Review

The Mystery of Chopin's Préludes, by Anatole Leikin. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015. 204 pp. Includes 8 b&w illustrations and 131 music examples. ISBN: 978-1-4094-5224-9. US $104.95

Mystery? All-too familiar as part of the pop-classic repertoire, these golden coins seemed worn long ago. Do they still preserve an enigmatic freshness behind their deeply imprinted sound images? They do—for those who did not betray the youthful excitement caused by these masterpieces and knew how to transform them into a mature intellectual challenge. As did Anatole Leikin, a devoted performer and expert on Chopin (among other repertoires: he is a pianist and harpsichordist), the editor of *The Complete Chopin—A New Critical Edition*.

"When Chopin's 24 Preludes, Op 28 were first published in 1839, many of his contemporaries did not quite know what to make of them. In some respects, Opus 28 still remains an enigma today" —is how Leikin opens his book (p. 1). What he offers to the reader is a highly convincing attempt at solving this enigma. Thread by thread, he neatly untangles one peculiarity after another. He sinks into the realities and circumstances of Chopin's 1830s' generation. At some moments, it is even as if this is not a twenty-first-century author writing, but an intellectual from Chopin's milieu who survived the composer, and who, in his later years, had the opportunity to give considerable thought to the enigma that had long haunted him. He knew just too well how hopelessly reluctant Chopin was in explaining his music.

What makes the reader feel this way is the rich, well-elaborated context: cultural, creative, and personal. Indeed, if Leikin were only a scholar of Chopin, he could hardly have managed to visualize Chopin in such a remarkably broad artistic context. And, without such a context, he would not have convinced the reader in his revelations of the essential ideas hidden in this unique cycle. Indeed, Leikin's expertise, starting from his eighteenth-century structural sonata research, made him also at home in Romantic and later music, recently leading him to important topics in his studies of Scriabin. (His book *The Performing Style of Alexander Scriabin* was also published with Ashgate, in 2011).

As for this new book, not only had Chopin intrigued the scholar for many years, but a similar process of comprehension had accompanied him for the *prelude* and *set of preludes* genres. Some twenty years ago, he had already discovered the idea of Shostakovich's cycle ("Decoding the Twenty-four Preludes of Shostakovich: A Hermeneutic Approach," *American Journal of Semiotics* 13 [1996]: 165-81). Thus, two paths—Chopin and preludes—cross in one mind, and the result is deeply rewarding.

At the core of this study is the idea that Chopin composed his *24 Preludes* (Op. 28, 1835–39) as his artistic reflection of Alphonse de Lamartine's poem *Les préludes* (from his *Nouvelles méditations poétiques*, 1823), just as Liszt later created his symphonic poem. The notion was presented in the first contemporaneous reviews, including that by Liszt. But nobody since that time went all the way to find out *how* Chopin's music expressed this poetic inspiration. This is the subject of the book by Anatole Leikin.

The book is written in the form of a resourceful research into an enigmatic historical episode. This, in fact, is what the scholar undertook to do. The strategy is clear: to examine all possible factors that could have influenced Chopin's creative process, both during the period of composition and in the background. During the period of composition, many things had to be checked: from the smallest details in the composer's manuscripts and comparison between editions—to practical circumstances—such as Chopin's together with George Sand refuge in Majorca, the romantic Spanish island where most of the preludes were composed. The author gives special focus to the old

Carthusian Monastery of Valldemossa, with its mysterious aura that so fueled Chopin's imagination. All the known epistolary evidence has been checked and crosschecked. All George Sand's statements (and there are many) have been analyzed: her mundane exaggerations as a lady of society have been neatly separated from the generally credible descriptions observed by her critical mind.

As for the background, clearly, it is universal in scope, but some realistic directions were selected. Among them: the history of the genre of prelude, and the way Chopin came to his own particular type of prelude; the structure and poetics of Lamartine's poem; Chopin's education/training in counterpoint. The author needed all this in order to prove his main arguments. As he summarizes:

> The book has two primary analytical foci. One is the pairing of the preludes in Chopin's Opus 28, which is comparable to the pairings of both the cantos in Lamartine's *Les Préludes* and the preludes and fugues in Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. The other is the use of the *Dies irae* chant in the *Préludes* as a musical symbol of one of the more prevalent topics in the poem: death. It is clear that the chant thoroughly pervades the *Préludes* and defines most of its thematic framework, which makes Opus 28 a monothematic composition. (p. 155)

