



Chopin Notes

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Upcoming Events:

Janne Mertanen, piano

**March 23, 2014
7:00 PM**

Roswell Cultural Arts Center

**Chopin in Art Contest
Deadline: June 15**

**Ewa Pobłocka, piano
October 12**

**CSA Fundraiser
November 16**

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 404-245-6133

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Natural Like Breathing

An exclusive Interview with Finish pianist **Janne Mertanen**, winner of the 1998 International Chopin Competition in Darmstadt, Germany

By Bożena U. Zaremba

Google "Finland." One of the most striking and intriguing facts you will find is where this country has placed in many international rankings. In 2001, Finland was ranked highest for the most technological advancement; in 2006, for the best student performance in science; in 2009, for the best quality of life; and in 2011 it was declared the most politically stable country in the world. The nation, which for centuries had been oppressed by the neighboring powers of Sweden and Russia, has finally found its own power in prosperity, technical and educational progress and freedom of press. This is the homeland of Jean Sibelius, a composer of the late Romantic era, who is believed to have shaped the Finnish national identity to a great extent. This is also the homeland of Janne Mertanen, a sensitive pianist praised by critics for his "instinct of a poet" and impressive dynamic range, who is currently working on a special recording of Sibelius's complete works on the 150th anniversary of the composer's birth next year. I caught Janne between a jog with his dog and packing for a 10-day tour of Japan. He is a bit anxious about parting with his two-year-old son, but at the same time excited about another tour of the country where Chopin is held in such high esteem.

Chopin is almost like a national composer in Japan. Why do you think he is so popular there?

Chopin is the number one composer, especially of the Romantic era, and he is number one everywhere, not just in Japan. Chopin's music is somehow fresh. He is an international composer, and the language of his music is understandable all over the world.

In your bio you put emphasis on being known as a Chopin interpreter. Does playing Chopin come to you naturally?

I hope so. It feels like it. Somehow when I play Chopin, I do not analyze things as much as I trust my intuition and my instincts. I have been playing for thirty years now, and I have this feeling about Chopin that I do not have to worry so much about what to do and how to do it. It comes very naturally. It feels, sometimes, like breathing. When you have been playing Chopin for a long time, it starts to come out by itself. It's quite different from playing a Bach fugue, for example, which requires the pianist's total concentration. With Bach, you need to carefully analyze the music and consider all the possibilities, while with Chopin it is important to follow your intuition, trust your instinct and not overthink it.

You won the prestigious recording award Grand Prix Du Disque Frédéric Chopin in Warsaw in October 2005 for your recording of the nocturnes. Why did you choose to record nocturnes?

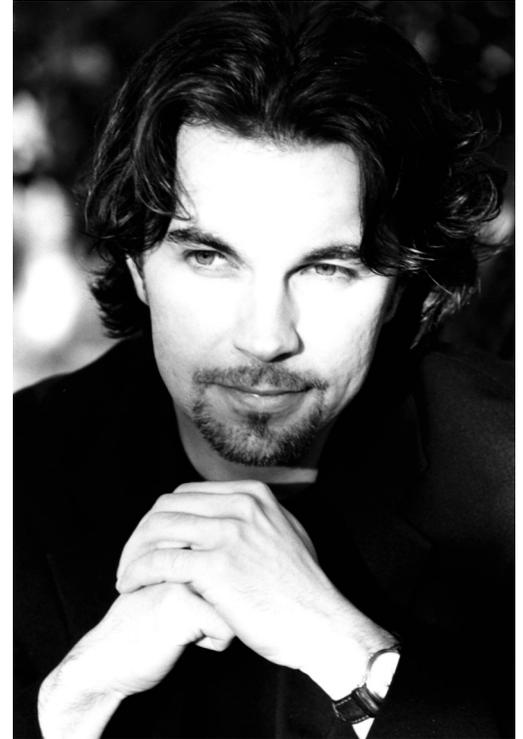


Photo: Kirsi Koskisen

Continued on page 2

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

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

Spectacular and Surreal

Winning Essay by **Sarah Sheley** in the CSA Contest for Young Listeners



"I thoroughly enjoyed the performance by Edward Kunz. He was phenomenal, and the environment was spectacular. Kunz gave me chills as he delivered his message through piano music, and I had a lot of fun. The concert was so great that it

