

THE EVOLUTION  
OF PERFORMANCE  
STYLE IN THE  
HISTORY OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL  
FRYDERYK CHOPIN  
PIANO COMPETITION  
IN WARSAW

When the idea of establishing the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw was conceived in the 1920s, it was partly motivated by the desire to promote an authentic performance practice in relation to Chopin's oeuvre. That authentic performance style was considered to have been lost under layers of interpretive exaggeration and liberty, beginning with the text itself and ending with matters of aesthetics.

The Competition's support of the so-called Paderewski Edition of Chopin's Complete Works led to the wide acceptance and use of that edition as the primary textual source. (The Polish National Edition, edited by Jan Ekier and now completed after many years of meticulous research, is currently recommended by the Competition and is well on its way to achieving the same status.) The ideal of adherence to the text, without the liberties that were characteristic of performance practice during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, remains in force in many quarters, however chimerical it might be in reality.

Yet the question of performance style is more complex. Chopin is regarded as an exceptionally difficult composer to interpret. The fact that practically all of the First Prize winners of the Chopin Competition have been considered to be among the greatest pianists in the world seems to suggest that the test posed by the Chopin style is particularly demanding and that only the best of the best are able to pass it successfully. At the Chopin Competition, of course, as in other international competitions, artistic individuality and virtuosity are important, yet what is paramount is an understanding of the unique style of Chopin. And that is where the controversies start. What is the authentic Chopin style?

In a *Los Angeles Times* article published in 1964, the great pianist and supreme Chopin interpreter Arthur Rubinstein said the following:

At first I had to fight to play Chopin. They called my playing too dry. The exaggeration and excessive freedom with which a pianist like Paderewski played Chopin was accepted by the public as a standard and made it difficult for us young pianists. [...] It was the talentless pupils of Chopin who established what was called the Chopin tradition, a tradition that lasted for a long time. [...] Paderewski became the exponent of the wrong tradition.<sup>1</sup>

Those words place in opposing camps two of the greatest pianists since Chopin, both of them Chopin's countrymen and both

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Albert Goldberg, 'Rubinstein: Virtuoso of the spoken word', *Los Angeles Times*, 15 March 1964.

considered in their lifetimes to be among the greatest interpreters of his music. That example of two great artists fundamentally disagreeing on how to play Chopin shows just how complicated and nuanced the question of style really is.

Our understanding of the Chopin style has changed over the years. Would anybody today call Rubinstein's way of playing Chopin 'too dry'? On the contrary, for at least the past fifty years, his interpretations have been considered an example of the romantic style *par excellence*. And here we touch on the essence of the difficulty of Chopin's style, which is the challenge of uniting and balancing the romantic element with the classical element present in his music. That blend lay at the heart of Chopin's artistic aesthetic.

The description of this aesthetic and of the compositional and performance style of Chopin would fill a multi-volume work and is not the main subject of the present discussion. Instead, let us focus on one aspect, which is crucial with regard to the possible evolution of performance style at the Chopin Competition: the similarity between the style and musical language of Chopin and Mozart and the difficulties those similarities create.

Consider these poignant words of Garrick Ohlsson, winner of the 8th Chopin Competition:

Playing Mozart in the twenty-first century of course is a challenge [...] but Mozart contains special problems. [...] Mozart, among all the geniuses of classical music, occupies this very special place of quasi perfection. In other words, you can't do anything to this music except change it for the worse [...] If you have too many of your own personal brilliant ideas about him and impose them on this perfectly balanced structure, the structure often becomes sort of unbalanced. [...] it's so harmonious. But the fact is, it's all very transparent, and the relationship of one note to the next is rather delicate and [...] can't be borne down on with too much weight, because it actually ought to sound easy, it ought to sound fluent. And the other part of it is just that emotional issue: you have to be totally emotionally involved and yet not imposing your artistic will on it because [...] Mozart] doesn't flourish in those environments. Beethoven is made of tougher stuff. I mean, you can actually bear down hard on him and he can still take it. Mozart isn't exactly fragile, but it – it loses its exquisite balance. Somebody once said [that] Mozart's like a very thin gauze curtain, you can see everything behind it, nothing's hidden. [...] it makes us very nervous actually because confronted with such music, you can't play well enough. It does challenge you to do your absolute best.<sup>2</sup>

Those comments could easily and accurately be applied to Chopin as well.