Just as Lamartine constantly reminds his readers that each lively, charming creature of nature is subject to death, Chopin alternates major- and minor-key preludes with the same contrast of sunny life and cold-dark death references. Leikin calls the cycle "Requiem in 24 pieces." Death, Death, Death—is the protagonist of this drama. It is not the same as in a folklore cycle or classic symphony, or a victorious state ceremony, where a life-glorifying optimistic and energetic Finale follows a sad and slow movement. No. Death, Death, Death—Chopin asserts. The scholar proves this through his scrupulous semantic analysis, showing many references to Bach's passion plays rhetoric and to what he proves to be the basic element, permeating most of the minor-mode preludes —the medieval sequence *Dies irae*. It is obvious that the composer would not quote *Dies irae* directly at every opportunity, but he uses its modifications in half concealed forms, often in the debris of his texture. The meticulous motivic analysis is impressive.

Most stunning of all is the cultural panorama that includes two highly memorable items. One is the striking parallel with Schubert's *Winterreise* (op. 29, 1827)—the 24-piece valedictory cycle. How obvious this parallel looks when it is presented! No less naturally than the same composer's *Die Schöne Müllerin* (op. 25, 1823). Apart from being the same year, 1823, there is no relation to Lamartine's poems, but its poetic echoes and chants bring natural daylight elements to life: wind, water, hillsides, etc. Indeed, both Lamartine and Schubert can be heard in Chopin's major-mode preludes. As Tad Szulc wrote: "Schubert died in 1828, at the incredible young age of thirty-one, depriving Chopin of what would have been almost certainty of meeting him" (*Chopin in Paris: The Life and Times of the Romantic Composer* [New York: A Lisa Drew Book/Scribner, 1998], 51-52). As Leikin shows, the sonic world of Schubert's piano companion in the journeys of his hero reveals its interesting presence in Chopin's opus.

Another cultural parallel, or rather source of Preludes' imagery, breathtakingly unexpected, is the late eighteenth-century Gothic fiction horror stories. Why? This is really a great discovery. A direct hit of Leikin's imagination that suddenly illuminates cells, yard, passages, and the whole view and atmosphere of the Carthusian Monastery—that exceptionally important and inspiring place behind the creation of the Preludes. This monastery motive in Leikin's research is a precious part of the cultural background of Chopin's generation. Leikin shows how these Gothic horror stories were a lens through which Chopin experienced (or perceived?) his sojourn in that romantic shelter: how he heard the rustles and the howling of the wind, sensed the smell of its stones, and saw the colors of its walls. Ghosts, graves, midnight ringing of the tower clock (or maybe the fear of the expectation?) become almost tangible. The reader could probably find this approach a stretch of the

imagination, if not for a very telling analysis of several preludes, otherwise unexplainable: for example, the pair of Preludes 17 (A flat major) and 18 (F minor). In the former, he draws the reader's attention to the frightening strikes of a clock, and in the latter, a kind of "incoherent monologue," a truly Gothic terror—a fear of insanity.

As mentioned, the book is written in the form of a musicological detective story. In its chapters, the author conducts a parallel investigation in various directions. He needs to answer the question he has posed to himself: whether the whole cycle is connected by one general concept. He needs evidence from every direction. For example, when he needs to check the roots of Chopin's skills in counterpoint—in order to show that the composer was very familiar with the technique of motivic manipulation as practiced in polyphony, he transfers the reader from the Carthusian Monastery in a north–east direction, to Warsaw. Here, he ensures that the textbook according to which Chopin studied contained these techniques, and that Joseph Elsner essentially taught Chopin counterpoint; and then back to the Monastery, to seek other details; then to Paris—to compare different kinds of piano and to explain peculiarities of pedal usage. And so on. Each new chapter strikes with the unexpectedness of its approaches and received data. Moreover, the author skillfully ends each chapter with a teasing remark, to maintain the reader's tension.

The book is a piece of musicological artistry. Indeed, fascinating reading is not among the main requirements for study in musicology. It is, rather, a rewarding bonus for those curious about the mystery of Chopin's Preludes. As we discover, the golden coins are not worn. They were just covered with caked dust, which Anatole Leikin rubbed away and cleaned. Now they shine with the subtlest facets of Chopin's complex embossing.

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