

↓ **CHOPIN Piano Concerto No. 1** • Yaroslav Senyshyn (pn); Oliver Dohnányi, cond; Czech Nat'l SO • NAVONA 6720 (42:36) Reviewed from a WAV download: 44.1 kHz/16-bit

First encounters tend to leave indelible impressions, and so it was for me with Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1 on a 1953-recorded RCA Red Seal mono LP (LM-1810) in a performance by Arthur Rubinstein, with Alfred Wallenstein leading the Los Angeles Philharmonic. And no, in case you're wondering, in 1954, when the album was first released, I was but a tyke who knew nothing of the pianist, conductor, or orchestra. I'm guessing that the recording didn't come into my possession until at least five or six years later, by which time I'd succumbed to the incurable obsession of record collecting.

Unbeknownst to me at that juncture was that Rubinstein had made a much earlier recording of the Chopin No. 1 with John Barbirolli and the London Symphony Orchestra in 1937, and had already recorded the piece yet again in a 1961 RCA stereo do-over with Stanisław Skrowaczewski and the New Symphony Orchestra of London.

I mention this only because it's said that Rubinstein had a special affinity for Chopin's music, and not just his two concertos. Composer and pianist shared common Polish roots, which brought a deep nobility of expression to Rubinstein's Chopin. At the same time, the pianist could be known at times for, shall we say, a somewhat *laissez-faire* attitude towards technical discipline, as famously evidenced by the bit of nastiness between Rubinstein and Fritz Reiner at a recording session for the Tchaikovsky concerto with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Long story short, Rubinstein had flubbed some notes towards the end of the first movement and asked Reiner if they could do another take. To which Reiner snorted, "If we're going to correct all of your wrong notes, we'll be here all day." Rubinstein stood up and walked out, leaving the recording unfinished. Unlike Rubinstein, Reiner was not a *laissez-faire* kind of guy, to put it mildly. Putting the two of them together was not a match made in heaven, though they did manage to make critically acclaimed recordings of the Brahms No. 1 and Rachmaninoff No. 2 before the Tchaikovsky flap ended their collaboration.

Like the madeleine that triggered Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, memories of all these things came flooding back to me as I began listening to Yaroslav Senyshyn's Chopin's No. 1. The nobility of expression and the passion were there, but assuredly not a trace of the *laissez-faire* in technical rigor.

Surely a well-known fact to *Fanfare's* readers is that not unlike the reverse numbering of Beethoven's first two piano concertos due to the happenstance of who makes it to the publishing house first, Chopin's E-Minor Piano Concerto (No. 1) was actually the second to be composed, while his F-Minor Concerto (No. 2) was the first to be composed. Both concertos, however, are cut from much the same cloth in which dotted-eighth and sixteenth-note motifs in both long/short and short/long configurations are an important rhythmic feature, likely related, I assume, to native Polish music.

There are also similarities in the melodic profiles of both concertos, though harmonically, No. 1 (which is really No. 2) is the more adventurous of the two, evidencing a number of unusual progressions and modulations. It also strikes me, strictly as a personal opinion, that the main business of the first movement is unnecessarily prolonged by an inordinately extended orchestral exposition, where some pruning to present the core material eventually taken up by the piano would have been welcome. The initial exposition in a concerto needn't play the whole movie for us before it's played again in full and elaborated on by the soloist. But let me not sound

ungrateful for the two concertos that Chopin composed in 1829 (No. 2) and 1830 (No. 1) at the still tender age of 19 and 20, just prior to his leaving Warsaw for Paris. He wrote no more concertos, and only another handful of orchestral works with piano at around the same time. There are no late works for piano with orchestra from Chopin's pen, so we can't know what direction such works might have taken.

In a 43:2 review of Yaroslav Senyshyn's Albany recording of Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2 and Liszt's No. 2 with the Czech National Symphony Orchestra, I put the pianist's Chopin on a par with Rubinstein's, Ashkenazy's and Argerich's. To Chopin's No. 1 on the present release, Senyshyn brings the same "youthful vigor and masculinity" one would have expected of the barely-turned-20 composer. "Not for Senyshyn," I wrote, "the light, filigreed, delicate touch. This is how one imagines a still adolescent, hormonally charged Chopin would have played his concerto and how it would have sounded, not on his beloved Érard, but on a magnificent Steinway grand, had one been available to him."

Elsewhere, in a review of Senyshyn playing Rachmaninoff's Preludes and *Études-Tableaux* in 37:4, I wrote, "Yaroslav Senyshyn demonstrates technical Tuency, mastery of the composer's unique keyboard style, and an understanding of the music's underlying complex emotional makeup, which, in my opinion, are the equal of any pianist who has played these works, and which give Senyshyn's performances a truly authentic feel." Every word of that, and a few more, describe the pianist's Chopin.

His rhythmic rubato, subtler than Rubinstein's, is never overdone. Always tasteful and tactful, it's employed by Senyshyn instead as a strategic tactic in shaping and joining the longer arcs of Chopin's phrases.

If music were a spoken language, Canadian pianist Yaroslav Senyshyn might be characterized as a musical polyglot, for in addition to his large repertoire of concertos from the Classical and Romantic eras, "he takes particular pride in working with living Canadian composers such as Larysa Kuzmentko, Reeves Medaglia-Miller, David Smith, Donald Cochrane, Catalin Ursu, and Japanese composer Atsushi Yoshinaga. Senyshyn has also collaborated with and improvised on Indian classical music with acclaimed virtuoso sitarist Sanjoy Bandopadhyay and ethnomusicologist James Hamilton."

In addition to his concertizing and collaborating with contemporary composers and musicians, both East and West, Senyshyn is "Professor of Music and Moral Philosophy at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, and frequently performs with his wife, Susan O'Neill, a virtuoso flutist and internationally renowned scholar who serves as Professor and Dean at Simon Fraser University's Faculty of Education and President of the International Society for Music Education (ISME)."

It's always something special when an artist's performance of a familiar work reveals hidden secrets the music holds and has to tell. It's why we never tire of hoping to hear something we haven't heard before in a new performance. Technical command and emotional expression unite as one in Senyshyn's playing, as they have in the artistry of many of music history's great instrumentalists and singers. That, in itself, is not unique. What is exceptional is the feeling one experiences in hearing a performance in which two souls, those of the music's executant and its creator, unite to become one. What is special about Senyshyn's Chopin is that the divide between the man at the piano and the heart and mind of the man who conceived the miracle of the music melts away before us to reveal one spirit and one voice. **Jerry Dubins**

Five stars: A very special, illuminating performance of Chopin's E-Minor Piano Concerto