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GRIGORY SOKOLOV

Classical Music in Poland

PHILHARMONIC WARSAW | 01ST DICEMBER 2019

Songs of Innocence and Experience

In Warsaw last night, Grigory Sokolov hypnotized the entire audience of a fully packed hall into complete silence with his conception and recreation of Mozart and Brahms. Pure music of the greatest integrity and truth reigned supreme here, quite beyond the medium of the performer and the instrument, both becoming merely a conduit to the spirit of man laid out before us, man an atom in the spinning firmament.

Innumerable hidden details were revealed by his consummate technique and by his profound philosophical and musical penetration. I was reminded of a comment made by Arthur Rubinstein when he observed that in live performance in a concert hall in the presence of a great artist, one is affected by their 'electromagnetic vibrations' that fill the space, electrical connections that cannot be captured on a recording, the way the artist plays directly on your soul and takes hold of it. Such a miraculous phenomenon went far beyond what is normally regarded as a 'performance', far beyond technical accomplishment or crass celebrity ostentation. This recital inhabited that rarefied realm of the greatest in art and even further took us on a spiritual journey into the domain of the ethereal and the immanent.

It is said 'There are pianists and there is Sokolov.' He is undoubtedly a 'soul' with all the connotations of beauty and emotional range of feeling stretching from sunlit joy through stoical suffering to darkest despair, qualities of character delineated in all the greatest nineteenth century Russian literature. On this magical night, the psyche of both audience and pianist were in a particularly rare state of receptive and projective harmony seldom encountered in concert halls. This symbiosis of feeling was fundamental for the development of the mystical and metaphysical atmosphere that slowly but surely began to prevail and hypnotize us with sound, tone, poetry and colour.

His programme:

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart - Prelude and Fugue in C major KV 394 / 383a

One of the greatest influences on the development of Mozart's music settling in Vienna in 1781, was the music of J.S.Bach. This was owing to the influence of Baron Gottfried van Swieten who collected the music of both Bach and Handel. Mozart began to attend the Sunday morning

artistic gatherings of the Baron as he indicated in a letter to his father: 'nothing is played but Handel and Bach.' He also studied fugues with Carl Philipp Emanuel and Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. He sent his sister Nannerl this Prelude and Fugue in C major, which he had composed for Constanze, who fell 'absolutely fell in love' with the art of the fugues of Bach and Handel.

The work is a rarely performed in concert. Sokolov with his immense experience playing Bach (consider his extraordinary Art of Fugue recording for Opus 111) brought to Mozart an uncanny feeling of time travel, projecting us back to the baroque but with an atmosphere filtered through the classical style of the late eighteenth century. His control and transparent expression of the polyphonic lines of the Prelude and especially the Fugue in terms of dynamics, articulation and nuance was nothing short of miraculous.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart - XI Piano Sonata in A major KV 331 / 300i

Sokolov brought such childlike innocence and playfulness to the siciliana and the variations contained in the Andante grazioso and gave unsullied life to these graceful illusions before the tigers of experience begin their feast - so captivating to the heart. Such blithe joy and lightweight reflection was also contained within the Menuetto. He brought rare infectious energy to the Alla turca. Allegretto, one of the first incursions of 'exotic foreign music' into the Western canon and clearly influenced by Mozart's own opera Die Entführung aus dem Serail. In Mozart's time, the last movement was sometimes performed on pianos built with a 'Turkish stop' allowing it to be embellished with extra Janissary percussion effects. Sokolov achieved this drum roll effect with remarkable skill on his modern piano, the arpeggiated left hand chords rolling off in a quite fantastic percussive fashion, possible only with his acute ear and overwhelming finger technique. An astonishing sound surely produced by sorcery!

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart - Rondo in A minor KV 511

One of my favourite keyboard works has always been the Mozart Rondo in A minor K. 511 (1787). It was composed not long after the huge success of Le Nozze de Figaro in Prague. Not a rondo in the galant style but far more the beginnings of an emotional exploration of the fluid thought processes of his own psyche, reflective and deeply felt - the haunting recurring theme building to a soul-searching emotional intensity but as ever with Mozart retaining perfect balance, beauty and grace. The work marks the beginning of a break from the joyful piano concertos that the Viennese aristocracy so adored. Here he begins to seriously explore personal rather than social concerns which culminates in so many ominous ways in Don Giovanni (also premiered in 1787) presaged by the the Piano Concerto No 20 in D minor K.466 (1785).

