



Chopin Notes

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Upcoming Events:

Jon Nakamatsu, piano

October 1, 7:00 PM

Roswell Cultural Arts Center

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

**Chopin Society of Atlanta
Annual Fundraising Dinner**

November 12, 6:00 PM

Country Club of the South,
Johns Creek

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Chopin Notes

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Poet, Philosopher or Beautifier?

Exclusive interview with Jon Nakamatsu, 1997 Gold Medalist of the Tenth Van Cliburn International Piano Competition

By Bożena U. Zaremba

How is it possible that a pianist with no musical degree has won the most prestigious American piano competition?

I started studying music when I was very young. I had a fantastic teacher, Marina Derryberry – the most incredible person. She basically taught me my first notes when I was six years old and then accompanied me to the Van Cliburn Competition twenty years later. She was always a driving force behind all things I did musically, and she really became, in a sense, a conservatory to me. She found people for me to work with on different areas of music from composition and theory to orchestration,

conducting, and building my repertoire. Because of that I was able to do other things at school. I majored in languages and literature because I had always believed that people who live in a vacuum, or only learn the mechanics of music but do not understand the humanity behind it, don't ever get to learn what art is about. Having had another life, having had experiences in humanities expanded my horizons, opened new opportunities and ultimately helped me become a better musician.

So the Cinderella story is just a myth.

If it's a fairy tale it's because it's so rare. This is not what people expect. I don't think it's impossible, because I am not the first one to ever have done something like that. Even people like Yo-Yo Ma have a degree in other things besides music. There is this famous story about the young [Vladimir] Horowitz visiting [Alexander] Scriabin, who told Horowitz's mother that practicing eight hours a day and learning every note there will not make him a great musician: first he needs to be a great man, he needs to understand life and the world and build his mind with things that are not just musical and what makes a musician interesting is how he puts his all experiences into what he does in music. I totally relate to this, and I would definitely follow the same path if I had to. But not every student can do it. I was lucky because I happened to find a teacher who was so devoted to me.

Did you feel that your background was an advantage or disadvantage?

That's a great question. I felt kind of both, because there were often times when the jurors would look at my résumé, which shows a language degree from Stanford, while other people had degrees from Juilliard and other great conservatories, and they would ask, "What are you?" Sometimes they would tell me, frankly, that I was rejected because I had no qualifications. Other times my résumé would awaken their curiosity – they would simply want to find out what this person was all about. They could never say, "Oh, he plays like that because he is from this or that school." So I had an advantage because they would really listen, without any prejudice. There are two sides to everything.

How does it feel now? After all the years of playing with the best conductors and orchestras in the world, does this really matter?

I have always believed that your career should not be based on your past but on your life. I felt that if I was making positive choices, good things would happen. There was no guarantee, of course, but I was certainly going to try, so I participated in different competitions and performed

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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 Musical Bouquet of Roses

Chopin Society of Atlanta Essay Contest for Young Listeners

Our post-recital contests always attract young listeners of different ages. No matter how old the writers are – six, twelve or eighteen – their responses are always deeply felt, and their beautifully verbalized comments leave us delighted by the

mering and brilliant. I loved his careful pacing; he treated each individual variation as a separate entity. Each variation was like a rose, and they all came together as a bouquet, bound together by the theme. In addition, Kobrin performed

Alexander Kobrin left the whole audience in awe. He is one of the most expressive pianists I have ever heard. His recital consisted of the hardest pieces, not only technically but emotionally as well. Even though it was a dark Sunday evening, his incredible talent was like sunlight, shining brightly and engulfing the entire auditorium with heavenly music. My favorite piece was Beethoven's *32 Variations on an Original Theme in C minor*. I have previously heard many people play this difficult piece, but no one has even come close to the unbelievable way Kobrin played it that night. Each note was clear, and every transition just perfect. I could count out every variation not because he did unnecessary pauses, but because he changed the mood of every variation. Kobrin brought out each melody, but he also made sure the melody didn't overpower the beautiful harmony. After he finished playing this piece, I nearly cried. Kobrin had remarkable control of his fingers. He made the music flow like a river, and I could feel each note trickle down my arm and tingle at my fingertips. I couldn't help my body from swaying back and forth with the music. I loved how his hands would lift dramatically after a chord so it could echo through the stage.

