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A Philosophy, Not a Profession: The Art of Burkard Schliessmann

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Describing someone as an "intellectual" pianist generates certain expectations about his or her playing: since it's so often trotted out as a synonym for "objective," the term prepares you for a musician who emphasizes formal structure rather than tonal color or expressive content, who's sparing in rubato, and who aims for strict reproduction of the score rather than a more personal interpretation. Yet, as you'd paradoxically expect from any pupil of Shura Cherkassky, German pianist Burkard Schliessmann defies those expectations. For his is an intellectualism with a personal twist—as became clear from the three CDs under review, coupled with a series of conversations by phone and e-mail (which, in turn, often incorporated material from his thoughtful program notes).

Why do I call him an intellectual? For one thing, he pays scrupulous attention to the details of the score; it's appropriate that his Web site features an endorsement from Harold Schonberg calling his playing "representative of the best of the modern school." That attention applies not only to the musical details, but to the written instructions as well. Discussing the last piece of Schumann's *Kreisleriana*, for instance, Schliessmann points out that the verbal cues tell us a lot about Schumann's intended interpretation: "'*Die Bässe durchaus leicht und frei*,' Schumann writes. What does this mean? When we look at the score, we find that in each repetition, Schumann placed the deepest notes of the left hand at a different rhythmical place. When you hear the recordings of Horowitz and me, you will see that the demand of the text is fulfilled in a special manner: we play the left hand not simply in the rhythm as noted. No, we're doing much more, by making the rhythm of the left hand independent from the 'main-metrum,' the right hand: the lower notes are playing their own way in a light, nearly dancing way; by this we are fulfilling the demand of Schumann, *leicht und frei*."

Beyond his scrupulous attention to the score, Schliessmann can be called an intellectual because his performances seem to be informed by a profound study of 19th-century European culture. "My interpretations are based on the exact knowledge not only of the internal structures, but also on the historic background, which is a real influence on the artwork. [Understanding] the historical, philosophical, and sociological circumstances is important for the realization of singular interpretations. The Hegelian aesthetic enlightens and informs my deep respect for music and my own interpretations: 'For art is not merely a pleasant or even a useful toy, art is the expanding of truth.'" Thus, Schliessmann not only talks comfortably about the composers (including their lives, letters, and diaries), but also about the literature, art, and philosophy of the time: how many performers of *Kreisleriana* can quote relevant passages from E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Kater Murr*? How many can illuminate Chopin with a comparison to Kierkegaard? ("Chopin was a loner, undoubtedly 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.'")

His understanding of cultural history also includes some remarkable insight about the music criticism of the time. I was struck, for instance, by his fresh approach to Hanslick's criticism of the Liszt Sonata. Few modern admirers of the Sonata take Hanslick seriously; if anything, his words are trotted out as one more example of how thickheaded critics can be. Thus, unless you want to mock the critic's lack of understanding, there's little reason to quote Hanslick's quip that "anyone who hears this piece and finds it beautiful is beyond redemption." But Schliessmann uses Hanslick to get insight into the work. Hanslick was, after all, an experienced listener, and "behind his apparently negative judgment there lies a whole set of observations which, if interpreted in a more positive way, are absolutely accurate." More specifically, "Hanslick had fully grasped the work's outrageous nature" by pointing to the music's disruptive character. "Ever anxious to create contrasts by means of unpremeditated transformations and by exposing the same motivic cells through variations of pianistic instrumentation, Liszt often deviates, even in his most lyrical pieces, from three-part song form. To conclude from this supposed economy of thematic material that Liszt lacked inspiration would be to fail to recognize the improvisatory nature of his creativity."

Schliessmann's intellectualism is evident, too, in his desire for absolute control—at least, in this repertoire. (When playing works like Godowsky transcriptions, he has a "different personality," one that abandons the search for control and is willing to run risks.) One of his models here is Michelangeli, someone with whom he wishes he could have studied. "I could have learned from Michelangeli. He had extreme control; he didn't risk anything when he played." Thus, while Michelangeli would not be an appropriate model for playing Godowsky, he was exceptional in Schumann, Chopin, Brahms, Debussy, and Schubert. "And this is what affected me and fascinated me in his playing. I could use this for my own playing, of Chopin, Schumann, and especially Liszt, because Liszt demands a very highly developed technique. You can't make any notes that are not clear. It doesn't mean you can play wrong notes with Godowsky, but Godowsky is a completely different style. Here you can risk anything, much rubato, many agogics."