Sokolov brought such a lipid, internally glowing and seductive tone to these glorious Mozartian melodies and never overplays or exaggerates. The charming Viennese 'affectation', ambiguity and civilized control of emotion in musical 'conversation' was always present however intense or ominous the expressed feeling. There are echoes here of his string quartets. Simply glorious and a jewel box lovingly opened.

INTERVAL

Johannes Brahms - 6 Klavierstücke op. 118

The autumnal Brahms 6 Klavierstücke Op. 118 (1893) have always been close to my heart. In a letter to the conductor and composer Franz Lachner Brahms wrote (concerning the 1st Movement of the Second Symphony): 'I am, by and by, a severely melancholic person ...black wings are constantly flapping above us'. These are among the last compositions by Brahms and he seems to have conceived them as a coherent whole. It is hard to overlook the presence of the spectre of death that inhabits them. The group speaks volumes to me of the transient nature of human existence, but more of a proud philosophical resignation to the inevitability of destiny than a sensationalist expression of terror, despair and melancholy in the face of our mysterious journey to oblivion.

The passionate outbursts of the first Intermezzo in A minor, such an affirmation of life in those rich chords, then the fading away and decay. These emotions were profoundly expressive with Sokolov. In the second sensitively played Intermezzo in A major, he savoured the desperate yearning and eloquent harmonic transitions of the Andante teneramente, the expressive dynamic variations and poetry, so lovingly embracing the long legato lines of transient affections. This ardent work has all the rhapsodic yearning and longing of a nocturne on the nature of mortality and lost love. Almost as a vengeful affirmation of life, yet hauntingly reflective, Sokolov exploded into the Ballade in G minor with its vigorous rhythms and a wonderful delineation of densely woven harmonies.

In the contrapuntal texture of the fourth piece, the Intermezzo in F minor, Sokolov expressed the fluctuating, mercurial nature of emotional tensions and calm waters, which seems inevitably followed by the etiolated nature of 'all passion spent'. The Chopinesque lullaby that inhabits the heart of the Romanze in F major was movingly expressed, his velvet touch and effulgent tone carried one away into rarefied realms. The gloriously variegated colors which have suffused his extraordinary sound palette were again glowing before us.

The valedictory final piece of this integrated meditation on the acceptance of destiny and fate, the Intermezzo in E-flat minor, begins with the theme of the Dies Irae of the Christian requiem. The spectre of death enters and recurs in the work in various guises. Here we begin to inhabit another world far beyond this one. A strenuous, heroic yet tragic averral of the force of life briefly emerges but the terminal expression of resignation in death concludes pianissimo. Sokolov, ego utterly extinguished, inhabited a world of a metaphysical medium in this scarcely bearable extinction of life.

Johannes Brahms - 4 Klavierstücke op. 119

The last piano work of Brahms was written in Bad Ischl in 1893.

It is in four 'movements'

1. Intermezzo in B minor. *Adagio*
2. Intermezzo in E minor. *Andantino un poco agitato*
3. Intermezzo in C major. *Grazioso e giocoso*
4. Rhapsody in E flat major. *Allegro risoluto*

Clara Schumann wrote in her diary after receiving the pieces Op. 118 and Op. 119

'It really is marvelous how things pour from him; it is wonderful how he combines passion and tenderness in the smallest of spaces.'

In a letter from May 1893 to Clara Schumann, Brahms wrote of the first in B minor :

I am tempted to copy out a small piano piece for you, because I would like to know how you agree with it. It is teeming with dissonances! These may [well] be correct and [can] be explained—but maybe they won't please your palate, and now I wished, they would be less correct, but more appetizing and agreeable to your taste. The little piece is exceptionally melancholic and 'to be played very slowly' is not an understatement. Every bar and every note must sound like a ritard[ando], as if one wanted to suck melancholy out of each and every one, lustily and with pleasure out of these very dissonances! Good Lord, this description will [surely] awaken your desire!

This *Intermezzo in B minor* is emotionally unsettled, full of the reflective anguish of past unrequited love, moments of anger and resistance followed by final resignation. These are moments of Arcadian bliss followed by happy memories of calm refection cultivated in the consoling refuge of age. Sokolov was sublime in this work. The E minor Intermezzo seemed to grow organically out of these profound reflections. Here was nostalgia for past passions of unrequited love contained in the sensual joy of that heartbreaking waltz and then a return to the cruel realities of life yet with brief glimpses of joyful memory.

