

Chinese Piano
or
Dueling over a Recital
a novel
by
Étienne Barilier

Poetry, Music and Art

Band 8

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Preface by the Editor

It is a great pleasure for me that I can publish in this series a novel by the distinguished French-Swiss writer Étienne Barilier in English translation. I thank Étienne and his translator for allowing me to do so as well as the publisher of the original French version (Piano chinois), Editions Zoé.

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Müllheim, 9.11.2015

H.-C. Günther

I

AN DIE MUSIK

A blog by

Frédéric Ballade

“I’ll not say a word.”

Arthur Rimbaud, ‘To Music’

July 25

Last night we realized that what is called a miracle is the most natural thing on earth. It’s a freshwater spring which awaits us patiently, playfully and safely -- a spring with drinkable water. Why did it take so long to notice this in the sun-drenched region close to Fontaine-de-Vaucluse, as verdant as the eyes of Petrarch’s Laura? As the years go by we no longer believe in miracles, although believing or not is beside the point. Listening is all we really have to do.

There was a time when we almost believed in miracles. Back in the day when masterpieces were fresh. Can we listeners who are jaded imagine a youth setting off on a Grand Tour? One who is *discovering* Chopin’s Piano Sonata n° 2 (“Funeral March”)? He gets past that phase, sad to say. At first he only hears the work, believing that it plays itself. Whoever reaches the solemnly slow-moving first movement prelude for the first time, that dusky copse whose timber wall must soon be storm-shredded, cares nothing about the name of the sporadic source known as a pianist which conveys this music. All he hears is the miracle which happens to be Chopin.

The youth grows to adulthood. Performers’ fingers teach him about the glowing moon of Romanticism and he watches those fingers more and more

often. With this knowledge of performance, he picks up the critical weakness of examining the messenger instead of reading the message as he had previously done. No doubt the youth is wrong; Chopin's music which strikes him with joyous anguish is not just Chopin but also Arthur Rubinstein and Dinu Lipatti. We old bed bugs of the concert hall and old rats of the music festival are wrong as well. As stupendous and disgraceful as it may seem, a work of music does predate its performer. For the latter, it is in every sense a means of existence.

So we write these lines, ready to burst into a culminating hymn of glory to one female pianist. That's because she gives to Chopin, Brahms, Scarlatti, and Stravinsky their original majesty with an ideal orient or pearl-like iridescent coloring. The same Orient which gives us Mei Jin and by mirroring her own merry temperament, rejuvenates our old European spirits and makes our taste for Alexandrine verse written to music for the dead seem that much less appalling. She is what she plays, no more and no less. Listening to her, we regain the feeling of youthful discovery. Only a select few performers have achieved such wizardly transparency apart from Arthur Rubinstein, Dinu Lipatti, Clara Haskil, Sviatoslav Richter, and Rudolf Serkin. Certainly not Glenn Gould or Vladimir Horowitz, to name only the most obstreperous keyboard narcissists. Nor even Martha Argerich who is too quirky, nor Maurizio Pollini who is too severe. Let's fall silent and listen to Mei Jin.

First let's watch her suddenly appear onstage at The International Piano Festival of La Roque d'Anthéron, where for three decades the young pianistic world comes to pit itself against cicada calls and frog's croaking, nightly trying to prove that Culture is Nature's irreplaceably purer and truer little sister. Culture is the Cordelia who in the end is recognized by King Lear as his dearest daughter. For music will always be more precious than the sounds of nature to which we ascribe melodies, until such time as Chopin rises up over the frogs

and Schubert over the cicadas. Let's watch young Mei Jin suddenly appear in her poppy-colored or perhaps vermilion long dress. She walks quickly and bows deeply but even quicker, like the tree praised in Paul Valéry's poem 'Palme'.

The recital begins with Domenico Scarlatti. Unfortunately, in this repertoire most pianists mimic harpsichordists: "Good people, admire the pearl-like quality of my playing!" Much like a seductress showing off her uncultured pearls, although of course the best performers have rejected this counterfeiting attempt. But then all too often they only produce worriedly pinched, haughty coolness, it must be said.

While we were chatting to the above effect, Mei Jin has sat down. With her hands poised on her knees, she concentrates for five seconds. Then she begins. We have *nothing* to say about what we are hearing. During an entire sonata and perhaps two, literally nothing. We're not speechless from admiration, or frozen with outrage, or even paralyzed in shock. Even if it means surprising several colleagues, let's say that during these rare moments we do not even notice that we had nothing to say. Our silence is in no way self-explanatory.

