewed pianist Burkard Schliessmann in 38:4, the subject was Bach and Burkard's new Divine Art SACD containing a handful of Bach's well-known keyboard works. Since then, Burkard has been very busy. Touching base with him exactly one year later, I learn that he has just completed an even more ambitious project for Divine Art, a three-disc SACD set containing a representative cross-section of works by Chopin.

Included in Burkard's new release are the 24 Preludes, op. 28, and a generous helping of the composer's scherzos, ballades, and pieces in other genres that Chopin cultivated and made famous. Apart from the magnificent playing that distinguishes Burkard's new three-disc set, what makes it different—the angle, if you will—is his decision to present his program in chronological order, or, by the numbers.

Other artists, of course, have done likewise in recitals of works by other composers, but such an approach takes on special significance with respect to Chopin. Burkard makes this clear in his extraordinarily extensive and detailed album note, in which he quotes Alexander Scriabin as once having remarked that “Chopin had shown little or no sign of further development during the course of his creative life.” It's not just that Chopin composed almost exclusively for the piano; it's that once he had perfected a formal typology—say a nocturne, a mazurka, or a Polonaise—so the criticism goes, the template was set and he evidenced little desire to expand upon or explore it further, other than, of course, to replenish it again and again with gorgeous music.

Burkard is of the strong opinion that this was not the case—that Chopin has received a bum rap on this particular account—and he sets out to prove his point by programming the works on these three discs chronologically.

J.D.: Burkard, the first thing I would note is that the opus numbers of Chopin's works, unlike those of a number of other prominent composers, do align closely with the chronology of their composition. But there are some overlaps where Chopin worked on a particular piece, like the Ballade No. 2 in F Major, op. 38, over a lengthy stretch of time—from 1836 to 1839), meanwhile completing other pieces with higher opus numbers first. And then, too, there are almost as many works without opus numbers, published both in the composer's lifetime and posthumously, that bear composition dates proximate to the works with opus numbers. How do you sort this all out?

B.S.: I don't, or better, didn't sort it out. Of course, I'm aware of all these circumstances. The Ballade No. 2 in F Major, you mention, for example, was originally planned with a completely different conclusion. Robert Schumann, to whom this work was dedicated, remembered quite well that Chopin played this piece with an end in F Major. And with many other pieces, too, we know from the manuscripts that Chopin continued to work and make changes here and there, even in the ornamentation; and he didn't rest until he had a solution that satisfied him.

We know that unlike Liszt, who needed a large concert hall in which to demonstrate his brilliant abilities, Chopin preferred to play in intimate surroundings before “company,” rather than an “audience,” and that he regarded the sound world of his music as being realized more perfectly in a salon than on a concert platform. It need hardly be said that this does not label him as a salon composer in the derogatory sense. The word “salon” refers to the aristocratic qualities that distinguish Chopin *and* his interpreters, their culture, their sensibilities, and their nobility of

taste. These qualities rule out “effect” for its own sake, however dazzling, but they do not exclude (as a misunderstanding of the word “salon”) might suggest deep feelings, fire, strength, and passion.

One already can see this in his *Mazurkas*, those miniatures which kept him busy all his life. In these little jewels—small only as regards their dimensions—one can see how Chopin worked and how he is to be understood: as an incomparable master of contrasting characteristics within an unchanging form, a romantic lyricist who inherited elegance from the French, and a fiery temperament from his Polish ancestors. And what immense variety there is in this music! Contemplation abruptly gives way to a compulsive desire to dance, swiftly followed in turn by a re-creation of the opening mood, as in the Mazurka in G Major, op. 67/2. Or, take the Mazurka in C Major, op. 56/2: A powerful chordal, almost rustic, dance suddenly loses itself in a delicate ornamental texture of quaver figuration within broad legato phrases.