—Ingrid Cai



Photos: Eizbieta Gürtler-Krawczyńska

profound impact music leaves on a still-young human mind, spirit and even body. Here are some excerpts from essays that were written after Alexander Kobrin's recital on March 20, 2011.

On a clear spring day, I stepped into a tall, brick building. Once inside, I wove through a crowd, nodding at familiar faces, while smiling to myself as I was preparing for what was going to be yet another extraordinary experience. Moments later, while I was sitting in the auditorium, a tall, slim man walked out and sat at a glorious Yamaha situated in the center of the stage. A distinct C minor chord filled the room, immediately bringing the audience to a trance. Alexander Kobrin's fluid fingers grazed the keys gracefully as every note unflinchingly spoke out. With incredible precision and meticulous fingering, Kobrin communicated the character of each variation in Beethoven's *32 Variations on an Original Theme in C Minor*. Even when he played *piano*, the notes came out in a sweetly poignant manner, and when he played *forte*, his tone was like liquid gold, shim-

with such clarity that each note was like a raindrop hitting against a window pane. In Variation XII, his voicing was superb,



and the theme came out lucidly, like a silkworm emerging from its cocoon.—
Catherine Xie

Authors of the best essays have been awarded Barnes & Noble gift certificates. Excerpts have been edited for space and clarity.

CHOPIN SOCIETY OF ATLANTA'S ANNUAL FUNDRAISER

NOVEMBER 12, 2011

The Chopin Society of Atlanta's Annual Fundraiser will be held on **November 12th, 2011, at 6:00 PM**, at the same venue as last year, the elegant Country Club of the South at 4100 Old Alabama Road, Johns Creek, GA 30022.

Rita Cosby, a television news anchor and Emmy Award winner will be the event's Guest of Honor. Rita Cosby is a nationally acclaimed TV personality, currently working as a special correspondent for the CBS program *Inside Edition*. She is the recipient of three Emmy Awards, the Jack Anderson Award for investigative excellence, the Matrix Award, the Ellis Island Medal of Honor, and the Lech Walesa Freedom Award. She is also a bestselling author. Her memoir, *Quiet Hero: Secrets from My Father's Past*, released in 2010, tells an inspiring story about her father, a member of the Polish Resistance in World War II, who fought in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, was captured, then escaped the Nazi POW camp to be saved by American troops. The book became a bestseller on several lists, including *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post*, and is available online at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Wal-Mart.

Please consider supporting our great cause by joining us for an unforgettable evening with delicious food and wonderful music. We look forward to seeing you there.

Please visit our website, www.chopinatlanta.org for more information, for tickets and an exclusive interview with Ms. Cosby.



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as often as possible – while working full time as a German teacher. Sometimes I would win; most of the times I would lose. That's how it was. I didn't win anything significant enough to start a career in music until the Van Cliburn.

In *Playing with Fire* – a documentary about the Van Cliburn Competition featuring you – one of the jurors said that in order to be a great artist, one needs to be either “a poet or a philosopher or a beautifier” who will catch the imagination of the listeners. Which one are you?

I really don't know. I have my own musical aesthetics. I strive for certain musical goals and it's almost that I leave judgment to the world. Music is all about communication, though what I am trying to convey may not necessarily be reaching people. I can only hope that what people receive is a positive message and maybe one or two of those things you have just said.

What is the worst thing that can happen to an artist?

Indifference. It's when the people who come to your recital walk away with no strong feeling at all. Of course, it is unlikely that an audience will love you 100% or hate you 100%. If they all like you 100%, it might mean that you are not challenging them enough; if they all dislike you, it's maybe because you are overdoing it. In art some people will

gravitate towards you and some will not, and that's how it should be.

Can we talk some about Chopin? What is your connection to his music?