Finally, there is Schliessmann's interest in "the architectural forms" of the music. Yet it may be here that we see some of the twists that make Schliessmann a different kind of intellectual pianist—for he's more apt to talk about "narrative" than "architecture." Asked, for instance, what contemporary pianists he admires, Schliessmann immediately names Maria-João Pires: "I like the narrative and expressive style of her performances, because they are not oriented to the metronome. The speaking character of her playing sometimes reminds me of Artur Schnabel, whose 'speaking and narrative interpretations' fascinated me early in life." And with this interest in narrative comes a real focus on the *disruptive* qualities of the music he plays, his focus on the progress of musical events rather than on static structures. While his performance of *Kreisleriana*, for instance, never engages in aggressive sounds (more on that later), he certainly does heighten the music's fantastic differentiation of moods. His performance of the Liszt stresses the disruptions, too.

In a way, then, Schliessmann can be said to be seeking out the subjective, rather than the objective, forms of the music. For, ultimately, personality is crucial to Schliessmann—both the personality of the artist and the personality of the performer. Indeed, his objections to competitions (which he avoids) stems largely from the way they stamp out individuality: "I'm convinced that even to win a competition is no guarantee for a career. Moreover, the typical playing in competitions has nothing to do with the real art of interpretation, which belongs to the personality of the artist, which is a mirror of the individuality and personality of the player. In competitions, very objective playing is necessary, playing which depends on the correct playing of all notes. In some cases, it's a competition for the fastest and loudest playing. There is no chance to demonstrate a personal style and there is no time for the jury to discuss the sense of a *style extraordinaire*."

His performance of the Liszt Sonata makes clear his extremely personal approach. Avoiding both the architectural rigor of Pollini and the sheer intensity of Horowitz, Schliessmann offers an unusually inward account of the music, on the slow side of normal (certainly he resists the temptation to race through the opening of the fugue), more likely to apply the brakes for interrogation of expressive details than to surge ahead for sheer drama. The technique is absolutely secure, but there's no razzle-dazzle. As usual, this interpretive perspective seems to stem from a deeply considered study of the piece in terms of Liszt's own life. Specifically, like Teresa Walters (see 24:5), Schliessmann sees the sonata in profoundly

religious terms. “The listener with no preconceptions hears massive waves of sound breaking over him and forms from them the image of a passionate soul seeking and finding the path to faith and peace in God through a life of struggle and a vigorous pursuit of ideals. It is impossible not to hear the confessional tone of this musical language; Liszt’s sonata becomes—perhaps involuntarily on the part of the composer—an autobiographical document and one which reveals an artist in the Faustian mold in the person of its author. As in the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, the underlying religious concept which dominates and permeates the whole work demands a special kind of approach. Whereas representations of human passions and conflicts force themselves on our understanding with their powerfully suggestive coloring, this concept only becomes manifest to those souls who are prepared to soar to the same heights. The equilibrium of the sonata’s hymnic chordal motif, the transformation of its defiant battle motif (first theme) into a triumphant fanfare, and its appearance in bright, high notes on the harp, together with the devotional atmosphere of the Andante, represent a particular challenge to the listener; he is, after all, also expected to grasp the wide-spanned arcs of sound which, from the first hesitant descending octaves to the radiant final chords, build up a graphic panorama of the various stages of progress of a human spirit filled with faith and hope. As the reflection of a remarkable artistic personality worthy of deep admiration and, by extension, of the whole Romantic period, Liszt’s B-Minor Sonata deserves lasting recognition.” In some sense, this approach to the Liszt mirrors Schliessmann’s often repeated convictions about music: “Music is a right, but only for those who merit it. It is not a profession to be a pianist and musician. It is a philosophy, a conception of life that cannot be based on good intentions or natural talent. First and foremost there must be a spirit of sacrifice.”

Probably the most immediately striking thing about Schliessmann’s recordings, though, is the stunning quality of the sound. In part, credit is due to engineer Marcus Herzog. The engineering on all three of these discs is remarkable; indeed, with regard to its ability to duplicate the sound of a real piano in a real hall, his new Chopin disc, at least when heard in surround sound (on either SACD or DVD-A), is arguably the best piano recording I’ve ever heard. Schliessmann insists that the quality of the sound has its source, as well, in the quality of his piano technician, Georges Ammann. But surely the pianist deserves credit, too? “I don’t want to be conceited,” Schliessmann says, “absolutely not, but it’s a fact that piano and player have to blend into one.” And in every way, Schliessmann seems exceptionally careful about the sounds he produces, both in the way he plays his instrument and in the way he has it recorded. Indeed, on his CD coupling Schumann and Liszt, he insisted on a different acoustic for each composer.

Significantly, for all his interest in history, Schliessmann is committed to modern pianos. He owns two new Steinways (“excellent pianos, very personal, and ‘trained’ by my friend Georges Ammann from Steinway”). Each has a different sonic character, and he uses them for different kinds of repertoire. The first—a piano much admired by Michelangeli, who would have bought it had Schliessmann not gotten there first—was used for his recordings of the Schumann and Liszt. “It is very fine for this kind of music, as well as for Brahms and Scriabin,” because after touching a note, “it develops a flower of tone” which merges with the tones beneath it. The other piano, on which he recorded the Chopin, is his favorite: “But it’s a piano which you can only use polyphonic structures and for polyphonic music. You can also use it very well for Bach or for Beethoven, not for symphonic music, because the tone is much more fragile.”