In the posthumously published four Mazurkas of op. 68, two contrasting dance melodies are brought together—the charming youthful piece (No. 2) in which the almost coquettishly elegiac A-Minor section gives way to “poco più mosso,” to an elegant A-Major section (though this, too, is of short duration), and Chopin’s last composition, dictated on his deathbed, that profoundly poignant F-Minor Mazurka (No. 4), in which the dance rhythm survives only as a faint recollection beyond a veil of mist. The extended middle part is available only in a very few editions. All of this occurs within a sphere of melodic invention full of flexibility and charm, which belongs psychologically among the criteria governing our use of the word “dancelike,” and which in the case of Chopin’s Mazurkas is perhaps more captivating than their origins in Polish folklore. In a harmonic context, which has been described aptly as “pre-Tristan chromaticism,” and which prepared the way for Debussy’s innovations in the field of harmonic coloration, Chopin has worked very long on these details to achieve his unique musical profile.

When we look at his manuscripts, we see that Chopin worked very hard on his ideas and had something special in mind. Very often he wrote something down, then rejected it and made many corrections, coming up with a completely different version, or, curiously, sometimes coming back to first version. We also know that he started work on the Preludes, op. 28, much earlier, but finished them in Mallorca in the winter of 1838/39. Having arrived in Mallorca, Chopin wrote from Valldemosa on December 28, 1838 to his friend Julian Fontana:

“Between cliff and sea, in a great, abandoned Carthusian abbey, you can imagine me in a cell whose doors are bigger than the house gates in Paris, unkempt, without white gloves and pale as ever. The cell is like a coffin with a high dusty vaulted roof. A small window, before which grow orange trees, palms, cypresses. Opposite the window, beneath a filigree rosette in Moorish style, stands my camp bed. Beside it an old empty writing-desk, which can scarcely be used, upon it a leaden candlestick (there is such luxury here!) with a little candle, Bach’s works, the folder with my own scribble and writing materials that do not belong to me. A stillness—one could scream—it is always silent. In a word, I write to you from a strange place.”

J.D.: In support of your primary argument that Chopin did develop and evolve, can you point to some of the salient differences between pieces that are not necessarily adjacent to each other because they are of a different form—such as the *Barcarolle* in F sharp Major, op. 60, and the *Polonaise-Fantaisie* in A flat Major, op. 61—but between two pieces of the same type, one being later than the other—such as the Scherzo No. 2 in B flat Minor, op. 31, and the Scherzo in C sharp Minor, op. 39?

B.S.: The *Berceuse*, the *Barcarolle*, and especially the *Polonaise-Fantaisie* (which is Chopin's last major work in length and form) really show enormous development from his early works. The *Berceuse* in D Flat Major, op. 57, is acknowledged as a classic example of unparalleled delicacy of sound. It is wonderful to see the inspired invention with which an ostinato bass figure, comparable to a chaconne, is overlaid with broken chords, fioritura, arabesques, trills, and cascading passages formed and developed as variations, which emerge, at first, from a dreamlike peace in ever faster coloratura and brilliant iridescence to a virtuosic middle section, only to sink back into that visionary peace when the quaver rhythm blends with the rocking left-hand figure.

The *Barcarolle*, op. 60, is a creation of sublime beauty. In its range of expression, its rainbow of colors, its rocking rhythm, and its perfectly judged formal design, it's one of Chopin's masterpieces. Carl Tausig wrote of the *Barcarolle*:

“This is a study of two persons, a love scene in a secret gondola; let us say this dramatization is the very symbol of lovers meeting. This is expressed in the thirds and sixths; the dualism of two notes (persons) is constant; all is for two parts or two souls. In this modulation in C sharp Major (*dolce sfogato*), there is surely kiss and embrace! That much is clear!—when after three opening bars the fourth introduces this gently swaying theme as a bass solo, and yet this theme is used only as accompaniment throughout the whole fabric upon which the cantilena in two parts comes to rest, we are dealing with a sustained, tender dialogue.”

Interesting: The *dolce sfogato* in bar 78 appears for the first time in the history of composition. Really sensational.

