

Chopin Notes

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It seems that a wider recognition in the U.S. came with your performance of Prokofiev's piano concertos with the San Francisco Symphony in 2007. Prokofiev's music was in a sense your ticket to success in America. Would you agree with that?

Absolutely. My first performance in the U.S. was actually Prokofiev's *Third Piano Concerto* with the Mannes Orchestra. It

was the first time my manager heard me. Again, it was the same *Third Piano Concerto* that I played in the final round of the competition in Cincinnati, so, in a sense, it became my signature piece. Then came my performance of the *First* and *Fourth Piano Concertos* with the San Francisco Symphony. It was the first time I had ever played Prokofiev's *Fourth Concerto* in a concert; it was also the first time for Michael [Tilson] Thomas to conduct it and for the San Francisco Symphony to play it. Can you believe that? So Prokofiev was the composer who walked me through the first few years of my professional career.

There must have been something fresh in your renditions that attracted the audiences, critics and agents.

For some reason, Prokofiev is not difficult for me to play. There are composers that you get along with and some composers that you "struggle" with. Prokofiev came naturally to me, and I understood very clearly what he wanted to say. This must have come across in my performances. Prokofiev was a great pianist himself, and his writing is one the most comfortable in the piano repertoire. One also needs to remember that Prokofiev was a versatile composer, who wrote the best ballet music that has ever been written. So you have to absorb him whole to be able to play his music well.

Where do you place Chopin in your musical interests?

He has a very special place in my heart. Chopin is one of those composers whose music people play from a young age to their late years, because he wrote a full range of pieces with different levels of difficulty. I played him a lot when I was much younger, but I never felt I spoke his language. You go through these stages in your life and sometimes have to wait to be ready for a composer. A few years ago, I finally understood everything Chopin wanted to say, in my humble, subjective opinion, of course. It became very personal, between him and me. This is what you wish to have with every composer. I am going through a Chopin stage, and I am playing a lot of his music this year, bringing in new pieces, so I am very excited to get a chance to play his music in Atlanta.

What do you consider to be the most fascinating element of his music?

Chopin is probably the only composer who never wrote a "wrong" note. There are many composers, including Prokofiev and Rachmaninoff, who wrote some pieces that I would not want to study, but Chopin is very special, because no single note in his music is meaningless.

No Life outside of Music

Exclusive interview with

Ilya Yakushev, winner of the 2005

World Piano Competition

in Cincinnati, Ohio

By Bozena U. Zaremba

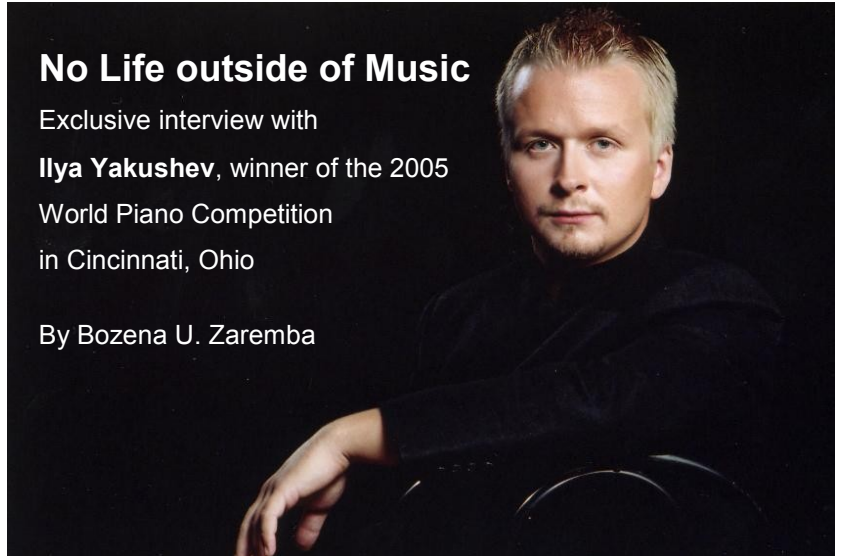


Photo: Serge O

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Upcoming Events:

Ilya Yakushev, piano

March 25, 7:00 PM

Roswell Cultural Arts Center

See our website for
information about the
After-Concert Essay Contest

Concert tickets are always discounted for members of the Chopin Society of Atlanta. To become a member join online at www.chopinatlanta.org or call 770.663.0620

Chopin Notes

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Chopin Society of Atlanta has grown a cult following among local piano mavens.

