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Upcoming Events:

Christopher O'Riley, piano

March 24, 7:00 PM

Roswell Cultural Arts Center

See our website for
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After-Concert Essay Contest

Lukas Geniusas, piano
September 28, 2013

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Cornucopia of Artistic Expression

Exclusive Interview with Christopher O'Riley
by Bożena U. Zaremba

I've heard you are working on a new album. Is this the same music you are going to play at your Chopin Society of Atlanta recital?

Yes, except for the Chopin pieces, which are special for the Atlanta concert. I have already recorded the new material, and it will be released in May. It's titled *O'Riley's Liszt*, and it will be released by Oxingale Records as a two-CD set, a Blu-ray video with surround sound, and in several high-end download formats.

These are piano transcriptions of some symphonic pieces by Berlioz, Wagner and Mozart—not a usual part of a pianist's repertoire.

It's true. Liszt's version of the *Symphonie Fantastique* has been recorded two or three times before but is not often performed publicly. These pieces carry a lot of weight in terms of music history. In the case of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, for example, the whole idea of the symphony for the piano and the idea of the motivically-derived piano sonata, like Liszt's *Sonata in B minor*, which came after that, I am sure was greatly influenced by Berlioz. Liszt was so admiring of Berlioz's *Symphonie* that his own transcription was printed and available before Berlioz's own orchestral score. I know that Wagner was influenced by Berlioz in terms of his motivic way of writing, and his *idée fixe* was a really new idea, which had a great resonance not only for the piano literature, but also for other genres.

Do you feel that by listening to these transcriptions one can understand the symphonic structure of a particular piece better?

I think that some things can be better represented by one person at the piano than 90 people in an orchestra, which can seem hysterical by comparison [*laughs*]. The *Symphonie* is, after all, subtitled *Episodes in an Artist's Life*, so one protagonist, I feel, is more effective than 90. I understand that the orchestration works really well on larger stages, but the format choices and the musical choices that Berlioz makes come more directly out of Beethoven. And while playing it on the piano, one gets more of a sense of what a wonderful and revolutionary work it is in terms of its format or certain improvisatory aspects of the piece.

It's been four years since I interviewed you for your first CSA recital.* What has changed in your professional life since then?

I am probably busier; I am doing other things. I have composed music for eBooks, and I have set off on a sort of multicultural project, but the most important change probably is this record. It's the first classical record I have made in about a dozen years.

You are very active on Facebook, and when I watch the *From the Top* program, I see that you use an iPad a lot. You seem to be an avid promoter of technology.

I read music from my iPad with the program called forScore. It can basically take PDFs of



Photo: Wendy Lynch

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

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

Painting the Scenes of Our Lives

CSA Essay Contest for Young Listeners

Some of us listen to music with eyes closed; some, with eyes wide open.

Some pay attention to finger work, while others focus on the dynamic range a pianist is able to demonstrate. Some of us make visual associations, while others respond to the emotion that the music evokes.

No matter what kind of listeners we are, music can make a profound impact on our imagination and can reach deep into our hearts. Children are no different in this matter. In fact, music's impact on them may be even greater. As our essay contest demonstrates, their reactions are often more genuine and less restricted than those of adults. Here are two excerpts from award-winning essays that were submitted after Sara Daneshpour's recital on September 29, 2012.

Each and every one of Ms. Daneshpour's pieces contained so much raw emotion and expertise. Every time her fingers touched the keys, it was as if a spell went over the entire audience. They were all mesmerized and unable to think or focus on anything besides the captivating music from the stage. One of



my favorite pieces was Etude-Tableau in A minor, op. 39, No. 6 by Sergei Rachmaninoff because it almost sounded like a movie soundtrack. I am a huge fan of soundtracks and listen to them on a regular basis, so as I listened, I closed my eyes and could almost imagine an old man reading from a book, Drums... drums in the deep or pirates taking a young woman hostage, or

a mad man in a box. It was deep and ominous, which would completely work with any of those scenes. Very often, film soundtracks are forgotten because of all other things going on. The soundtrack is almost always my favorite part of a film because it paints scenes better than the best actor or actress ever could. The music of a movie completely sets the tone for the scene. ... And the best part about music is that it is always around us, painting the scenes of our lives. We just need to listen for it. —Eliza Folkert



I treasured Sara Daneshpour's recital. All of the pieces were so beautifully played. One piece that really caught my attention was Maurice Ravel's Gaspard de la nuit. The first part was really interesting. She played the trills at the very beginning so marvelously! The finger work was amazing. When I was listening, it felt like something was about to happen—a good thought floated around. The piece sounded like fairy-tale music. The piece was really relaxing; she played it so musically. The second part was very calm. ... Miss Daneshpour played it wonderfully. ... The third part was astonishing!

At the beginning, she played it as if a big storm was coming. She amplified it so much! The storm grew, and grew, and grew! The piece was magnificent. I loved how her finger work was so precise, so articulated! Sarah Daneshpour's performance was really breathtaking! I really enjoyed it, and hope she returns to play more.

—Ashley Elliott

The writers of the essays were awarded Barnes & Noble gift certificates. The excerpts have been edited for space and clarity.

Photos: Pawel Loj and Elżbieta Gürtler-Krawczyńska

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anything, so I use it both for scripts of my *From the Top* programs and for music. You can create not only libraries but also set-lists, so you can have, for instance, pages 1 to 4 from a *From the Top* script followed by some music score, followed by more script pages. And things can be updated at a whim. For page turning, I have an AirTurn Bluetooth pedal.