The *Polonaise-Fantaisie*, op. 61, is Chopin's last great work for piano. It cannot in fact be considered a true Polonaise. It is far more of a fantasia, whose unusual form corresponds to that of a symphonic poem or a large-scale symphonic work. Its musical program is more that of a ballade than that of a dance. It is legitimate to ask whether this late work of Chopin's deserves to have its sustained air of inner reflection disturbed by coquettish fancies. The underlying *maestoso* character (with the tempo heading *Allegro-Maestoso*) governs the mood of the whole work and calls for something that will “bear the load, maintain equilibrium, yet remain weightless.” It is a key composition among Chopin's last works, which are characterized by feverish unrest and offer no daring images or sunny landscapes. Franz Liszt's poetic depiction sounds strange to us today, particularly in connection with his own works:

“These are pictures that are unfavourable to art, like the depiction of all extreme moments, of agony, where the muscles lose all their tension and the nerves, no longer tools of the will, become the passive prey of human pain. A sorrowful prospect indeed, which the artist should accept into his domain only with the utmost care.”

These are moving words indeed, but I believe that Liszt came into conflict with the formal layout of this work, possibly in much the same way in which Eduard Hanslick bluntly dismissed Franz Liszt's own B-Minor Sonata as "*the fruitlessly spinning wheels of a genius driven by steam.*"

This presents the performing artists with 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.

J.D.: How did you come to choose the specific pieces for your Chopin collection that you did? And more to the point, what do you find in these particular pieces that supports your argument about the composer's development?

B.S.: The pieces I selected have, for many years, been part of my life and of my engagement with Chopin. I played (and still do!) them in various recitals and know how the audience reacts. Lastly, I would say, that these pieces are parts of myself. I wanted to put the smaller pieces next to the major ones. For example, I see the Preludes, op. 28, not as a collection of miniatures, but as a big, coherent major cycle, like Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Chopin's cycle is composed of 24 pieces that encompass all twelve major and minor keys; his Preludes, however, are not in chromatic progression but follow the principle of the circle of fifths.

My next recording plans include the three sonatas. With them I will show that Chopin not only was a great admirer of the classical form but that he was able to manage large-scale sonata-allegro form with all its classical rules and demands.

J.D.: In all honesty, Burkard, I have to tell you that I'm not as big a fan of Chopin as I know many readers of this magazine are. I've admitted in the past that there's something about Chopin's music I find depressing. It's not that there's a feeling of sadness to much of it; a lot of music makes us shed a tear or two. But feeling sad and depressed, for me at least, are two different things. What much of Chopin's music communicates to me is a sort of despondency or forlornness, as if it's completely bereft of hope. I know there are upbeat pieces among his output, and certainly a lot of thunderous, virtuoso fireworks in many works, but my overall takeaway impression of the music is of an abiding pall, and not of a kind I personally respond to. What would you say to someone like me that might help me to hear Chopin in a different way?

B.S.: Your attitude and reservations are a good place to start. So, let's go back to Alexander Scriabin. He once expressed the view that Chopin had shown little or no sign of further development during the course of his creative life. His concentration on the piano was often attacked and misinterpreted as "one-sided" or "unimaginative;" though Scriabin himself in his first decade had been an epigone of the music of Chopin, especially in Scriabin's first compositions, such as the Preludes, op. 11, and the Sonata No. 3 in F sharp Minor, op. 23, which is his last sonata using traditional form and which represents the climax of a movement discernible in his earlier works. Comments about Scriabin, written by Boris Pasternak, who took a paternal interest in the composer, may assist us to a greater understanding of him in comparison and opposition to Chopin:

“It was the first settlement of mankind in worlds which Wagner had discovered for mythical creatures and monsters. Drumrolls and chromatic waterfalls of trumpets, which sounded as cold as the jet from a firehouse, frightened them away ... a Van Gogh sun glowed over the fence of the symphony. On its windowsills lay the dusty archives of Chopin ... I could not but weep when I heard this music.”

So far, we already can see the deep chasm between the philosophy and aesthetics of both composers. This is reason enough to take a fresh look at the art of Frédéric Chopin. Alexander Scriabin's inner and outer creative path was that of a confirmed cosmopolitan. A variety of creative and maturational processes shaped his artistic activities as composer, pianist and philosopher, starting as an inheritor of the Chopin tradition and concluding as a forerunner of early atonality and serial music, with his last sonatas and preludes powerfully shaping and influencing the landscape of this creative sphere. The *accord mystique* created by him on the basis of the tritone served as an electrifying pole, and thus, the breeding-ground for his compositional subtleties, drawing the energy fields of his major symphonic works and his late sonatas into the center of his own dodecaphonic thinking. So, this very chord acted as the focus of the serial idea itself and reverberated throughout the entire compositional world. This may make Frédéric Chopin, who always led a secluded life and gave very few insights into his artistic and private life, seem a pallid character by comparison.