Only after Scarlatti's Sonata K.87 arrives, sometimes called "fugal" because it effectively develops a modest *fugato* in the key of D minor, do we realize instantly that Mei Jin isn't trying to make the piano sound like a harpsichord. Nor does she attempt the opposite, to make the presence of a piano overcome the remembered traces of the harpsichord. Her playing is neither too sharp nor too interconnected, with neither too much evenness nor too much *rubato*. She never tries to convince us of her talent as a performer or to tear the temple veil in twain. So what is happening exactly? In Mei Jin's hands, all of a sudden this modestly wistful fugue becomes heart-rending.

Suddenly we feel moved and then heartbroken, not so much by Scarlatti's notes as the fact of their presence among us. It's the miracle of music

in an innocent state, such as one might occasionally feel when reading the notes of a musical score in the ever-threatened hush of our inner world, or what remains of it. And beauty or what we call beauty is undoubtedly this: the gravid and intense presence of what once was, of what is now dead, of what we shall never accomplish; the clarion call of a word which had been swallowed, the simple pure drawing, still and deathless, of what fades, dies, and recedes nonetheless like a face drawn on water which remains forever.

Later, when the recital is over there will always be time to ask ourselves who is giving us such a bequest and if we were not merely dreaming. Or if for once in fulfillment of Jean Cocteau's request, we critics and listeners were the only ones with talent? Or could it be an unknown, all-enveloping something which deluded us -- the mildness of Provence which is felt so often at La Roque. Or maybe the quality of the light, yet does this really change to such an extent from one evening to the next? Perhaps it was the smart appearance of our traveling companions for it seemed that the entire audience, who had settled into their seats with a sigh of contentment, leaned forward slightly like people wondering if what they were seeing and hearing was real. That was only the beginning. Chopin is next.

II

GOODBYE PIANOS...

A blog by
Leo Poldowsky

“Musical telegraph, capable translator...”

Tristan Corbière, ‘To a Young Lady’

July 25

Last night’s recital at La Roque d’Anthéron? Young Mei Jin, 22 years old, an Americanized Chinese woman, was preceded by flattering publicity. She’s praised by great old conductors and plays with a high degree of technical freedom – as is well known, the best circus performers come from China – and also has a pretty little face. No doubt about it, Mei Jin is a high-quality product, pianistic hi-tech in concentrated form with a seductive wrapping, like those computers and portable phones whose design is just as important as their efficiency.

If we wanted to be nasty, we could take the comparison even further. Just as each year, computers have more memory and power, in each new generation – which likewise turns out to be every year -- classical pianists devour longer programs and emit them with more noise and skill. It is fairly understandable that a major record company, in distress just like the minor ones, has bet everything on this new phenomenon, who, unlike her Chinese predecessors, has the indisputable charm of an oxymoron. Her slim body and unobtrusive gestures set off the same sonic hurricanes as do the wayfaring

adventurers, ivory crushers, and other Asian elephants who already bask in media glory.

In short and to speak plainly, Mei Jin is an ideal supermarket end-aisle display. What's at stake is considerable. So-called classical music is on the skids like all other music, but so far it has managed to survive. For the major companies, this niche remains secure. To be sure, not because love for this type of music is livelier than for rock or pop, but idiotically enough because music lovers in this category are pirating less than others. Could it be because they are more honest? Does classical music foster virtue? Alas, the reason is more mundane. Lovers of Bach and Beethoven are mostly elderly; the performers of this music are ever-younger, but not its audience. Uncomfortable with what's called new technologies, they would be unable to pirate anything whatsoever, and anyway have no concept of piracy. For record companies, it's still worthwhile to release new classical albums, whenever performers are "unprecedented phenomena" and "pianists of the century."

And so we come to Mei Jin. Someone must have whispered to this young woman that any self-respecting pianist hoping to enter the circle of Grrreat Performers must play a bit of Scarlatti. It's a matter of showing that one is brilliant, but humble -- these sonatas allow a performer to set off sparks, if not ignite the flame of Romanticism -- and also to prove that one can play without pedal. We listen because that's what we're here for, and we remember Scarlatti as recorded by Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli and Vladimir Horowitz. We wonder how these men managed to achieve such sharpness without hardness and without seeming like diligent excavators of staccato notes.