Does it mean that we no longer need page turners, the job that you yourself often assumed on the *From the Top* shows?

When *From the Top* went to TV, we decided that having a page turner would be unnecessarily visually cluttering the stage. At that time, I was using a laptop and a USB-corded pedal. Since May of last year, I have been using an iPad, which has a much better display and a

better program, and AirTurn is wonderful; I have been really enjoying the system.

There seems to be a new trend of playing the piano from the score rather than from memory. Do you think that technology had something to do with this trend?

No, I think it's more a matter of the pianist's personal choice. I happen to have many, many pieces committed to my memory but am responsible for many, many pieces at one time (concertos, multiple recital programs with brand new arrangements I have made, the music for the kids on *From the Top*), so that it has become easier technologically to play from the score is a good thing. Sometimes, however, the problem may be the size of the score on the iPad, and when you realize it's a lot of sight-reading, this is not exactly something you would want

to do entirely for the first time. Another wonderful thing is that, because I have a PDF capability, I can actually play from the PDF of a hand-written score. Playing the *Goldberg Variations* from Bach's manuscript—that's definitely a technological advantage.

The Internet has transformed musical education. It's easier to study a composer's life, and through YouTube one can see any musical piece and any performer, plus instructional material. Do you think it has influenced our perspective of classical music?

It definitely creates more informed listeners. When I was at school and you were a violinist, for example, you were at the whim of whoever Columbia or Sony was putting out there. People had a very small frame of reference in terms of artistic expression. And the kids could

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only know who Heifetz was or any of the old masters, whereas kids now immediately go to the source. If they want to hear the Bartok rhapsodies played by the composer and Joseph Szigeti, they can see them, and they can realize the wealth and depth of traditional performance and everything that has come in between. This is really a pinnacle, the cornucopia of expressive possibilities. The more informed we are, the more creatively inclined we get. We have advanced technologically to the point where all that is accessible and gives one a wider and deeper scope of reference.

Can you think of any instances in modern days when technology has hindered the development of classical music?

No, I think technology has tried to advance it. The problem is that many orchestras do not have access to technology—in other words, to a wider audience—due to constraints and financial concerns. I think that top-notch orchestras have embraced this and have reached a worldwide arena by streaming their concerts, for example. I don't think that too many of our top musicians have proved themselves capable of addressing that. And that's a shame because, again, what we want to be dealing with is the widest possible audience, and to cut yourself from that kind of access is just an antiquated template of thinking.

Are there still any technology advancements out there that have not been explored yet?

One we have not spoken about is teaching master classes through Skype and satellite. I think it would make it possible for everybody to study with whomever they want and wherever they live, and that would be an enormous advantage.

Actually, my son takes guitar lessons via Skype.

For guitars it's very advantageous. We deal not only with the matters of high fi-

delity but with visuals, and that's what a lot of guitar playing is all about. It's pretty easy to figure out musical subtleties when you are looking at somebody's fingers and seeing what they ask you to do. Actually, it's an excellent tool.

Another thing that has revolutionized music industry in the last few decades is the digital recording. A great pianist,



Photo: Matt Dine

Krystian Zimmernan, for example, was for a very long time reluctant to record CDs because he thought that a lot of sound nuance was lost in digital recording. Then we have the phenomenon of iTunes. What is your stand on all of this?

It's interesting that you bring all this up, because my record will be released as two CDs and as a Blu-ray made for the home theater system. We had cameras all over the studio and in all the great outdoors when we went to Colorado and the Beartooth Mountains in Wyoming and Montana, so basically we have a video of the entire record. As for iTunes, one has to remember that iTunes has a very low resolution. We have addressed that, and with the full, four-channel surround sound we have created the sound that has never been experienced before. Number two, the hammers we used were the brand new New York Steinway hammers, which are now as of the last couple of years the best make in the world, so they are also the stars of this recording. So the old piano technology is now better than

ever as well. Of course, you will be able to get this record on iTunes, but it will not be the same sound quality as on the Blu-ray disc.

Also, downloading has changed the way we think of music. We no longer think in terms of an album but in terms of individual songs. When you were recording your new album, did you have a vision of your CD as a whole?

I think the major pieces are themed around love, obsession and death. We have the fate motif of *Don Giovanni*, evolved through various *Dies Irae*, the *idée fixe* of *Symphonie Fantastique* and, finally, the Tristan fate motif of the *Prelude*. So, again love, obsession and death are the threads that run through the whole record.

We have been talking a lot about changes. What has remained the same? Has your attitude remained the same?

Yes, I get up every day and work very hard and look forward to continuing exactly that way.

Are you still into the music by Drake and Radiohead or do you have any new fascinations?

There is a large project that I am working on now that has to do with Andy Warhol collection of films and that will have a lot of music by Velvet Underground and Niko.

You are exploring a lot of different areas—music literature and now visual arts. Do you consider yourself a Renaissance man?

[Laughs] I am not as much of a Renaissance man as a thirteen-year-old pianist on our program [*From the Top*], but I consider myself a very fortunate man to pursue every avenue that I pursue.

***To read the 2009 interview with Christopher O'Riley about From the Top, visit our website at www.chopinatlanta.org.**



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