

OSM

March 23-24, 2010

Paley and Davidovich : two great pianists at the OSM

There is a strange encounter in this evening's program: it features works stretching over 250 years of music. It is unusual to hear two piano(s) concertos immediately one after the other, very different in style and keyboard technique, separated by hundred years in time. For a listener, it would be a very special experience to capture the transformation of a musical genre through a century, like watching an accelerated film of a growing tree or the blooming of a flower.

There is a common thread which units those four compositions; it is the musical theatre in its different forms. Mozart, as well as Tchaikovsky, had a very developed sense of drama in music, which they often transposed on their instrumental compositions. Moreover, Ruzicka's and Strauss' works are linked with the opera scores: *Vorecho*, according to the composer, is a symphonic study for his opera *Hölderlin* (2008), while Strauss' *Symphonic Fantasy* is an orchestral pot-pourri of *The Woman without a Shadow*.

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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra N. 10 in E-flat Major, K. 365

Born in Salzburg, January 27, 1756, died in Vienna, December 5, 1791.

Premiered probably in Salzburg, 1780.

Since Bach, the concertos for multiple harpsichords or fortepianos were out of date. Mozart preferred the solo instrument, considered more suitable for a dramatic expressivity, as it could brilliantly play as an opera character. The vocal style of the opera aria served as a model to the solo instruments.

The orchestral exposition opens the *Allegro* movement, presenting the thematic material, and announcing the "contest" between the two soloists. Mozart uses *ritornelli* as comments of the keyboard melodies; the two pianos share their themes as well as their cadenzas, written in full by the composer himself. The string orchestra is completed with pairs of oboes, bassoons and horns.

The model for the cantabile *Andante* movement is to be found in the opera air. It is lyrical and intimate, with a wide range of embellishments of melody that characterize Mozart's musical language from his earliest days. The orchestra plays in the background, leaving the stage to the soloists.

The final *Rondo Allegro* is a whirling dance, following the traditional structure A-B-A-C-A-B-A, characteristic of the 18th century rondos, and naturally adapted to the "conversation" between soloists. The main theme recalls an old Austrian folk song, playful and light, but full of harmonic surprises. It is a pure musical delight.

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Piotr Ilitch Tchaikovsky, Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23

Born May 7, 1840, Vyatka, Russia; died November 18, 1893, Saint-Petersburg, Russia.

Premiered in Boston, October 25, 1875; Hans von Bülow, as soloist, Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Benjamin Johnson Lang.

The fanfares opening this concerto are probably the most famous sounds of classical music. It is a true firework, an expression of the Russian soul in the imagination of popular audiences. Listeners were fond of Tchaikovsky's music, while the critics were reluctant.

"I shall not alter a single note. I shall publish the work exactly as it is!", Tchaikovsky answered to Nikolai Rubinstein's criticism, the famous pianist and director of the Moscow Conservatory. According to Tchaikovsky's letter to Mme von Meck, recalling this event, the Master's judgment was harsh: « My concerto was worthless, absolutely unplayable; the passages so broken, so disconnected, so badly written, that they could not even be improved." The unusual, audacious tonal and harmonic treatment probably sounded awkward to a conservative pianist such as Rubinstein.

As for the audience, it was a resounding success. Hans von Bülow, pianist and conductor, who agreed to play the premiere of the work, was enthusiastic: "The ideas are so original, so noble, so powerful."

The famous introduction to the first movement, *Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso*, heralded by the horns in unison, is played by the piano in thunderous chords. Then follows the first theme, stated first by the violins, then by the clarinet, one of most memorable melodies, rich enough to provide motivic elements for the entire work. It is inspired by a melody Tchaikovsky said he heard at a country fair near Kiev, played by a blind musician. However, it is heard only twice, and after a rhapsodic cadenza, it disappears for ever, leaving just an echo, diverted by new musical ideas. The double exposition, *Allegro con spirito*, develops two lyrical themes followed by an intense dramatic crescendo, concluding with barrages of quadruple octaves in the piano solo, and a virtuoso piano cadenza.

