



Chopin Notes

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Photo: Hong Wei

Honest and Sincere Love of Music

Exclusive Interview with Sa Chen, winner of the Crystal Award at the 2005 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition

By Bożena U. Zaremba

Piano seems to be extremely popular in China. Why do you think the Chinese like this instrument so much?

I don't think it is just the piano but classical music in general. This passion for classical music and arts started before the Cultural Revolution, but then, during the Cultural Revolution, such passions were forbidden and people could not pursue them, so paradoxically somehow they grew stronger. When the Cultural Revolution ended, everything started to bloom and grow very fast. The change we see now happened over a long period of time; we are actually talking about the whole generation. That's how I see it.

There are estimated 20 million pianists in China. It must put an immense pressure on artists to distinguish themselves from others.

This is a shocking number, but it probably includes children who are studying the piano. Learning music to be a star was never my intention. I myself chose to play the piano when I was 7. My parents love classical music, yet they never pushed me for anything. On the whole my family was very supportive and my

experience of the learning process was healthy and balanced, so I was never under this kind of "competing" pressure.

You come from a family with musical traditions, don't you?

Yes, my father played the French horn and my mother was a ballet dancer. My father was the very first person to infuse me with music. When I was little, he would copy piano scores for children for me, and he taught me how to read music. He also played records for me. At that time we did not have a CD player or any sophisticated audio system, just a tape recorder. We would invite friends over to our house to listen to music. These were very nice and cozy times.

I've read a story that your parents had to sell the tape recorder to buy the piano. Is this true?

Well, I don't recall such a story, but it definitely required an effort and sacrifice to buy a piano at that time. It was not very practical, either, because people did not have too much space in their homes then. But my family was very excited to see how I was interested in playing the piano, so they thought they should support me, for which I am very grateful.

It looks like your parents had a great role in shaping your musical interests. Are there any other people who had a similar impact?

Before I was 9, I think, I had not been under much influence of the outside music world except for a group of my father's few friends, who played at the opera theater. When I was 9, I started to study with Professor Dan Zhaoyi, who was my teacher for 8 years in China and had a great influence on my artistic path. Then a lot of influences came from the conservatory, which would invite musicians from all over the world for master classes, and that was a big source of inspiration.

You have studied music in China, England, and Germany. How do you compare those

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Upcoming Events:

Piano Recital

Sa Chen, piano
March 22, 2009, 7:00 PM,
Roswell Cultural Arts Center. See our website for the 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

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

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

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“I want to play like him some day.”

Essay Contest for Children

Our latest violin recital, featuring Mariusz Patyra on the violin, accompanied by Giovanni Casella on the piano, brought enthusiastic reaction among young members of the audience, whose response to our Essay Contest was remarkable. We received many excellent essays, in which children first of all praised Patyra's outstanding technique. They were also impressed by the effortless collaboration and partnership between the violinist and his accompanist. It was interesting to see how different musical pieces made a diverse impact on the listeners, who responded to music in such a wide-ranging way. The essay that caught our attention most was the one written by 15-year-old violin student Richard Duan, who wrote:

“I was inspired by the performance of Mariusz Patyra, who played most brilliantly and skillfully. When I attended his concert, I experienced a revelation of heartwarming and spine chilling music. His technique and ability are simply amazing. He played with ease and passion that drew the audience into his music. I particularly enjoyed Paganini's *I Palpiti*. I am currently studying that piece with my teacher, and I was very interested to see how he would play it. *I Palpiti* is a very difficult piece, with fast spiccatos, double stops, and numerous left-hand pizzicatos. I must say I was astounded. He played through the difficult passages so smoothly, like it was a piece of cake. His fingers were moving so fast they were like a blur. His bow was so swift and speedy that some of the bow hairs broke. Yet despite the speed, each note sounded very powerful and strong. He played his violin with so much passion and zeal that he made the notes come alive. He is a true virtuoso of the violin. I am inspired by him and want to play like him some day.”

Here are excerpts from other prize-winning essays:

“I liked the piece by Wieniawski best because it reminded me of animals,” 7-year-old Emily Foster wrote. “At the end, I thought I heard horses running; in the middle, I thought I heard lions roaring; at the beginning, I thought I heard cats meowing.”

“My favorite piece was Saint-Saens's *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso*, because I could feel the music. It made me feel very good inside. It reminded me of Italy; the melody made me feel like I was actually there,” wrote 7-year-old Caroline Burke.



Photo: Mim Eisenberg

Mariusz Patyra and Giovanni Casella

“I have heard several professional violinists play in recitals, but no one can even compare to how talented Mariusz Patyra is,” wrote Ingrid Cai. “His musical talent and the selected emotive pieces really made us – the audience – ask for more. Every piece he played was absolutely marvelous and emotional. Of all the pieces I heard at Mariusz Patyra's recital, I liked Paganini's *I Palpiti* best because it was warm and delicate. I loved the part when Mariusz Patyra made the notes sound like a flute playing or, maybe, a bird singing. It was so extraordinary that I wished it would never stop.”

It is already our long-standing tradition to offer free concert tickets for students attending Chopin Society of Atlanta concerts. In exchange, they write essays about the performance to show the impact that the music has made on them. Authors of the best essays are awarded Barnes & Noble gift certificates, and excerpts are published in *Chopin Notes*. Excerpts have been edited for space and clarity.

