

STANDPOINT.

blog entry by Jessica Duchon

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Krystian Zimerman

Take it to the Limit

Full house and a standing ovation were waiting for Krystian Zimerman at the Royal Festival Hall for the first of Chopin's two big birthday concerts yesterday. Half of Poland seemed to be there, never mind half of London, while dignitaries, diplomats and the titled abounded. I am concerned that my fingernail may, during a handshake, have caused momentary discomfort to the Duke of Kent. Some music fans were also in the hall. Nobody sang 'Happy Birthday Dear Chopin' and there wasn't any vodka.

And so to business. What is it about Krystian's playing that causes all the fuss?

It would be easier to say "what *isn't* it", but here are a few thoughts. First of all, he goes further. Where other pianists merely dream, shrug and compromise, Krystian won't settle for the same. Anyone who has ever set a toe into the murky waters of professional piano performance will know that ghastly sinking feeling in the stomach as you meet your piano for the evening, which may variously resemble a stew, a typewriter or a three-legged monster predisposed to eat you. Every one of us (well, them...I gave up...) longs for a violinist's freedom to bring his own Strad and adjust the tuning & set-up. And that is exactly what Krystian does.

His piano is his best friend and goes everywhere with him; he spends possibly as much time preparing it as he does practising on it. Result: the piano has the greatest clarity of any concert instrument I've heard - for instance you can hear the definition of every flickering note in the whisk-figure at the start of the Second Scherzo. The dynamic range, too, is incredible - think quintuple ps and fs instead of merely double. He's realised every pianist's greatest wish.

Not that that would count for anything if he didn't have the musical imagination and ability to match. Going that far with the instrument enables him to go further with his interpretations, which of course is why he does the former in the first place. Some moments in the concert - the first movement of the B flat minor Sonata or the last of the B minor - progressed with such intensity that it was hard to breathe. If most pianists push matters to the extremes in terms of speed and emotional intensity combined, they come croppers, but not this one.

He opened with a deceptively tranquil F sharp Nocturne, melodies exquisitely turned, inner textures lapping like the Thames outside, then unleashed the B flat minor Sonata: the first movement a feverish gallop, the last almost an optical illusion - again because every note was defined even through the carefully manipulated pedal wash. Pedalling, btw, is an underrated art. Try the way Zimerman uses the soft pedal at strong volume to create the aural equivalent of a gauze lowering as the Funeral March begins its last diminuendo into the grave. The B flat minor Scherzo was its ideal foil as a sort of pre-interval built-in encore.

The B minor Sonata was a model of lyricism and power and demonstrated the extreme capabilities of both pianist and magic piano - the Largo a voyage through heavenly tranquility, the

finale building to an overwhelming tenor oration with the theme's final return that wouldn't have disgraced a Greek tragedy. Zimmerman's melodies do not only sing, but speak, because he has something to say...

Yet by now something odd was happening: our pianist started to cast some seriously filthy looks into the audience. Was it the coughing between movements? The drawback of the RFH's refurbishment is that every bark bites - and most of Krystian's recitals here in the past have taken place in May or June rather than in prime flu season. But no: some dimwit near the front had brought in a recording device, and Krystian could see it clear as daylight. You can imagine his views on such things. Later, we hear, the culprit was 'detained' by staff and the police were called.

Finally the Barcarolle entered another world, a valedictory poem that was all half-lights and sepia colourwash. And, faced with standing ovation and a bouquet almost bigger than he is, he treated us to a rare encore - the C sharp minor waltz; we missed hearing the first bar because everyone had to sit down again very quickly. (I wish he would allow his LP of the Waltzes to be rereleased on CD - it was one of his first recordings, made when he was about 21 and is the freshest, most charming account of them you could hope for - but I guess it's a case of 'pigs might fly'.)

And then, while the great and good drank and diplomaticised upstairs in a room with a view, the man and his piano set out again to drive through the night to Paris. As The Times interview revealed the other day, he is planning to take a well-earned sabbatical next year. I hope he'll be back soon. Few other artists exist to match him, if any.