



Chopin Notes

Chopin Society of Atlanta Quarterly

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Upcoming Events:

Piano Recital

Christopher O'Riley,
piano

October 24, 2009, 7:00 PM,
Roswell Cultural Arts Center.
See our website for the information about the After-Concert Essay Contest.

3 x Chopin—three different visions of Chopin's music
Leszek Moźdżer, piano
Andrzej Jagodziński, piano
Jacek Kortus, piano

March 21, 2010, 7pm
Roswell Cultural Arts Center.

Concert tickets are always discounted for members of the Chopin Society of Atlanta.

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Greatest Emissaries of Music

Exclusive interview with **Christopher O'Riley**, an accomplished pianist and host of the top-rated National Public Radio show, **From the Top**, and the **2009 Emmy winner** PBS series, "From the Top at Carnegie Hall"

By Bożena U. Zaremba

You are such a perfect fit for this show. You do it with enormous passion, humor, an unpretentious style and, most of all, a warm attitude toward the young, talented musicians that the show presents. Does it come naturally or do you have a key to being, yes, the best host possible?

It is very kind of you to say so, but many of us at *From the Top* contribute to the general welcoming and celebrating young kids – from the very beginning, when we get in touch with them, up to the time when we have them appear on the show. The staff work on the exhaustive pre-interview process, then on the questions, which have a great deal to do with their personal lives. We also design the way in which we present them and decide whether we will talk to them by the piano, or maybe talk with their friends on the swim team, and see what they think about their friend. It all depends on their story. We want to present the participants with clarity and to illuminate them in the best possible way, but at the same time let them be themselves.

What are your most memorable moments on this show?

The most memorable thing for me has to do with the fact that we are able to help these kids in their musical pursuits with the help of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. We have now given away, in a form of a \$10,000 scholarship, over a million dollars to kids who are talented.

Do you personally or the producers of the show follow those young musicians' paths after their appearance on the show?

Yes, quite often. First of all, our website is a very good meeting place and clearinghouse for updated information. We also do a where-are-they-now show twice a year, in which we will play with the kids who have previously appeared on the show. Some of the follow-up stories are



Photo: Wendy Lynch

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

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

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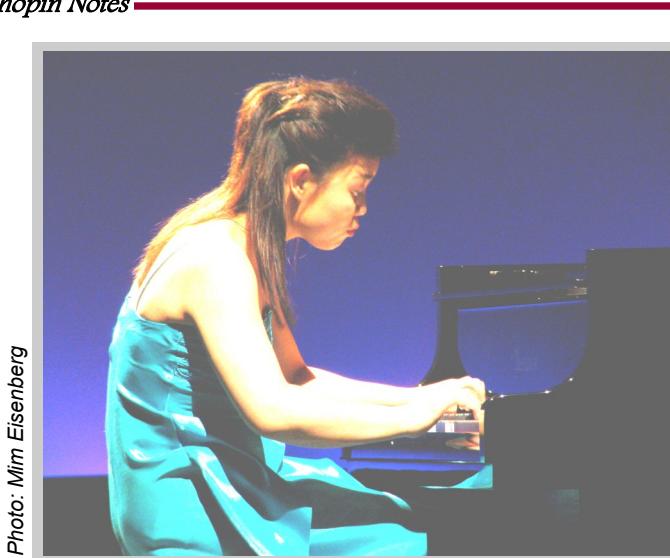


Photo: Mim Eisenberg

The role of a music critic role is essentially to inform, educate and enlighten audiences. Although our tradition of student-written essays aims first of all at enriching the lives of young listeners, we do believe that their fresh and untainted outlook can inspire adult audiences as well. Our essay contest has attracted so many students over the past few years that we feel it has become a breeding place for future musical critics. Here are excerpts from prize-winning essays about Sa Chen's recital in March 2009:

"The piece I treasured most was Chopin's *Fantasy in F Minor, op. 49*. The style is unique, with sudden dynamic and rhythmic contrasts throughout. At first, the piece appears to be dark and gloomy, but then it becomes lighter and happier, creating a contrasting mood. This piece's theme seemed to portray the battle of the good and the evil. Sa Chen's performance was mesmerizing. Her musical style is delicate and intense." (Alexandra Taggart)

"It was a wonderful night! Listening to Sa Chen's beautiful performance was just music to everyone's ears. I thought that each of the pieces was dazzling and engaging... but there was one in particular that stood out to me. It was the *Piano Sonata No. 14 in C-sharp minor* by Ludwig Van Beethoven. Although the hand and fingering technique were fabulous, Sa Chen putting her heart and soul into the piece was what really made it glorious. There was a significant amount of contrast in mood and sound, which made it unique. The beginning of the piece was elegant and graceful. You could imagine hearing the music of a ballet scene. Gradually, the music grew stronger, giving the piece even more juice. I felt myself imagining the action of a movie or a fierce battle going on." (Kathryn Jian)

"There is no doubt Sa Chen is very skillful when it comes to playing emotional music. Every piece had its own story, which she interpreted flawlessly. Of all the touching pieces that I heard at Sa Chen's concert, I enjoyed the *Piano Sonata No.14 in C-sharp minor* most.