– Pierre Ruhe, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 2007

A Giant with Poetic Sincerity

Chopin Society of Atlanta Essay Contest for Young Listeners

Just before our latest recital, we faced an unexpected turn of events – Mr. Nakamatsu, who was supposed to be the featured pianist, had suddenly fallen ill and had to cancel his appearance. Within three days, we had to find a replacement, make travel arrangements, print new programs, and make announcements. Joyce Yang, whose previous Chopin Society of Atlanta recital brought an enthusiastic response from our audience, kindly agreed to step in at the last minute, for which we are very grateful. The response from a young member who participated in our After-Concert Essay Contest proves that Ms. Yang's vibrant musical temperament was definitely more of a consolation than a disappointment. Here are excerpts from the winning essay by **Roberto Yrigollen**.

“On the frightfully cold night of October 1, 2011, Joyce Yang, a young, inspiring and over-the-top musician, warmed the hearts of every audience member at the Roswell Cultural Arts Center. Since this was my first live concert, I was not sure at all what to expect. I was further baffled when I learned that the original musician



Photo: Pawel Loj

who was scheduled to play had become ill. Ms. Yang cheerfully accepted the replacement role and had to plan her concert three days prior! If that is not a remarkable feat in itself, her piano playing

would have kept you on your feet applauding. The piece I have chosen to critique is Franz Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6 in D-flat Major*, a piece Liszt himself would come back from the dead to steal back from Ms. Yung.

It makes you wonder if the composer ever imagined someone like Ms. Yang tearing up every note on the keyboard,

impressing the whole concert hall. Probably not. Ms. Yang's image is one of poetic sincerity and intelligently formed modesty... She showed the ability to go outside of her comfort zone and stomped like an angry, ravaging giant on the citizens of an innocent village, known as her piano. The beginning of this performance immediately grabbed my attention with a marching feel and intricate strikes of the keys. Once my attention was grabbed, it was as if Ms. Yang lured me in further with her flawless pedal usage and flooding scales, almost like an angler fish bringing in an unsuspecting prey with its enticing glow. Once I was reeled in, a continuous serious and deep tone put me into a dazed mood. Ms. Yang managed to grasp my attention with animated, bouncing chords that made me want to get up and dance, had it not been for my fear of public appearances... Finally, the giant reappeared, jumping, playing and stomping at the end of this alluring piece.”

The essay was awarded a Barnes and Noble gift certificate. Excerpts have been edited for space and clarity.

Exclusive Interview—Continued from p. 1

Chopin should suit you well, because you often have a delicate, almost feminine, touch, which can be heard, for example, in your interpretation of Bach's *Partitas*. It reminds me of the great Ivo Pogorelic. Is this a fair comparison, do you think?

To be honest, I have never heard Pogorelic play Bach, but are you probably talking just about the quality of sound?

Yes, exactly.

I am quite flattered by the comparison, because Pogorelic is one of the best pianists out there, but I never really tried to sound like someone else. I believe that every pianist needs to find his or her own voice. I listen to other pianists' recordings out of curiosity, just to see what other people do, not in order to copy them. If you try to sound like someone else, the momentum of your performance is going to be completely

lost. It's going to be somebody else's, not your own.

How did you find that voice in Bach?

There was a moment in my life when I studied Bach thoroughly, and that was when Vladimir Feltsman became my teacher and mentor. He is known to be one of the best Bach interpreters of all times, and it was Bach's *Partitas* that we worked on. I learned a lot from him; I think I gained in-depth knowledge of Bach's music and understanding of his language. I am glad you like this recording, because I think it is one of my best. I worked hard on achieving the right kind of sound, and I am really proud of the results.

You studied in St. Petersburg at the Rimsky-Korsakov College of Music and then came to America to continue your musical education. How did that come about?

I was at college in the '90s. It was a tough time for Russia, and my parents

told me it would probably be a good idea to go abroad because there was money there in my profession. They said it would be a good experience and that if I didn't like it, I could always come back. Russia is much better off right now, but at that time, I thought it was a good idea. My parents respected my decision and fully supported me. They helped me fund my trips to auditions to different schools, including two schools in New York. Dr. Arkady Aronov from the Mannes College came to my audition, and he ended up being my teacher for the first three years. I decided that Mannes would be the best place for me, and I am very happy with that decision. Otherwise I would not have met Feltsman and I would not have what I have today.

Do you ever go back to St. Petersburg?