seemed surreal, as if I were in a movie. It was all extremely exciting. I volunteered and handed out programs to the kindest and most friendly music lovers. Then I made my way to my seat, the excitement building up inside me. When the musician entered the stage, I could not even imagine what was in store. Kunz played as if he were telling a story, one that I will not ever forget. I was amazed that anyone could dig up such deep emotions held inside me without saying a word. After the concert, there was a reception where I had



the opportunity to meet the artist himself. The food was fabulous, and it was definitely an experience not to be forgotten. I loved the concert, and I am very grateful that I was invited and had the opportunity to attend." — **Sarah Sheley**

The author of the winning essay was awarded a Barnes & Noble gift certificate. The excerpt has been edited for space and clarity. Photos from Eduard Kunz's recital by Pawel Loj.



Announcing a new contest "Chopin in Art," for kids K-12. See our website for details.

Chopin Versus Sibelius

Trivia about two composers' lives and work

Which of the following statements refers to Fryderyk Chopin and which to Jean Sibelius? *Answers on page 4.*

1. Wrote his first composition at the age of 7.
2. Dreamt of becoming a violin virtuoso but eventually opted for writing musical compositions.
3. "[It] always reminds me of the scent of the first snow," said the composer about one of his compositions.
4. Wrote songs for the voice and piano.
5. Believed that the left hand should act like an orchestra conductor; it should be like a clock and rhythm must not be violated.
6. Never came to America.
7. Is believed to have had a great influence on shaping the national identity of his homeland.
8. An international competition bears his name.
9. Made frequent use of literature in the composition of his works.
10. Improvisation (though not to be confused with impulsive rambling) stands at the center of his creative processes.

Exclusive Interview—Continued from page 1

It was actually after I started to play the nocturnes that I realized, for the first time, that Chopin's music was very important to me. When I took up playing the piano at 12, I listened to some recordings of nocturnes by Rubinstein, Horowitz and other remarkable pianists, and what I enjoyed most was the colors and the intimacy of this music. I was learning the technical aspects of music with etudes, and, of course, for a teenage boy to be able to play an etude by Chopin from the beginning to the end felt like a victory [laughs]. With nocturnes, it always felt

more personal. They are still technically difficult, but you have to make them your own; you have to tell your own story.

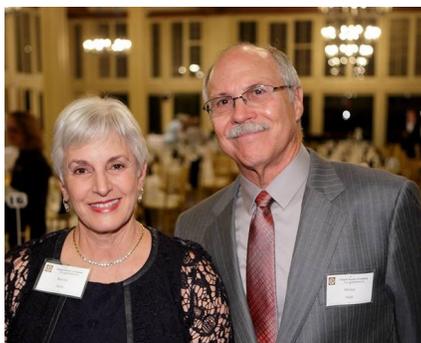
What do you think the committee found in your interpretation that stood out in comparison to other pianists?

Of course I cannot speak for them, but I was, first of all, very happy about the sound of this recording. I had a wonderful sound engineer in Mikkeli, a small town in the middle of Finland. They had a superb Steinway, an excellent hall and a studio one can only dream of. I was really lucky to have an opportunity to make

the recording there, because it does not always happen this way. You never know where you are going to make the recording, who the tuner is going to be, or who has played the instrument before, so the piano may not be in the best condition. I had the best possible instrument there. We spent some time mastering the recording to make sure I was happy with the sound. So everything just clicked.

I think you are being very modest by giving credit only to factors beyond your power.

Enjoy the photos from the **Chopin Society of Atlanta's 2013 Fundraiser**, which took place on November 17, 2013, at the Country Club of the South. **Monica Kaufman Pearson**, former news anchor for WSB-TV, was our Guest of Honor.