"Music to Everyone's Ears"

Essay Contest for Children

Sa Chen told the story of this piece very well. The beginning of the *Sonata* seemed very mysterious and depressing, yet peaceful. The gradual crescendos and diminuendos added to the style of this spectacular piece of art. I liked how in between each movement, she paused, which created suspense. She came in just at the right time so that we took in the silence, without losing the feeling of the previous movement. Although the mood changed in the *Allegretto*, Sa Chen continued to keep the flow going. She made the light and bouncy notes very delicate and gossamer. My favorite part of this piece was when Sa Chen played a loud chord, followed by soft staccatos. It brought a very heartwarming and spine chilling sensation." (Ingrid Cai)



Photo: Elżbieta Gurtler-Krawczyńska

"I liked the *Night on Bald Mountain*, because it reminded me of a birds' party. I heard the coo-coo of the morning dove, the fus-fus-fus of the blue jay, the chickadee-dee of the chickadee, and the moc-moc of the mocking bird." (Emily Catherine Foster)

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

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quite fascinating. There was this young oboe player who lost three fingers in his right hand in a kitchen accident and went to University of Southern California with an ambition to learn French horn; there, he actually found a way to design an oboe that he would be able to play with the remaining fingers, so now he can continue to play the oboe. The young girl who played the "Flight of a Bumblebee" on a tuba in a bumblebee costume is now the principal tubist in the Philadelphia Orchestra. We had a young lady, a violinist-pianist and a very professional bassist, who was also interested in nanophysics, and she is now running a stem cell research group at Harvard University.

So not all of them become professional musicians, right?

That's correct. I think this is part of how the program is instructing and enlightening the audiences about classical music. I think many people have been a bit frightened off by a seeming sense of exclusivity about classical music, and this does not engender a feeling of discovery in audience. Those kids demonstrate that classical music is something they cannot live without but, at the same time, is part of their lives just as are many other interests, passions and pursuits. And no matter if they decide to devote their whole life to music or not, there is nothing preventing them and the audience from enjoying classical music on casual bases. So I think these kids are the greatest emissaries of music.

I recall a story about this young man who was just as avid a classical guitar player as a top speed skater. So does being passionate about music help them foster other passions?

I think that is true. The whole "Mozart effect" is very much part of the picture. Music builds brains, first and foremost, and I think that passionate pursuit of music becomes a matter of discipline and of focusing one's energies on the pursuit of excellence.

Why do you think the show is so popular?

Because of the variety-show aspect and the fact that it is more about getting personalities behind the music and therefore giving the music a chance, music that is not necessarily familiar. We decided not to have a competitive aspect to the show, because it is the compelling quality of the kids' stories and the interest in their character and the subsequent

You put an individual signature on the music industry by recording your own transcriptions of the music by rock artists such as Elliott Smith, Nick Drake and, most of all, the alternative rock group Radiohead. What do you try to achieve through these transcriptions?

First and foremost, it is to show what



Photo: Da-Hong Seetoo

curiosity in music that draws people to listen to the show.

Besides being a host, you are also an accompanist on the show, and sometimes even a page-turner (smiles). Let's talk about your musical career for a while, then. During the course of your musical education you had a short "affair" with jazz and pop music. Why did you decide to stick to classical music?

I felt for me it was more of a challenge to revisit and revitalize the classical repertoire than to improvise.

the piano is capable of doing. My favorite pieces are those that extend the coloristic and lyrical boundaries of the piano, so either emulating a human voice or a symphonic orchestra, a pipe organ or five-piece rock band; the mingling of voices and textures on the piano is also something that draws me to any piece that I interpret. And harmony – this great palette from which you can choose and which is instinctive to the piano. But basically what I'm trying to do is to play music that I love, and quite often the music that I love does not exist for the piano, and I have

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come to feel confident in making a version for the piano that I think is successful.

How do you work on your transcriptions?

It usually starts from a personal and emotional connection, from being in the presence of a song that I just can't stop listening to. And then there is some thread, some part of an accompaniment figure that makes me believe it might be successful as a piano piece, so the transcription usually comes from within the song, rather than being a global explication of it.

Your concerts are often unconventional. Sometimes you incorporate rock and jazz into the classical repertoire, or you will play pieces that are not in the program. Do you think that the traditional piano recital is passé?

No, I don't think so. I still think that it is advantageous for people see the program and perceive, at least subconsciously, the connections between the pieces that the pianist

included in the program, or the juxtaposition he is trying to achieve. But sometimes I will incorporate un-announced pieces during my recitals for a simple reason – some people, when they fish out, let's say, Shostakovich, in the program, they won't come. It is really unfortunate that peoples' prejudices preclude them from certain experiences just on the basis of lack of curiosity. If you are really married to a few favorite pieces, why to go to a concert at all and not just listen to your favorite recording? Obviously, there is a great deal to be gained from being in the presence of a live performance, even of your most favorite pieces, because everyone will play them differently according to his or her insight and empathy with the work itself.

What is the common ground for all the music you play?

First, it is the harmonic language that really sends tingles down your spine. The works by Maurice Ravel have that sort of effect, or a moment in Chopin sonata or nocturne. Then it is my fascination with texture, from the

exacting contrapuntal type fit that Shostakovich exploits so beautifully in his preludes and fugues, to the immense ingenuity and fathomless amount of creativity and originality with which Robert Schumann infests every one of his song accompaniments. So it is harmony and texture.

You don't talk much about emotions.

Talking about your emotions is something you do with your shrink (*laughs*). But you're quite right; I don't talk about emotions in terms of music making. I would never want to be caught dead in the situation where somebody thought that my performance was emotionally vacuous, but I think it is more important to put love in the preparation and execution of music rather than in the propagation or the publicity of it. ♪

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

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