Mei Jin has indisputable technical abilities. But the problem is that while she is playing, we never stop thinking about her technique. The performance is tidy, but to what purpose? Once again, if we wanted to be harsh

we would compare this all-too-perfect playing to the disconcerting mechanism of a computer which beats chess grandmasters in matches, but can't understand that it has won. This would be unfair, since Mei Jin is, quietly and obstinately, a human being. Yet obviously she is not really playing Scarlatti, she is reciting a lecture on western culture. Her imitation of her predecessors' pearly playing is deceptively close, which is precisely why hardly anyone is deceived. We can't begrudge her. After all, what can European classical music mean to a Chinese person except twin lessons well prepared and well recited? The first lesson is about the works and the second, how to perform them. Mademoiselle Jin is the perfect mimic, but a mimic she remains. Chopin ran away from her even before she tried to approach him. That's normal and unalterable.

III

AN DIE MUSIK

A blog by

Frédéric Ballade

“Do I envy those jacks that nimble leap [...]”

Shakespeare, Sonnet CXXVIII

July 26

If you can believe it, before Chopin’s Sonata op. 35 and after the Scarlatti, we were stupefied to hear, Brahms’ “Variations on a Theme of Paganini,” such a cumbersome work that even today few pianists dare to perform it in recital. And if they do so, they do not play the ‘Funeral March’ sonata afterwards, and even more rarely do they program Stravinsky’s ‘Petrouchka’ to round off the program.

A few words about Mei Jin’s Brahms. Some words which to begin with we must admit will be insufficient, or more precisely, *inapt*. Music and words never make good bedfellows, as we critics know better than anyone. In fact, that’s why we are so often harsh. It’s easier to complain about the absence of music than to celebrate its presence. When such presence is confirmed, simple silence is fitting and appropriate.

For Mei Jin, the ‘Paganini Variations’ is not an onerous work which has been mastered, however easily. For her it’s an unproblematic work, genial and friendly, a joyful landscape. Shifting momentarily from the digital performance to the instrumentalist’s face, what do we notice during the most grisly moments of these *Hexenvariationen* (Witches’ Variations), as Clara

Schumann called them? Mei Jin's face is relaxed and untroubled, with a fleeting half-smile. Her lips, which in so many pianists communicate tension, agony, striving and mental strain -- those lips which so often belie a pianist's hands -- in her case remain slightly parted, calm, and quiescent. Her ease is limitless. She gives the impression of a lass who is day-dreaming on her balcony while pixies serenade her in the guise of her fingers.

The Paganini Caprice at the origin of these Variations is singular, yet off-putting because it states not so much a theme as a kind of basic structure, a primeval melody something like the waltz by Diabelli upon which Beethoven built his well-known Variations. We'd enjoy hearing Mei Jin take on the latter work so she might make it sing as she makes Brahms sing. Paganini himself saw these few notes as a pretext for acrobatics. In turn, Liszt, Brahms, Rachmaninoff, and Lutoslawski openly aspired to a comparable virtuosic ideal.

Yet at least in the Brahms, genius plays a part, bursting out everywhere and making everything lovely. Using these few notes, Brahms's Variations recount a long, scary, and astonishing tale, a kind of epic poem full of sound and fury, a Shakespearean play crowded with tragic vigor which concludes with an apotheosis of glowing wrath. Described in this way, such a work does not seem possible for female hands to play. It's a desperately manly tale, a male affair both because of the physical power required and the nature of its feelings and emotions. Perhaps Clara Schumann was expressing womanly fear in the face of gruff manliness after being summoned to make her way past medieval knights' bodies which remain somehow indecent despite being clad in chain mail.

Mei Jin is a young woman, even daintier than Clara was. She divides the crowd of knights who retreat courteously to make way for her, creating with their armor a glistening, shifting regalia for her like two sides of a river divided by a swan. In no way does her femininity impede her strength. She is Joan of

Arc, artless but unyielding, before whom horsemen kneel, muttering their fealty. And this womanly strength allows her to stay on track through this horrendously masculine music, to relate its plot of male violence in a soft voice, to uncover its trove of gentleness, making of it a ballade – a sibling of the same composer's *Ballades*, op. 10. It is solemn, to be sure, but solemn like an auspiciously nurturing ghost under whose aegis we may thrive and rest in peace.