My teacher was born and raised in Iran at the time when the authorities were trying to expand the knowledge of western music. The music conservatory in Teheran was world-class, and the music scene was rich and incredible. Many of her teachers were imported from Russia and from Europe; several of them were Polish – great scholars and great interpreters of Chopin's music. When I was still very young, she told me, “You can never be a great pianist unless you learn to understand Chopin, because Chopin is the quintessential piano composer in every way. Everything you will ever learn – Bach, Mozart and everything after that – all lead to this one man.” So first I learned to play a *Cantabile*, a very small, one-page-long piece. I gravitated to it right away, and from that little piece we built my Chopin repertoire. Through Chopin I feel this wonderful connection to my teacher, and for me it's always such a great joy and pleasure to play his music. It's the highlight of all my recitals. I feel this is something everybody wants to hear.

Do you feel you have learned to understand him?

I think so. As much as one can. My teacher encouraged me to read about

Chopin, and I read pretty much everything there was to read about him and his work. He is very enigmatic, but it all comes to one idea: everything comes straight from the heart. When I went to Poland for the first time, I really understood this because the people there are so expressive and so emotive in a way that reflects Chopin's music in the most positive way.

As much as you are a soloist, you are also a chamber musician. How do you compare the collaboration with a chamber ensemble to that with a symphonic orchestra?

In short, with an orchestra, you play first among equals, while in a duo or a chamber ensemble, you are completely equal and no one is more important. With an orchestra you are funneling your energy through a conductor, because it is impossible to communicate with seventy people in the same way as when you play with three musicians. Even the geography of the chamber stage shows how these messages are funneled back and forth; you lead here, you follow there. For me they are both great experiences, because the goal is the same. Music is your expression, but the only thing different is the dynamics between the players.

How did the collaboration with the clarinetist Jon Manasse start?

We came together simply because we had a manager in common. When I

signed with that manager, he said, "There is one person on my list whom I really want you to play with, because I think the two of you would make the ultimate combination." But it didn't happen for a long time. I think it was 2004 that we finally got a "date" in Boston, which was going to be our debut. I remember our initial rehearsal, when we read the first movement of the *E-flat Clarinet Sonata* by Brahms. After that movement we had to stop. We just sat there, and we didn't know whether to laugh or cry, because it was just unlike anything we had ever done before. It was really like playing in a mirror – we could read each other in a very strange but deep way and understand each other's musical intent and personality perfectly. We clicked immediately, and it continues to be most likely the greatest collaboration I will ever have. Separately we have a lot of wonderful musical experiences, but this is something really special for both of us. It also immediately evolved into the closest friendship – his wife and kids became like my own family, and when I got married several years ago, he was my best man. We all just blended.

You have a degree in German Studies and Education, and before the Van Cliburn you used to teach German. Now you teach music. How would you compare these experiences?

I don't have a regular teaching position. I only teach music when I am invited to master classes or festivals. I imagine that if I had regular students I could see more continuity and similarities between the two situations, but I can say that teaching music does relate to the classroom in two distinct aspects – you always have to come prepared, and you always have to inspire. The difference is that with a musician your focus is on an individual. You are looking into one person very deeply and trying to bring out what he or she has inside.

Tell us something about your Japanese roots.

My grandparents came to Hawaii from an island called Okinawa. My parents were raised in Hawaii, and after they got married, they moved to California. My brother and I were born in California.

Do you still relate to the Japanese culture?

In many ways, I do. Living in this

country, where there is such a great variety of people, you tend to create your identity based on the traditions of your family. This makes us different and unique, even in very subtle things relating to behavior and attitude. It also makes us gravitate towards those who have similar background and values. There is a large Japanese community here in California, and there are large groups that still preserve the culture and traditions. But the funny thing is that when I go to Japan, this is the time when I feel the least Japanese [*laughs*]. I relate to so many things they do and to so much of the mentality. It does feel like home, but in many ways I never feel more American than when I am there. Their lives are so different!

I've heard you like to cook. Do you make any Japanese food?

I love to cook Japanese food, though I would never try to do it in Japan because I would be embarrassed [*laughs*]. I am first an American, but for me, the roots are closer and apparent. We definitely have distinct cultural differences. I like that.

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

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