

CIPC Young Artists Competition: Twenty minutes with Alexander Schimpf

by Jarrett Hoffman



“Both the ‘*Hammerklavier*’ and the ‘*White Mass*’ are about positive forces in life,” said pianist Alexander Schimpf. “In the end they’re about fighting through something and having a triumphant ending — and both endings are pretty spectacular.”

On Wednesday, May 13, at 10:00 am in Baldwin Wallace University’s Chamber Hall, Alexander Schimpf — the Mixon First Prize Winner at the 2011 CIPC — will present the first master class of the Cleveland International Piano Competition Young Artist Competition’s newly-formed Institute, to be held concurrently with the ten-day competition. Admission is free and open to the public.

Then, on Wednesday, May 20 at 7:00 pm in BW’s Gamble Auditorium, Schimpf will play the final guest recital of the Institute, performing Brahms’s 8 *Klavierstücke*, Op. 76, Scriabin’s *Piano*

Sonata No. 7, Op. 64 (“*White Mass*”), and Beethoven’s *Piano Sonata No. 29 in B-flat Major*, Op. 106 (“*Hammerklavier*”). Before the Beethoven, pianist Zsolt Bognár will join Schimpf onstage for a short conversation about the work. Tickets are \$15.

Schimpf spoke to us by phone from his hometown of Würzburg, Germany, saying, “I’m looking forward to being back in Cleveland. I have so many friends there now, it’s like my second home.”

If Cleveland is Schimpf's second home, how does it compare to his first? "They are very different," he said. "Würzburg is a much smaller, less significant city. For example, we don't have an international airport. But what is similar is that the arts are valued highly in both cities. We have a very nice music conservatory, where I studied, though it may not be as exceptionally regarded as the Cleveland Institute of Music. We also have an opera house, a symphony orchestra, and museums. I have to say, though, it can't compare to what Cleveland has to offer."

Schimpf said that Zsolt Bognár is the perfect person to be joining him for the conversation about the Beethoven. "We've met in Cleveland a couple times, and once also in Germany. He's so active in talking about music in all sorts of ways — discussing it, having interviews with musicians." (Check out Bognár's [Living the Classical Life](#), a series of filmed interviews with classical musicians.)

"The 'Hammerklavier' is a piece that's really worth talking and thinking about before you hear it, especially if it's your first time with it. It's challenging to listen to — and admittedly also very challenging to play. It can be very overwhelming in a sense. Both Zsolt and I know it well, and we'll just take a couple minutes to discuss a few aspects of it, hoping that we'll make the whole experience more worthwhile for the audience. It's usually much more effective this way than reading program notes."

Schimpf has been very successful playing Beethoven. His triumph in the final round at the 2011 CIPC was with Beethoven's fourth concerto. He also won first prize at the International Beethoven Competition in Vienna in 2009, and he will be debuting at the Beethovenhalle this August with the Beethoven Orchestra Bonn, playing the composer's first concerto.

"Sometimes people ask me, 'Who's your favorite composer?' I don't really have one. But if I have to choose, if they make me, it's always Beethoven. For me, he gave the most complete picture from his opus 1 all the way to his late works. He offers such a spectrum of compositional techniques, styles, and emotions. It's all in there. And particularly for pianists, there's just so much to work on, to choose from, to experience. It's amazing.

"It may also just be that his music somehow fits with me — maybe the way I grew up, or the music I was surrounded by. He's always been a special composer to me. I recently finished studying all five of his piano concertos, so that part of my repertoire with orchestra is finally complete. It gives me a good feeling to have played, worked through, and experienced all of it."

Schimpf sees some connections between the Beethoven and Scriabin's "*White Mass*." "Both composers were writing in a really advanced style with these pieces, beyond their respective times. I mean, Beethoven was really out-there with his late sonatas. Nobody

wrote like he did in the 1820s. The same goes for Scriabin, who developed his later style in the second half of his sonatas and was a very important influence on what today we call ‘modern music.’

“I also think both the ‘*Hammerklavier*’ and ‘*White Mass*’ are about positive forces in life. There’s desperate music in both of them, but in the end they’re about fighting through something and having a triumphant ending — and the endings for both of these pieces are pretty spectacular. I’ve never played them both in the same recital, and I’m looking forward to it.”

Schimpf said he discovered Brahms’s *Klavierstücke* fairly recently. “I’ve been more involved with his very late compositions — both his piano concertos, and you may have heard his op. 119 on my latest [CD](#). The music from the middle of his life gets neglected. It’s not performed that much. I just spontaneously decided to study these pieces and put them on programs from this year on, so it’s kind of an experiment. With programming, it’s more about some feeling than having a complete concept for the whole evening.”

Finally, I asked Schimpf what he expects out of serving on the jury of the CIPC Young Artists Competition. “I’m really excited about this opportunity to be on the other end of things. It will be extremely interesting and a new experience for me. I think it will also be very challenging because there will be amazing piano playing to be heard all the way through, and we probably won’t feel like giving anybody a very low score because they will all be great. They are pre-selected candidates, so only the very best are coming.”

He went on. “It’s complicated. I don’t want to go in with too many expectations or with too clear a plan. But I also want to feel prepared in some way.” In what way prepared? “I’ll give some thought to making sure I am always listening with the same attention and not unfairly getting tired the second half of the day. You want to be equally present for everybody to make it fair. I’ll have to find some sort of strategy for myself.”

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