Yes, in fact quite often, and I love being there. Two days ago, I actually bought a piano for my apartment in St. Petersburg,

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Please visit our redesigned website: www.chopinatlanta.org

CHOPIN SOCIETY OF ATLANTA'S 2011 FUNDRAISER

The Chopin Society of Atlanta's Annual Fundraiser was held on November 12, 2011, at the Country Club of the South in Johns Creek. **Rita Cosby**, a television news anchor and Emmy Award winner, was the event's Guest of Honor. During the evening, she told the fascinating story of her father's life, which is the subject of her bestselling memoir, *Quiet Hero: Secrets from My Father's Past*. Please read the letter she sent to the Chopin Society of Atlanta (below.)



John Lemley, WABE-FM host and Dorota Lato, president of the Chopin Society of Atlanta



Rita Cosby with the young pianists — Anthony Wang, Stephanie Chew, Eliza Folkert and Emilia Folkert — whose performance charmed all guests.



Rita Cosby, Dorota Lato, president of the Chopin Society of Atlanta and Lawrence Ash, Honorary Consul General of the Republic of Poland



Elizabeth Pelypenko and Richard Hamrick



Halina Szlam and Barbara Leszczyński



Rita Cosby and Kevin and Kathy Green



Teofil Leszynski and Bogdan and Krystyna Łomnicki



Marty Merkler



Anna Holub-Standish and Danuta Brodka

I want to thank everyone at the Chopin Society of Atlanta Fundraiser. It was truly a spectacular and very special evening. From the wonderful music of the young pianists to Dorota Lato's warm and welcoming remarks, it was a memorable night for a terrific cause. You also had a first-class emcee in WABE's John Lemley.

As I said in my speech that night, the music of Chopin holds a very powerful place in my heart and in my father's life. When he was a young child in Poland, this music represented the incredible culture and beauty of his homeland. The first night my father and I were in Warsaw in 2009, we heard Chopin's music being played, and immediately tears streamed down my father's face, as there was an instant connection.

Chopin's music is timeless, and his spirit is pervasive in your great organization, which is dedicated to promoting this exceptional composer and arts in general. Thank you for including me at your extraordinary fundraiser, and I hope to see you all again in the near future. Keep up the fantastic and truly inspiring work!

Rita Cosby



Elzbieta Gürtler-Krawczyńska and Rita Cosby signing her book

Photos: Pawel Loj

Exclusive Interview—Continued from p. 2

and I am going to have it shipped to Russia. It is an incredible instrument, and it's going to be restored by possibly the best Steinway technician in the country, so I am very excited about it. When I see the progress Russia has made in the last 12 years, I am more and more thinking about spending an equal amount of time in both places, New York and St. Petersburg. Both are great cities, but New York is not for everybody to live the whole year around. I still love my hometown, and in my heart, I feel I never left it. Russia is a different place today. It is no longer difficult like it was for many performers who left Russia for good [before the fall of Communism]. Rachmaninoff was never happy in the U.S., and in the last 25 years of his life, while he was living in here, he wrote only six pieces because he was so nostalgic about Russia. A big part of his life was wasted, but he could not go back. Prokofiev could not stand living away from his homeland and went back to the Soviet Union at the worst time possible. That's why the end of his life was not very successful. There is something "magnetic" about Russia. That's why I keep going back.

Let's talk about your recording company, IY Records. Did you found it for financial or artistic reasons?

I simply wanted to produce my own CDs under my own label and protect my copyrights.

Does this give you more artistic freedom?

Yes, certainly. The only thing I don't do is distributing.

Having control over the whole process probably entails a lot of work.

Yes, but when you do something for yourself you can do it on the highest possible level and then be proud of your product. This is the beauty of having your own business. Our design is top of the line; I have the best sound engineer and a first-rate photographer. We take it extremely seriously, and there is no way I can produce it half done or even 99% done. I do it like Whitney Houston [did], sitting in the studio for hours and sitting at the computer for hours. I almost lost my designer because I was so difficult to deal with [laughs], but eventually he was very happy with the result and forgave me.

You are a perfectionist, aren't you?

Unfortunately [laughs], but this is what makes me move forward.

How do you take criticism?

I don't pay too much attention to it. If you believe in yourself and in what you do, and if *you* are satisfied, then it doesn't matter who says what. If I was paying attention to everything everybody says around me, I would have been in a blaze a long time ago. You should never let anybody put you down or stop you from progressing.

Tell me something about your life outside music.

There is no life outside music [laughs heartily]! I am very boring. Unfortunately, I am one of those guys who dedicate all their lives to music. There is not much left outside of it. I have a girlfriend in St. Petersburg, and it's quite serious, so we are thinking of possibly buying a lot near St. Petersburg and hopefully building a house there for summertime. This would keep me busy for a while. There are a lot of projects on my list, but that's all right. I am not a vacation type of a guy.

For an extended version of the interview please visit our website: www.chopinatlanta.org

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