Part slow movement, part scherzo, the *Andantino semplice-Presto* in symmetrical form brings a contrasting lightness. It starts with solo flute melody, muted pizzicato strings in accompaniment, repeated by the oboe and violoncellos, elaborated upon by both piano and orchestra. A fast scherzo section, *Presto*, is inspired by the French song "Il faut s'amuser, danser et rire", playful and charming, popular in the 1860-ies. Finally, there is a brief return to the folk melody of the *Andantino*, which closes the second movement of the concerto.

Tchaikovsky found the main theme for the finale *Allegro con fuoco* in an anthology of Ukrainian folk songs, « Zbornik ukrainskih narodnih pesen » (1872). « The wild Cosac fire », wrote a Bostonian critic after the premiere. In a fast triple meter and marked

syncopations, the furious dance leaves the impression of a flamboyant energy. The second lyrical theme, reminiscent of the melody from the first movement, brings a sudden contrasting episode. The music is amplified in a magnificent crescendo of the virtuoso octaves in piano, closing brilliantly the most popular piano concerto.

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Peter Ruzicka, *Vorecho*

Eight fragments for orchestra

German composer and conductor, born July 3, 1948, Düsseldorf.

Premiered in Madrid, February 22, 2006, Cristóbal Halffter conducting Orchestra Sinfónica de Madrid.

Among Peter Ruzicka's works some significant titles draw our attention: *In processo di tempo* (1972), *Z-Zeit* (1975), *Erinnerung und Vergessen (Memory and Forgetting - 2008)*, *Memorial* (2001), *Vorgefühle (Premonition - 1998)*. Memory and time are their leitmotifs; they mark over forty years of the composer's production, who is in his first visit to the OSM.

Ruzicka's music seems to be a sort of game with time, leaving it open: some of his pieces are conceived as « works in progress »: *Torso* (1973), *Versuch* (1974), *...Ins Offene* (2006), suggesting unfinished compositions. Moreover, the subtitles defining the genre, such as sketch, fragment, outline or essay, are explicitly intended to avoid the conclusion. Some scores are considered as preparatory studies to the future works. This is the case with *Vorecho*, "before the echo", the silence preceding the sound. It is a symphonic study for orchestra, consisting of eight "sketches" (*Ansätze*) of various lengths, preparing the material for the opera *Hölderlin*.

Vorecho opens in total silence; immaterial sounds arise slowly, then amplifying in intensity: timpani ostinato, rustle of harmonics, and sudden attacks of the brass section produce a strong effect. "When composing it, I intended to express a sound language observing itself; a music, which, during the moment of sounding also maintains the view toward the outside", the composer explains. "My music is the "composition of remembering", an echo of "musical shapes which return in "over-painted" form and yet maintain their identity".

There is still no recording of this work; it would be a discovery for the Montreal audience.

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Richard Strauss, Symphonic Fantasy from *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (The Woman without a Shadow)

Born in Munich, June 11, 1864, died in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, September 8, 1949.

Premiered on April 26, 1947, Konzerthaus-Saal in Vienna, Karl Böhm conducting.

The opera *Die Frau ohne Schatten* is a true fairy tale in music, sparkling in celestial thrones and fantastic landscapes, setting an imaginary stage for a symbolic legend. It features the conflicting worlds, spiritual and earthly, showing characters with magic powers over the human love and life.

The librettist, Hugo von Hoffmannstahl, drew his inspiration from various sources: oriental mythology, Persian legends, fantastic comedies and German romantic tales (Novalis, Grimm, Goethe).

The opera is most demanding to stage. Even for a major opera house it is a great challenge. Despite its highest musical qualities, it is a less known work among the general music-loving public. Strauss was well aware of it and wanted to popularise the opera, composing a shorter orchestral fantasy at the end of his life. Musically, it is conceived as a great tone poem, a compilation of the most striking moments of the opera, its voices treated as a part of the magnificent orchestral web.

The listener, wanting to follow the story of the opera, plot and characters, would find it quite difficult. Strauss composed a purely orchestral score, reworking original themes with musical rather than theatrical logic. And the music is a pure enchantment.

This evening's program features the orchestral version by the conductor Peter Ruzicka. It would be fascinating to compare Strauss' and Ruzicka's orchestration.

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