

Report**Cleveland International Piano Competition
Festival film — *The Art of Chopin* (August 7)**

by Guytano Parks



The Art of Chopin, an hour-long documentary film by Gerald Caillat produced by Euroarts Studio and released in August 2010 to commemorate the great Polish composer's 200th birthday, was the fifth "Festival Event" presented by The Cleveland International Piano Competition at The Cleveland Museum of Art. The CIPC website describes the film as "a thought-provoking and enlightening film paying tribute to the art of Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849), whose unique and inimitable writing laid the groundwork for twentieth century music and the modern piano."

Garrick Ohlsson, the first American to win the International Frederic Chopin Competition in 1970, provides much of the dialogue during the documentary. Taken aback as he views a video excerpt from his exciting and historic competition winning performance at the onset of the film, he humbly says, "wow — only a few minutes, but such a big part of my life."

There is also quite a bit of historic performance footage of other distinguished pianists who won the Chopin Competition such as Bella Davidovich (1949), Maurizio Pollini (1960), Martha Argerich (1965) and Krystian Zimerman (1975), plus concert and studio performance footage of Piotr Anderszewski, Yuja Wang, Evgeny Kissin, Murray Perahia, and none other than the legendary Arthur Rubinstein.

At one point Ohlsson speaks of the difficulty in execution of the *Etude in A minor, Op. 10, No. 2*, explaining, "there are sixteenth-note chromatic scales in the third, fourth and fifth fingers while the thumb and index finger plays accompanying quarter-note staccato chords in the right hand." He firmly reiterates, "the right hand is simultaneously playing two entirely different parts. And then one must forget about the technical difficulties and communicate the musical expression, turning a study into a poetic and imaginative creation." Another historic video clip with a bird's-eye-view of his hands captures his mastery of this etude.

This was more or less the extent of the technical talk of Chopin during the film — perhaps of more interest to pianists studying and performing his music than to listeners — but nonetheless, very fascinating. Poetry and beauty with pathos and heartfelt emotion,

penetrating directly and deeply into our souls. This is the Chopin the world knows and loves. This is the master who has been described as “the chameleon of the piano” for his kaleidoscopic grasp of color, mood, texture and feeling.

Chopin's output of compositions for the piano is staggering: 27 Preludes, 27 Etudes, 20 Waltzes, 59 Mazurkas, 17 Polonaises, 21 Nocturnes, 4 Ballades, 4 Scherzos, 4 Impromptus, 7 sets of Variations, 4 Sonatas, 2 Concertos, 5 Rondos plus 21 miscellany works. The many short video clips in the film give a fairly good representation of Chopin's multifaceted character, revealing the great variety of styles within his wide-ranging types of pieces. Preferring to play in the intimate atmosphere of the salon rather than in big concert halls, Chopin's hushed, poetic utterances draw the listener in, demanding undivided attention in a subtle, delicate way. But when he cries out in declamation, he does so with great strength, passion and heroism.

The film briefly touched on Chopin's relationship with George Sand. At first he felt she was much too emancipated for his taste, but he soon changed his mind and the two became inseparable as they left Paris, relocating to the Isle of Majorca. Chopin's health was failing and he was practically penniless, living with Sand in a Monastery. Sadly, he described his room as looking and feeling like a coffin.

Perhaps the main quality which makes up the essence of Chopin's music — which is in large part responsible for its world-wide appeal — is its spontaneous, improvisatory feel. Chopin labored over every last detail, large and small, so it is quite miraculous that despite that, his music sounds so very fresh, blossoming with inventiveness and originality. He was the master of *rubato*, and the influence of the *bel canto* style of Italian opera, which he so loved, is distinctively inherent in his writing.

We are left breathless as Arthur Rubinstein plays the last section of the second movement *Larghetto* from the piano concerto in f minor. Strategic camera work effectively captures his face head-on for the duration of this clip. One cannot help but be mesmerized by the contentment and solace expressed as he effortlessly *sings* Chopin's song, setting each note like a perfect little jewel, peacefully concluding the movement in a heavenward ascent.

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