I can only describe the mood of the *Intermezzo in C major* from Sokolov with the opening stanza of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem

To a Skylark

*Hail to thee blithe spirit!
Bird thou never wert-
That from heaven or near it
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.*

Defiance, resolution certainly yet philosophical acceptance of destiny lay at the heart of the final Rhapsody in E flat major. Allegro risoluto. Sokolov brought a magnificent fluctuating mood of melancholic acceptance and almost joyful defiance as he built a valedictory cathedral of the human emotional landscape, a type of existential expostulation at the conclusion 'Yet I am!'

An unnerving experience indeed, an evening devoted to songs of innocence and experience, a night no other living pianist could possibly achieve to the same degree as Grigory Sokolov. You cannot be taught to feel. You cannot be taught sensibility. The ability to express with integrity a wide range of human emotions comes only from within the heart. It is a gift of God made up in music of innumerable microscopic hesitations and accelerations, indeterminate fluctuations of dynamic and phrasing, subtle variations of articulation, a wide palette of colours and nuance, a tone and touch that emerge organically from within the soul. Such profound and refined musical gestures are instinctive aspects of character and cannot be learned. Wilhelm Furtwängler once said that 'an interpreter can render only what he has first lived through.'

His customary six encores began after a wild eruption of enthusiasm and an instant standing ovation. With Sokolov, an encore is performed at the same elevated spiritual level as the main programme. One must never let one's concentration diminish. Again the choice was not random but suffused with melancholy and sadness at the transience of life and the steady and inevitable destruction of time. 'Time's wingéd chariot hurrying near' to quote the seventeenth century English poet Andre Marvell.

First the Schubert Impromptu No.2 in A-flat major D.935 with its tender melodies which speaks of the consolation music gives to the tough travails of life and the threatening face of death.

Then a rather dreamy, poetic, and nostalgia imbued Chopin Mazurka in A minor Op. 68 No.2. His polyphony was finely transparent but such a different view of the mazurka to the Polish vision.

The third was the G-sharp minor Prelude Op. 32 No.12 by Rachmaninoff. We return to the the Dies Irae theme. The composer was deeply attracted to this and used it in many compositions. In this Prelude, the Dies Irae is the main theme presented in the form of variations, performed with the depth of a lifetime's musical intimacy with this great Russian composer.

The fourth emotionally heartbreaking encore was another piece of Brahms that preserved the elegiac mood we had already been placed in by the previous works. The Intermezzo No.2 in B-flat minor Op. 117 was performed by Sokolov with profound emotional penetration and subtle sensibility - the kaleidoscope of colors which have suffused his extraordinary sound palette were again in evidence. One could not help reflecting, fancifully perhaps, that he had before his mind's eye and in his heart the memory of a departed much loved being. Once so close to him, he was offering this performance with deepest love to that memory.

A softly played, nostalgic and tantalizingly brief Chopin Mazurka in B minor, Op. 30 No.2 took fifth place and to conclude the recital, as is often the case with him, the spiritually serene and affecting Bach Chorale Prelude „Ich ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ“ (I Call to You, Lord Jesus Christ).

We travel towards these sublime connections unencumbered by mere material obstacles as the piano or even the pianist himself. A seemingly direct connection to the music. There is always with Sokolov a revelation of internal detail and perceptive musical penetration which both moves the heart and astonishes the mind. Yet here was not the exuberance of youth but the product of mature and deepest philosophical reflection. A lifetime of contemplation of these pieces has produced spiritual intensity of the greatest refinement and depth. This is one of the rarest qualities possessed by Grigory Sokolov. This and musical and personal integrity of the highest order, simplicity of conception, the dissolution of the ego and a lifetime of devotion to supreme musical truths. In the final analysis it is character that determines the status of a virtuoso pianist and musician. Yes, this is the difference. There are pianists and there is the man Grigory Sokolov...

*And gentlemen in England now-a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here*

Shakespeare
Henry V - St. Crispin's Day Speech

The clammy December Warsaw night folded itself about me in an embrace of cold reality as I headed off with a musical colleague for a ruminative glass of wine to share and commune with these rarely experienced emotions.

Michael Moran

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