However, it would be a mistake to compare Chopin's agenda as a composer to that of Alexander Scriabin, let alone equate the two. Let us remind ourselves that Robert Schumann dedicated his *Kreisleriana* to Chopin, who thought little of the work on account of its deliberate disjointedness, confusion, complexity and exaltation. Chopin's own sense and awareness of Classical form made him a stranger to the world of phantasmagoria.

Although often at the heart of society life in Paris, he saw the profligate glamor of its banquets more as a necessary evil than as an inner need. At his beloved Nohant, he often fled the ever-present social scene and concentrated his attention on exchanges with close friends in the artistic community, such as Delacroix. His reticence is evident not only in his own personality but in his compositional thinking, which shows that he shunned influences from outside the musical sphere. The Romantic interweaving of music and literature that was characteristic of Schumann and Liszt was a negligible source of inspiration; Chopin's music, the expression and mirror of his innermost being, was and remained autonomous, free from all extraneous impulses and thus independent of outward circumstances.

In a relatively short creative life of 20 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, phantasy 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 marshalled trains of thought permitted no experiments, and so he did not “wander about” within stylistic points of reference as Scriabin was to do.

Today, more than 150 years after his death, Frédéric Chopin's eminence as a composer remains undisputed. There must now be general agreement that he was not a writer of salon compositions but a truly great composer. Like Mozart, Schubert, and Verdi, Chopin was a gifted

tunesmith. There can few if any musicians who have created melodies of such subtlety and nobility. His Ballades, Scherzos, Etudes, Polonaises, the 24 Preludes, the B flat Minor and B Minor Sonatas, the latter with a final movement—as Joachim Kaiser once formulated it—in which “a mortally ill genius composed a glorious, wonderfully overheated anthem to the life force,” have never disappeared from the concert hall repertoire or the record catalogues.

Chopin’s biography, on the other hand, remains obscure. A man who “withheld” himself all his life in contrast to the openness and accessibility of his contemporary Franz Liszt, he 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. It is no wonder that popular literature dubbed him a “tuberculous man of sorrows” and “a consumptive salon Romantic.” Striving for crystalline perfection, he never ventured outside his own domain. The refusal to compromise what was innate to his character finally compelled him to break off his long-lasting liaison with George Sand and her daughter Solange. He was a loner and undoubtedly an elitist, but at the same time a sufferer. This is made clearer by a comparison with the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who is said as a child to have given “martyr” as his chosen career. Chopin too must have shared this cult of the *pater dolorosus*.

Although a European celebrity, he was surrounded even then by an aura of mystery. Even as a practising pianist, he was a special case. His playing is described by all his contemporaries as something exceptionally individual. Rarely, indeed, did he appear on the concert platform, feverishly awaited by his followers, “for the man they were waiting for was not only a skilled virtuoso, a pianist versed in the art of the keyboard; he was not only an artist of high reputation, he was all that and more yet than that; he was Chopin,” as Franz Liszt wrote in 1841 in his review of a Chopin concert. Liszt gave his own view of Chopin’s reclusiveness: “What would have marked a certain retreat into oblivion and obscurity for anybody else gave him a reputation immune from all the whims of fashion. This precious, truly high and supremely noble fame was proof against all attacks.”

The reason for his reclusiveness and for the rarity of his appearances on the concert platform is given by Chopin himself in his observation to Liszt, whose virtuosity Chopin 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. But you are called to this; for if you do not win over your audience, you are still capable of subjugating it.”

Ignaz Moscheles, himself one of the leading pianists of the 19th century, gave what is perhaps the most expressive and beautiful commentary on Chopin’s pianistic status and ability when he wrote in 1839:

“His [Chopin’s] 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, can I explain to myself the ardent devotion of the ladies. 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 dilettantish 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.”

There has been much discussion about the manner of his rubato playing, with his contemporaries greatly differing in their views.

“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. ‘Il (elle) ne sait pas lier deux notes [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. ‘Je vous prie de vous asseoir [Please be seated]’, he would say on such occasions with gentle mockery.”