Not surprisingly, the interaction between piano and hall is also extremely important to him. He often travels with his own favored instruments (especially if there is a recording or broadcast involved), and he carefully adjusts to any hall in which he plays. “I need a day to hear the hall and to place the piano at the right place.” This maximizes the impact on the audience. In his care in this regard, he has been influenced by Horowitz. “Horowitz, in his comeback of 1965 in New York Carnegie Hall, worked a long time to place his piano at the right place. This has had a great effect on me.”

In the end, though, for all the interest in history, for all the interest in structure, for all the concern for sound, what really seems to generate Schliessmann’s performances is communication with his audience. “It’s quite an obsession to me to communicate at this moment, at this time, with my audience. I don’t only *play* for them, it’s something I want to *give back* to them. I feel how each listener in the audience is listening to me, and I feel its warmness, for example, and I give it back to the complete audience. I feel the intensity of hearing, of listening. This is like electricity, and this I give back to the audience. It’s very stimulating.” Indeed, this give and take is so important that, when recording in a studio, he likes to bring a few friends along to serve as an audience. “Sometimes, I ask one, two, or more people just to sit in the audience and to listen to me with concentration as I play. It’s stimulating for me, and I try to build up a situation like that in a recital with a live audience. This helps me to play in a way that electrifies people.” Given this concern with the give and take of communication, it’s not surprising that he records in long takes, avoiding the kind of patchwork cutting that so many others employ. “When I’m doing my records, I have prepared everything on a very high level. That means that I can avoid cuts; I can have a big line, a big arc of my whole interpretation. Even in the Schumann Fantasy, where we have three big movements, there are few patches. I only play each movement three or at the maximum four times and that’s really enough.” With too much editing, he believes, “I would lose my big line. Therefore, it’s easy to work with me on my recordings; they’re very quick to produce.”

All in all, Schliessmann is a fascinating artist—well worth your acquaintance. So which of these recordings should you start with? As I’ve said, simply in terms of sound reproduction, the Chopin disc is a real winner—at least if you have the appropriate playback equipment. To hear the Chopin in the way he recorded and the way he wanted it heard by his listener, “it is important to hear it on multichannel equipment with five speakers. Even though the SACD is a hybrid and thus compatible with a normal CD player, on a regular CD player you only will have compressed audio reproduction format. That means there are no room acoustics and all is reduced to a sound that has nothing to do with my interpretation. Listening in this way, you will get a wrong and false impression of my interpretation.” The same is true of the DVD version; unless you listen on DVD-A player, you’ll lose some of the quality. The DVD version has an additional virtue—a bonus video clip on which he plays the Waltz in CT Minor, although many will find that the nearly surrealist visuals distract from the music. “In all, this production has been a great challenge, but I’m a little bit proud to be one of the pioneers on these new high-end formats.” Indeed, Schliessmann even found that the quality of the recording influenced his interpretations, especially with respect to tempo. Because the new recording techniques give a truer sense of room acoustics, he says, they “gave me the opportunity to play passages in a manner I normally couldn’t play.” He points, as examples, to the intimacy of the second theme

of the First Ballade and to the beginning of the Second Ballade: “I could play it in a very simple, plain way, like a pastoral song on a shawm.”

Still, I suspect that for many listeners his Chopin—especially his extremely patient exploration of the colors and textures of the Ballades—may be an acquired taste; although Schliessmann himself sees his approach as an amalgamation of the “classical strength of Rubinstein and the ‘romantic drive’ of Cortot,” in fact the dramatic elements are extremely muted. It’s excellent playing, given its premises, but it’s hardly mainstream. I’d therefore recommend starting with his earlier recordings—his mercurial (and highly polyphonic) Schumann and his spiritual recording of the Liszt Sonata. These are not exactly middle-of-the-road performances, either, but I suspect they’ll be more widely accessible.

But whatever your starting place, you are liable to agree that Schliessmann is not a run-of-the-mill performer.

SCHUMANN **Fantasy in C.** LISZT **Sonata in b** • Burkard Schliessmann (pn) • BAYER 100 293 (61:36)

SCHUMANN ***Kreisleriana. Symphonic Etudes*** (with Posthumous Etudes) • Burkard Schliessmann (pn) • BAYER 100 311 (73:50)

CHOPIN **Ballades. Fantasy in f. Barcarolle. Polonaise-Fantaisie. Waltz in c**♭, op. 64/2[1] • Burkard Schliessmann (pn) • BAYER 100 348 (Hybrid Multichannel SACD: 70:45);