Vladimir Horowitz was another pianist to point out the similarities and the connection between the two composers.

2  
Garrick Ohlsson, 'On playing Mozart in the 21st century' [video], YouTube (recorded 5 July, uploaded 13 Sept. 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lpEhs3tfWc>, accessed 27 June 2017.

He emphasised the presence of both classical and romantic elements in Mozart and Chopin: ‘Mozart ought to be played like Chopin and Chopin like Mozart’.<sup>3</sup> Mozart’s aesthetic, which perfectly represents the aesthetic of the entire classical era, was close to Chopin’s heart. A familiar portion of one of Mozart’s letters from 1781 expresses that ideal precisely. Again, it would be easy to imagine these words being written by Chopin:

Passions, violent or not, must never be expressed to the point of disgust, and music must never offend the ear, even in the most horrendous situations, but must always be pleasing, in other words, always remain music.<sup>4</sup>

The question of balance and proportion is fundamental to the Chopin style. Such elements as sound, tempos, rubato, emotional development, musical narration and dynamic range, passion, temperament, elegance, the famous *zł* (sometimes translated as ‘tristesse’), longing, joy, heroism, pathos and virtuosity – to name just a few – must combine in Chopin in a way that will create a singularly harmonious whole. Everything must be expressed naturally, avoiding exaggeration, of which Chopin did not approve.

Carl Mikuli, one of Chopin’s pupils, gives this description of Chopin as performer:

A lofty, virile energy lent imposing effect to suitable passages – *an energy without roughness*; on the other hand, he could carry away his hearers by the tenderness of his soulful delivery – *a tenderness without affectation*. But with all the warmth of his peculiarly ardent temperament, his playing was *always within bounds*, chaste, polished and at times even severely reserved.<sup>5</sup>

The well-known maxim ‘through discipline comes freedom’, originating with Aristotle, applies very well to Chopin’s aesthetic, too.

The difficulty and the dilemma of Chopin interpretation lie in the necessity of reconciling opposites and finding Chopin’s ideal between opposing poles. Performers must search for the composer who constantly worked within strict, self-imposed boundaries but who found freedom at the same time in the utmost discipline.

Each new generation of pianists naturally seeks its own understanding of Chopin, grounded in that generation’s culture, values, sensibilities and aesthetic. The challenge is also to remain true to the specific nuances of Chopin’s style, however these might be manifested or interpreted. It is a challenge because the filter of artistic personality and temperament, and also the spirit of the times, will inevitably be at work. The danger is that Chopin’s music *as he conceived, played and heard it* may be changed beyond

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3  
*Horowitz plays Mozart*, film directed by Albert Maysles, Columbia Artists, 1987.

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4  
*The Letters of Mozart and his Family*, 3rd edn., tr. and ed. Emily Anderson (London: Macmillan, 1985), 769.

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5  
Carl Mikuli, Preface to Chopin, *Complete Works for the Piano*, tr. Theo. Baker (New York: Schirmer, 1894), 1; my emphases.

recognition and, in some aesthetic quarters, beyond acceptance, even though reinvention should be understood as an essential force in the history of art.

So is an evolution of performance style at the Chopin Competition desirable on the one hand and acceptable on the other? Even if we accept that the establishment of stylistic guidelines for Chopin performance was not the specific goal of the Competition's founders, the Competition was perceived by some, from the very beginning, as an arbiter of that style. For example, on the occasion of the First Competition, in 1927, the weekly magazine *Świat* wrote: 'The young contestants represent all the countries of Europe. They will nobly compete for the palm in the preservation of the Chopin tradition [...]. The Competition is [...] to a certain degree, an examination of the best performance style and of historical understanding of the immortal Master'.<sup>6</sup> In the First Competition, the jury comprised only Polish musicians and teachers, with the exception of one German judge, who joined only for the final stage. *Świat* commented on that fact: 'We consider it quite right. Our country, as far as Chopin is concerned, is indeed the source of the tradition that brought forth numerous masters of Chopin's pianistic style, such as Paderewski, Michałowski, Śliwiński, Hoffman, Rubinstein and Friedman. The Competition organisers consider Polish musicians to be best equipped to define the essence of the Chopin tradition and to set out the guidelines for the future.'<sup>7</sup> Chopin performance style was discussed in the context of the Chopin Competition in *Przegląd Muzyczny* in 1927: 'Past generations of Chopin performers did not display such a complete understanding [...] as was demonstrated by the competitors here. In the past, a correct understanding of Chopin style was rare; artistic freedom often resulted in exaggeration, a lack of rhythmic discipline, unnatural phrasing and loose technique'.<sup>8</sup>