This recollection of a female pupil 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 wilfulness: “Chopin submitted only reluctantly to the yoke of bar lines; in my opinion, he took rhythmical independence much too far. [...] Chopin could not play at a steady pace.” Evidently he did not allow his pupils the license he reserved for himself.

Franz Liszt, in his 1851 biography of Chopin, explained:

“Even if these pages do not suffice to speak of Chopin as we should wish, we hope that the magic which his name justly exercises will add all that our words lack. Chopin was extinguished by slowly perishing in his own flame. His life, lived far from all public events, was as it were a bodiless being that reveals itself only in the traces he has left us in his musical works. He breathed his last in a foreign country that never became a new home for him; he stayed true to his eternally orphaned fatherland. He was a poet with a soul filled with secrets and plagued by sorrows.”

Also interesting is that Liszt himself preferred the rich-toned and brilliant Érard as an instrument, while Chopin looked for the much more sensitive and fragile Pleyel, where he had a wide range of colors and also could emphasize darker sonorities. In conclusion, Chopin nothing has to do with a “thunderer;” it’s the art of a quiet and silent genius, delicate and fragile.

And last not least, Chopin was a great admirer of Johann Sebastian Bach and was inspired by his work. Chopin took *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, in the new Paris edition, to Mallorca with him and applied himself to a special study of Bach’s masterpiece. His love of Bach links him with Felix Mendelssohn, and also with Ferdinand Hiller. Together with Hiller and Liszt, Chopin had performed Bach’s Concerto for three pianos. Bach epitomized for Chopin greatness and order and peace. Bach also signified refuge in past times. It was that for which he yearned at all times and in all places.

Chopin had been drawn to Bach’s works in his early years by his Warsaw teacher Wojciech Żywny, not at all in accordance with the tastes of his day. Chopin made his own pupils study Bach’s preludes and fugues in great detail, and during the two weeks of the year in which he prepared himself for a major concert, he played nothing but Bach. In his Etudes, Chopin showed how well he had mastered the laws of logic and structure that he admired in Bach. In

composing his 24 *Préludes*, Chopin once again revealed his debt to Bach. True, none of his preludes is followed by a fugue, but each piece is self-contained and makes its own statement.

In the *Revue et Gazette musicale* of May 2, 1841, Franz Liszt had this to say of Chopin's recital of April 26 that year:

"The *Préludes* of Chopin are compositions of quite exceptional status. They are more than pieces, as the title might suggest, that are intended to introduce other pieces; they are poetic preludes comparable to those of a great contemporary poet [possibly Lamartine], which cradle the soul in golden dreams and lift it into ideal realms. Admirable in their variety, they reveal the work and the skill that went into them only upon careful examination. All seems here a first cast of the die, full of *élan* and sudden inspiration. They have the free and full spirit that characterizes the works of a genius."

Robert Schumann, on the other hand, was bewildered by the *Préludes*: "They are sketches, the beginnings of studies, or if you will, ruins, single eagle's wings, motley and jumbled. There is sick, feverish, odious stuff in the volume; let each seek what he desires."

Maybe Schumann recognized traits of his own here. In any case, he had already been subjected to criticism of this kind. In a review of 1839, the music critic Ludwig Rellstab finds fault with Schumann's *Kinderszenen* for "feverish dreams" and "oddities." Schumann saw in Bach the origin of all combinatorics in music; for Chopin, however, Bach meant size, order and tranquility, but also security in the past.

Chopin himself was quite cross when George Sand talked of "imitative sound-painting," and protested vehemently against theatrical interpretations. "He was right," admitted Sand later. He was furious, too, when she translated his D flat Major-Prelude into mystical experiences and spheres: "The Prelude he composed that evening was surely full of the raindrops that danced on the echoing tiles of the abbey; in his imagination, though, and in his song, these drops were transformed into tears that fell from heaven into his heart." In fact, Chopin composed on Mallorca as he always did, nobly, majestically, elegiacally.

