

# POLAND'S PRIDE

Chopin's two piano concertos are youthful and passionate. Uzbek pianist Eldar Nebolsin has just recorded them and tells **Erica Worth** why he loves them both

**When did you record the Chopin concertos?**

I recorded them in Warsaw during five days in September last year with Antoni Wit and the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra. I had played the Saint-Saëns Concerto No 2 with them a year earlier, but this was my first encounter with Antoni Wit and this orchestra in the music of Chopin.

**Are these concertos in the blood of this orchestra?**

When I spoke to Antoni at dinner after our first concert prior to the recordings, he told me that he has conducted Concerto No 1 with the Warsaw Philharmonic around 150 times! The F minor, No 2, a little less – but still over 100 times. This orchestra knows the concertos inside out. They know, and Wit knows, all the challenges that they present in those moments of accompanying the soloist.

**Some people say that the orchestral part in these concertos is uninteresting.**

I always strongly disagree with that point of view! The concertos demand flexible playing, so an orchestra has added challenges. It needs to be able to listen, to modify its phrasing accordingly to what the soloist does. If you compare the Chopin concertos with the Brahms – one could say that yes, the Chopin seem much easier. But that doesn't mean it's easy music to accompany. In fact, accompanying German music is easier for orchestras. One can plan the phrasing and timing. Whereas with Chopin, in my opinion, there should be a lot of spontaneity with not too much preparation beforehand. This gives the spirit of improvisation. Mozart has that quality too.

**It's interesting that you compare Chopin to Mozart.**

There's always some aspect of a particular composer that can be compared to certain aspects of another. For me, there are

some similarities in composers that at first sight may seem very different. Take Prokofiev and Haydn. They sound worlds apart, but what I find with both is they have a way of being incredibly specific in what they want to achieve in every moment. They are both very graphic in their writing, and brave and provocative in their harmonic thinking.

In the same way, I find there are certain similarities between Mozart and Chopin. Chopin is very difficult because of his very particular and rare combination of Classical formal thinking and at the same time of incredible inner freedom that makes this music so incredible. Think of the concertos – formally they are very Classical, but their expression within every phrase is from a different, non-Classical perspective. When an orchestra starts to rehearse the concertos alone, the pieces may seem relatively easy. But when the soloist joins in, it becomes 20 times more difficult. Every bar, every phrase, every sentence, is totally new with a soloist. The conductor has to know exactly what the pianist is doing, with all the

embellishments and so on – and Wit's way of conducting was very sensitive and precise. He knew all of this.

Another challenge is that many orchestras are used to *accompanying* the Chopin concertos most of the time. However, even in the accompaniment parts, there are many points where the orchestra should *lead*. It's not always the piano that's the leader – especially in the parts between the first and second subjects. The orchestra should be a real partner.

#### What's the hardest thing in Chopin?

One of the most difficult aspects is being able to always sing in even the most seemingly technically challenging passages. There's a great book about Chopin and his pupils that portrays his way of teaching and explaining to his pupils. You can see that for him there was not such a thing as a scale or a technically difficult passage. It was always the melody – even in the fastest passages. No matter how fast you play, you must be able to sing. Singing is hard to do on the piano and we need much more effort than a singer would require.

#### Is Chopin vital to your musical life?

Every composer has a certain place in one's heart – at least for me. I have periods where I'm very in love with Chopin and then I switch to Bach and then Brahms, and then it's contemporary. It's difficult to be monogamous. I cherish certain composers very much, but I don't dare to perform them. It has a lot to do with being honest with yourself and being able to say, 'No, I don't feel ready to play this or that yet', even if I'm dying to!

#### What's your favourite Chopin work?

Of course, all of Chopin's music is great, but I really love the concertos. For me they are the most significant works he wrote. The mazurkas too. With the mazurkas, it seems he was working way ahead of his time. I know the concertos are early opuses, but you can see that his way of writing was already incredibly passionate.

#### You've recorded the Liszt concertos too. Do you often listen again to your recordings?

I have to say that with my recordings in general, there's often a degree of inner fight inside me. When I record something, it's like a frozen moment in time, done from a particular view. Since I made these recordings, I've played the concertos more and more, so my way of playing and my whole concept of the pieces has changed and it's a suffering to listen to my recordings. It's always like that! One or two years later, and it's all very different.

#### Have you done anything special for Chopin's 200th?

I've played the concertos many times. And I will perform some programmes at the end of this year that have a very interesting concept: the cross-influences between Chopin and Schumann. There will be works by Schumann that are close to Chopin's spirit. I will also include some Clara Schumann mazurkas and polonaises. There are so many cross influences among the composers of the 19th century. Schumann even wrote a piece called 'Chopin' in his *Carnaval*. There are many more subtle influences. I'm not saying that one composer decides to imitate the other – it's more a subconscious thing where a composer writes in the manner of some composers in the past.

#### And what about Liszt's bicentenary next year?

I have some projects – recitals in Korea and so on – where I will play only Liszt. I haven't decided exactly what to play yet, though... ■

*This issue's covermount CD includes Eldar Nebolsin playing the slow movement of Liszt's Concerto No 1. Nebolsin's Chopin Piano Concerto No 1 recording with the Warsaw Philharmonic and Antoni Wit is released in August (Naxos 8.572335) and his recording of Concerto No 2 follows in October (Naxos 8.572336).*

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