Photos: Paweł Łoj



Well, at the time of the recording I was 35, but had played the nocturnes for 20 years and they had been very close to me. So in a sense, I had a deeper understanding of the music. I always try to find the colors of the piano to maximize the lights and shadows to make the sound special and unique. With etudes, you just try to manage, to find the right keys, the right notes, to conquer the technical difficulties. You are an acrobat, a sportsman. The nocturnes present a totally different world of intimacy. You need to be an artist.

I have noticed a lot of similarities between the history of Finland and Poland, most notably the struggle for independence of these two countries from two neighboring powers. Chopin was much affected, if not distressed, by his homeland's efforts to regain freedom, and that is very much reflected in his music. Being Finnish, is this something that you identify with?

I have never thought about it this way, but it makes a lot of sense. Actually, my grandmother on my mother's side was Polish. She died when my mother was only two years old, and my mother was adopted by a family in Finland just before World War II. Finns are considered somewhat quiet and introverted, so there is something in Chopin's music, especially

in his nocturnes, that appeals to our mentality in the sense of being reflective and insightful. But as for political connotations? I always try to sense the feeling, the emotion and the character of the music in anything I play, and whatever has happened in my life, my life experiences create the sound, and I do not necessarily think about any national character, nor do I try to guess how a Pole would play this music.

But you can tell the difference between how, for instance, a Russian pianist plays from the way a Frenchman plays?

Of course, you can guess if a pianist is from the so-called Russian school or the French school. On the other hand, it is less and less so, because people nowadays study all over the world. The cultures mix; the ideas intermingle and influence one another, so there is no longer one distinguishable way of playing Chopin.

You, yourself, had many different teachers of different nationalities. How did you deal with a situation when one teacher contradicted another?

When you are very young and you don't have your own point of view, then it may be confusing. But with playing music there is never one truth; there are many truths at the same time. And especially when you are on stage, you have to

choose the one you believe in at this particular moment. The next time you play a recital, it can be a different truth. The ideal situation for me is that you never find one truth that stays forever. That is what makes music making so interesting and rich, when you allow things to change. Of course, some technical issues may be confusing with different teachers, but you simply have to find your own way of playing the piano, try out different things and choose the one that suits you best and – what is most important – is your own.

What do you, as a teacher, try to communicate to your students at master classes?

I always encourage them to find different points of view, different ways of playing the same piece. Students tend to play a piece the same way over and over again, but especially with Chopin, you must sound as if you were playing it for the first time. It has to sound fresh. This is very challenging.

Your son is only two, but will you encourage him to be a professional musician?

I will let him choose. I will do everything I can to support his dreams, but he must make the choice himself because as we know, musicians have to work really hard, and he would really need to want to do it. I started playing the piano when I was 12 years old, and I could not imagine doing anything else. It was very clear to me after a few months. You can't tell anybody to practice thousands of hours if he or she doesn't have a passion for it. One teacher told me that if there is nothing to stop you from doing it, there is a chance for you [to make it in the music world], but if you can stop it, probably you shouldn't be doing it. You have to feel like you cannot live without it. 🎵

Janne Mertanen's website:

www.jannemertanen.com/in_English.html

See our website for information about the After-Concert Essay and Chopin in Art Contests.

Answers to quiz on page 2:

1. Chopin. It was the *Polonaise in G minor*.
2. Sibelius. He did become an accomplished violin player, though.
3. Sibelius, about his *Sixth Symphony*.
4. Both Chopin and Sibelius.
5. Chopin.
6. Chopin (Sibelius visited Washington, D.C., and Canada in 1914).
7. Both Chopin and Sibelius.
8. Both Chopin (the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition, held in Warsaw, Poland) and Sibelius (the International Jean Sibelius Violin Competition, held in Helsinki, Finland).
9. Sibelius. Examples: His stark *Fourth Symphony* drew from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," and he also wrote several symphonic poems based on Finnish poetry.
10. Chopin. "Improvisation is designed for an audience, and its starting point is that audience's expectations, which include the current conventions of musical form," wrote Nicholas Temperley, a historical musicologist about Chopin's improvisatory style.



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