George Sand's daughter Solange expressed and elaborated on this in 1859:

"Chopin! Elect soul, entrancing spirit, ready to joke in the hours in which bodily pains allowed him a little respite. Born a superior being, exquisite manners. Sublime and melancholic genius! Purest decency and honor, finest tenderness. The modesty of good taste, unselfishness, generosity, unchangeable devotion. An angelic soul, tossed down to earth in a tormented body, to complete a mysterious redemption here. Is his life of thirty-nine years of agony the reason that his music is so exalted, so graceful, so select?"

J.D.: My goodness, Burkard, that was surely way more of an answer to my question than I bargained for. It's very interesting, though, because so many of the writings about Chopin you quote, and so much of how he seems to have been seen by his contemporaries, tends to reinforce our image of him as a sort of delicate, fragile, epicene of a boy-man that has come down to us in popular lore. Personally, I don't buy it. He may have been sickly, yes, but his music is not sentimental salon music. Much in Chopin speaks with pride, strength, and resolve. I do want to ask you one last question, though, since you touched on it in your answer above, and that has to do with Chopin's pianos. The composer is quoted as saying, "When I am not in the mood, I play

on the Érard piano, where I find the ready tone easily. But when I am full of vigor and strong enough to find my very own tone, I need a Pleyel piano.” One might wonder what Chopin was not in the mood for when he preferred an Érard, but my question to you, Burkard, is how you would feel about playing Chopin on an actual Érard or Pleyel, as opposed to a modern concert grand. It has been done. If those were the instruments Chopin knew and was writing for, how might their tone, timbre, and mechanisms alter our impression of his music?

B.S.: When Chopin played on a Pleyel, it was a big challenge to his technique and his sensitivity to sound and colors. A Pleyel was a much more sensible and sensitive instrument than an Érard. In the case of a Pleyel, Chopin was challenged to shape each single tone. This is what he meant when he said, “When I am full of vigor and strong enough to find my very own tone, I need a Pleyel piano.”

I regret that the Érards, which Liszt preferred, or the Pleyels that Chopin played are not built any more today. The modern ones don’t have anything to do with the historic ones, and Pleyel, to my regret, no longer exists today. So, we only can remember on a few remaining historic instruments, what their tone, timbre, and mechanism were like. As you know, I’m no fan of old and historic instruments. Also in case of Bach, I prefer new and technically perfect instruments (I spoke in earlier interviews in *Fanfare* 31:3 and 38:4 and 31:3 about this.

I very much respect those artists that specialize on playing historic instruments, but I personally feel at home on new instruments, which are perfect in mechanism, tone, and timbre, and which allow me an unlimited range of colors. I’m convinced this allows me to be much closer to the intention, as well the perfectionism Chopin wanted.

One of the biggest changes since the 1960 Chopin celebrations has been the growth of the period performance movement. I personally remain committed to a modern instrument. Why? We know that Chopin preferred the sound of Pleyel, which was much clearer, more intimate, and nearly chamber-music-like than the Érard Liszt used, which was richer-toned and orchestral. I personally never even wanted (how crazy and terrible to say it!) 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, an instrument I sought for many years. It has an extreme clarity and sonority, extreme colorfulness, and an unlimited range of registrations over the entire keyboard. It’s 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 has been on my side the whole 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 else special the instrument *must* have; 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 will know what I mean and how it should be!

The studio of Teldex in Berlin is a hall with phenomenal acoustics and very special warmth of sound. That’s where I also recorded my *Goldbergs* (Bayer BR 100 326). Again I used one of my own Steinways, and again worked with my Teldex team, Friedemann Engelbrecht, Tobias Lehmann, and Julian Schwenkner as recording producers, and Julian Schwenkner and Wolfgang Schiefermair as my recording engineers. To bring out such a 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 (!), and classical strength, but also of romantic enthusiasm and passion in bringing out this “obscure man,” Chopin, to create an experience never before heard.


Let’s close with 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!”

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 than superficial thunder.

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Burkard Schliessmann



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Ballade in F major, Op. 38 ***

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Fantaisie in F minor, Op. 49 ****

SACD C

Ballade in F minor, Op. 52 *

Scherzo in E major, Op. 54 *

Berceuse in D flat major, Op. 57 ****

Barcarolle in F sharp major, Op. 60 *

Polonaise-Fantaisie in A flat major, Op. 61 *



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