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experiences?

I am very grateful that I had a right teacher at the right time—for instance, Professor Dan Zhaoyi, who was so involved and very enthusiastic about his teaching. He discovered a lot of things for me. He taught me the basis of piano technique, and he taught me how to be natural and true to what I feel about music. That beginning was very important to me – it provided the necessary foundation. And then when I was 16, I went to London and then to Hanover, where both my teachers Joan Haville and Arie Vardi were very caring and inspiring. Western teachers generally offer you a wider area for inspiration and arouse your interest in different kinds of art; they also tell you how to play a certain piece in a certain style and give you clues of how to access it. Generally they give you more freedom to fully express yourself, your own feelings, which is very valuable.

Why did you decide to settle down in Germany?

Basically I found an excellent teacher, and that was the main reason. Also, there are a lot of composers that are German and Austrian, so I thought it would be nice to live in the center of European culture and to get to know it better. Besides, I had lived in London for four years before, so I felt it was time to move forward and do something different.

Recently you were asked to sit as a jury member at a piano competition for children. How would you compare it to professional competitions you have participated in?

The difference was that in this competition there was a part in which the participants had to answer questions about music. It was good for the kids who were watching because they had a chance to gain some knowledge. Also the participants had a time limit for each round (due to TV

programming constraints), so it was hard for them to show the full array of their skills. On the other hand, the whole experience was as intense as a professional competition. I was amazed how the kids could hold on for such a long period of time; it was almost every night for more than 10 days, and the level was very high. It was interesting to see how some of the young pianists demonstrated incredible technique and how others chose musical pieces to show their souls – the two most important qualities in music, so in that sense it was a miniature of what we see in the professional music world.

You have made yourself known in China and all over the world. What does a pianist need to be successful in the music world?

From my experience, I can tell it is never like a one-night legend, like you are successful on one night and then you are famous forever. It is more of a growing process with a lot of different elements. First of all, you have to love music, honestly and sincerely. Only then can you discover something unique that belongs only to you. Of course, you need a lot of people around you – when you are faced with difficulties and hard moments and you have to be courageous and determined, you especially need their support and advice. And society is important, too, because without their support art would have no place to grow. But if we are talking about how to make oneself famous in the music market, that may be another story.

You have often been praised for your performance of Chopin's music. What place does his music play in your repertoire?

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Photos from the Fundraising Dinner: *Mim Eisenberg, Tolek Leszczyński and Renata Cichocka*. To see more pictures from the event, please visit our website: www.chopinatlanta.org

CHOPIN SOCIETY OF ATLANTA ANNUAL FUNDRAISING DINNER



Mike Bodker, Mayor of Johns Creek, Kevin Green, Emerson Power Systems, John Lemley, WABE Radio Personality, Guest of Honor, Dorota Lato, President of the Chopin Society of Atlanta, and Piotr Folkert, featured pianist



Chuck Burgess, Barbara Leszczyńska, Linda Merkler, Kay Green, and Marty Merkler



Halina Szlam and Joanna Moczarska



Piotr Folkert and Aleksander Szlam



Elżbieta Krawczyńska, Krystyna Prus, Anna Holub-Standish, and Krzysztof Krawczyński

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I like Chopin very much. I started to play his music when I was about 9, and since then I have always kept his music in my life and my growing path. And then, of course, there was the Frederic Chopin International Piano Competition, which brought me closer to his music and to him as a person. I felt like he became my close friend.

What qualities of his music appeal to you most?

His music has a lot of character and subtlety in the harmony changes with which he varies the mood of a piece. His music is sentimental and passionate, but proud at the same time.

Do you have a passion outside music?

Yes, of course. I like to travel, but I wish I could travel more without giving the concerts, just to be able to visit different cities and different places. Then I like watching movies with my friends or family. I also like outdoor sports, and wish I had more time for that.

You also claim to find inspiration in

nature.

I like nature because it is honest. It is always the truth. What you see is what it is. Nature is very peaceful, powerful and beautiful. When I walk in the forest I really forget about myself, and the moment you forget yourself you receive more from the surroundings. You become part of the nature, and that is the utmost relaxation.

Do you consider yourself an ambassador for Chinese culture?

When I'm traveling outside China, I am always being automatically reminded that I am Chinese. About being an ambassador – maybe I am not very self-conscious about it, but sometimes during my recitals I present Chinese music and I enjoy it very much. And people like it, too.

Is there anything in particular in Chinese culture or traditions that you associate yourself with?

Maybe the way of thinking – that is, how you think, how you see, and how you accept the world. The root of Chinese

temperament is based on sensation and fantasy and not much on reality, and on the inner power that you build within yourself. And happiness comes from spiritual rather than material experiences. In the aesthetic sense, the Chinese would always leave a bit of space to breath and feel rather than put the whole picture right before one's eyes. When faced with the modern world, the Chinese have the culture of being modest, but they still attach importance to the recognition of their own value.

Where do you see yourself as an artist in 20 years?

By then, I hope to grow artistically much, much bigger and release many albums. I also hope to teach classes and have a chance to share my experience with others. In 20 years I would also expect to have a family and children. In short, I wish to be a great artist, great daughter, and great friend and become a great wife and great mother – if only that would ever be possible in life!

The artist's official website:
www.chen-sa.com

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