If the most masculine variations are performed with such forceful attention, we can imagine the happy fate of the contemplative variations, such as the fifth, or the second in Book II, with their 3:2 rhythms (triplets vs. eighth notes). In the former piece, overlapping hands suddenly become the occasion for a waveringly meticulous stroking which is circuitous, questioning, pensive, and salutary. From the start they were devised for a woman's hands. Clara, you unfortunate creature!

Mei Jin is a dexterous horsewoman who has no need to whip her steed for it to achieve and maintain a steadily frenetic pace, instead stroking it skillfully to draw out its maximum speed and power. Under her tapered steel fingers, The "Paganini Variations" are an amazing horseback ride, a stormy and perilous voyage yet at the same time, how can we say this? Even while stampeding across mountains through the deadly night amid lightning and thunder, it's as if we were sheltered in a quiet secluded bedroom with a gently flickering fireplace where we may drink and sleep and dream. Naturally, because we are actually being told a story which we hear in a dream and not in reality even though we truly experience it. We must be grateful to this young pianist, who we hope and trust is unaware of how phenomenal she is. Such freshness when combined with such authority is indeed to be acclaimed. The hand which plays is the very one which leads us, we who are not ashamed to return to our childish sense of wonder.

IV

GOODBYE PIANOS...

A blog by

Leo Poldowsky

“The treble clef is not the key to the soul [...]”

Tristan Corbière, ‘To a Young Lady’

July 26

Before Chopin’s Sonata op. 35 we heard Brahms’ “Paganini Variations.” After the Chopin sonata, there would be Stravinsky’s “Petrouchka.” In short, the program was gargantuan, herculean, and humongous. The Middle Kingdom never goes by half-measures, so you Europeans will get what you get with your anemic black concert grands. In our homeland, black does not signify mourning. White signifies death for us and that’s a close call for you. If not, our pianos would be snowy like the ones in syrupy light entertainment orchestras, our favorite weapons to drown you in a tsunami of outlandish world music.

You have already been captivated by Lang Lang’s masculine tomfoolery, and now it’s the turn of Mei Jin’s feminine wiles. At the top of this article we should have noted the intimidating effect which began before the Scarlatti, even before the first note of music was sounded. Just reading the program was enough to alarm us. Only a few Western pianists have dared to throw down the gauntlet in this way in a single recital. And now: We Chinese, as a group, are sending to match and surpass your all-round athletes, a crafty little sweetie who wraps up your unplayable masterpieces and mails them back to you, all in three rustles of an evening gown and four flutters of an eyelash.

You've sweated blood over these titanic works and it in turn is used to wash her hands which caper like a billy goat unless she uses it to deepen the color of her severely low-cut gown. Relatively speaking, it's as if the Passion of the Christ were reenacted as a musical comedy with a female Jesus who simpers her way through the torments and climbs down from the cross to declare that you have been saved, but only until the next concert. After which if you want eternal salvation to be extended, it will be necessary to pay up once again.

Such brilliant sleight of hand obviously requires some technique. Any actor who wishes to accurately feign agony and ecstasy should be a master of his means. It must be admitted that even in old Europe, and long before the "Made in China" invasion was hot on our heels, the audience and even purported specialists were often tricked by clowns who mistake technique for musicality with the added distinguishing sign that they swear they never make any such mistake. So it's also the fault of us music lovers of coriaceous old Europe if we fall into the technical-sentimental fine mesh trap which is set today by the Sino-Korean-Japanese world. Mustn't we respect, if not worship, technique as needed for the actual quality of expression? Isn't it necessary to have the resources to match one's feelings? In the case of "The Paganini Variations," if the pianist is not up to its mechanical demands, he surely cannot rise to its expressive demands. As is well known, a little technique negates musicality while a lot of technique restores it.

The trouble is that an incredible amount of technique allows not just the expression of feelings but even more, their *enactment*. Hear ye, hear ye, attend to my affecting discourse! Here I will trigger off sought-after tempests by request, there I will force-feed you with affection -- you asked for it, you got it -- and so skillfully that it's hard to tell from when affection is absent. Way over there I will present meditation which is so meditative and so heady that next to

me, the poet Alphonse de Lamartine on his lake is nothing but a grossly obese, tattooed sailor whose only reaction to Debussy's *Poissons d'or* (Goldfish) would be to scarf down a bellyful of them. Then I will offer a livery of gentleness until no antidote is possible. You will be satiated with the pinkish down of baby chicks, cream soup made from the crepitation of the Virgin's infant child, ticklings of peach skin covered in confectioners' sugar, a wee girly girl's cotton candy and blossoms wafted from a cherry tree. I borrow the last-mentioned from the esthetic-romantic armory of the Empire of the Rising Sun, as surely it's time for China to plunder its neighbor.

You will certainly get your money's worth and you'll be amazed at how old Johannes Brahms, that gruff cigar sucker from Hamburg, could have penned such pale, conventional, and dull musical pieties which expertly pander to the worst in you but which nonetheless you adore. This music's inconsequential sentimentality and sheer flabby "emotion" is burdened by no connection to reality, life, humanity, or accountability. With all its shortcomings European music is spiritual adventure, not cardiac lethargy. Our Chinese friends are well aware of this but they also know how to play a shell game which makes us lose sight of our own lives; and they know how to swindle us with cooked opium.

The reader may feel that we digress. That we are placing a heavy burden of bad faith on Mademoiselle Jin's frail shoulders. So we will go as far as to concede that this young person is "sincere." Throughout Brahms' "Paganini Variations," she sincerely offers us that ultimately marketable product of pyrotechnics plus sentimentality, that sweet and sour sauce which is so popular from Shanghai to Canton. To which we will reply with the gentlest, but most determined, refusal.

Am I judging someone on mere intent? To prove good faith, let's describe Mademoiselle Jin's Chopin a bit more specifically. We'll relish the unexpected bonanza that Mademoiselle Jin performed the Sonata op. 35, one of those works which to our knowledge has *never* been played in a *completely* satisfactory way. This music is so difficult of access, offers so many oddities or indeed inconsistencies and its discourse is so spasmodic that we may wonder how to impart any interconnectedness to it. It would have been necessary to hear Chopin himself play this work.

One factor that renders the sonata unperformable is its ultra-familiar, even hackneyed third movement with its march which is labeled "Funeral." It can be heard in every possible conceivable arrangement, for accordion, electric guitar, and even brass band. It's a wow, a must-have, a stunner. The Turkish March for stiffs. Yet right after this third movement, this nowhere-ville for aggrieved yokels, this refrain to entice gravestone carvers, we arrive at the fourth movement, an unidentified lilted object, a meaningless unlistenable freak which Robert Schumann correctly termed "no longer music." A page which music lovers pretend to understand and love but which is over their heads, just as it is over all of our heads.

Thus in succession in the same work, we hear a refrain which has become repellent due to constant repetition and the wild "block that has fallen here below from some obscure disaster," as Stéphane Mallarmé described the tomb of Edgar Allan Poe. How to find links in such a mixture? As stated above, the greatest pianists have lost their hearts and broken their spirits, if not their fingers, on it. One pianist gets lost in the final two movements after giving us two glorious ones. Another is inspired in the third movement but vacant in the fourth. Yet another, Serge Rachmaninoff who ranks among the most substantial, is fine in the last movement but unbearable in the Funeral March. And so it

goes. There's no hope. All we have left is to turn to Mademoiselle Jin, who surely will not be scared off by such a trifle and with a teasing little smile will offer her globalized solution to our metaphysical distress.

AN DIE MUSIK

A blog by

Frédéric Ballade

“The piano kissing a fragile hand”

Paul Verlaine

July 27

Chopin. The Sonata op. 35. Of all Chopin's creations perhaps the most arduous, lofty, and ferociously introverted. Perhaps no pianist has been able to bear and endure every secret.

Especially not those of the *Finale*. Should we associate this spectral movement with old tonal certainties and harmonic memories, thereby anchoring it in the past, or on the contrary highlight the 20th and 21st centuries in it by underlining its acerbic atonality? Is the *Finale* a romantic bridge or drunken boat of modernity? Is it Delacroix, Van Gogh, or maybe Mondrian, who can say?

Have you noticed? Even this sonata's sweet moments such as the median portion of the Scherzo or that of the march contain baleful, pitiless, circular and repetitive aspects. This may enlighten us about the secret of the whole work. Listen carefully to these two moments of apparently relaxed lingering, the barcarole and lullaby located in the eye of a hurricane. Can't you hear that they are ritornellos of fate? Can't you see these tender melodies etching closed circles around our necks like a collar or perhaps a rope? Don't you feel stifled inside the prison of their tenderness where snares slowly, sweetly, and inexorably close around the spirit?