This comment seems to tie in with the words of the Competition founder, Professor Żurawlew, who said that the idea of the Competition arose because he had 'often encountered the opinion that Chopin's music was excessively romantic, weakening the soul and mind [...]. I found all those signs of a complete misunderstanding of Chopin's music rather painful'.<sup>9</sup> The idea of the Competition as the guardian and censor in matters relating to performance style, whether fairly ascribed or not, continued to be expressed over the years. For example, Jerzy Stażelski wrote in 1960: 'For over twenty years, thanks to the Chopin Competition, Warsaw exercised hegemony over Chopin performance style [...]. The idea of the Competition was to protect Chopin's music against an overly saccharine, mannered approach'.<sup>10</sup> Professor Andrzej Jasiński, the Chair of the Jury in three editions of the Competition, stated the following in an interview from 1995:

6 'Pierwszy wielki Turniej artystyczny w Odrodzonej Odczyźnie' [The first great artistic tournament in Reborn Poland], *Świat*, 5 (1927), 13. (All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.)

7 'Międzynarodowy Konkurs Szopenowski w Warszawie' [International Chopin Competition in Warsaw], *Świat*, 18 (1926), 13.

8 Karol Stromenger, 'Przegląd Muzyczny: Konkurs im. Chopina' [Music Review: The Chopin Competition], *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, 7 (1927), 138.

9 Jerzy Żurawlew quoted in Barbara Niewiarowska et al. (eds), *Kronika Międzynarodowych Konkursów Pianistycznych im. Fryderyka Chopina 1927–1995* [Chronicle of the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition 1927–1995] (Gdańsk: Omega, 2000), 6.

10 Jerzy Stażelski, 'Impresje polemiczne. Po wielkim konkursie' [Polemical impressions. After the great competition], *Kierunki*, 13 (1960), 1.

During the last Competition, there were performances by pianists who displayed strong artistic personality but were controversial in terms of the Chopin aesthetic. They did not reach the final or were eliminated even earlier. We need not consider them to be wronged [...]. If they are truly talented, then they will likely soon win prizes in other major competitions, which will enable them to perform in concert. Then they will be able to perform Chopin on their own account. It is normal that young pianists performing Chopin's music seek inspiration from famous laureates of the Chopin Competition. However, the Chopin interpretations of some of the greatest piano virtuosos of the past and present cannot be held up as a model of the Chopin style. And therein lies the importance of the Chopin Competition as the authority which helps to preserve the good tradition of Chopin interpretation, serving as a model for young pianists and helping the careers of those performers who best express the richness and the pure, unaltered beauty of our brilliant composer's music.<sup>11</sup>

While guarding against oversimplification, we can say that the figures connected with the Competition who consider stylistic evolution to be a fact (possibly a desired one) include the late Polish music critic Jan Weber and the winner of the 7th Competition, Martha Argerich. Those who consider the possibility of changes in the performance style to be somewhat limited include such famous pedagogues and jury members as Andrzej Jasiński and Regina Smendzianka. Yet another point of view is exemplified by Fou Ts'ong, third-place laureate of the 5th Competition. In his opinion, it is very difficult to answer the question of stylistic evolution, if not practically impossible.

Among those who have considered evolution to be natural and inevitable, we should also include Zbigniew Drzewiecki. This eminent Polish pianist, teacher and mentor of several generations of Chopin interpreters and laureates of several editions of the Chopin Competition served as a juror of all the editions from 1927 to 1965, and from 1949 to 1965 as jury chair.

In his important essay from 1956 on the contemporary Polish style of Chopin performance,<sup>12</sup> Drzewiecki described the stylistic changes that he had witnessed in the editions of the Competition held before and after the Second World War. He also voiced his conviction that performance style would continue to evolve. Drzewiecki's description of the Polish style of performing Chopin forms an artistic credo based on the Polish pianistic tradition established by generations of Polish pianists over the first one hundred years after Chopin's death. It also expresses ideas that draw on the aesthetics, philosophy, musicological research and performance practice of the mid twentieth century. In Drzewiecki's words:

The main elements of the 'Polish School' can be described as follows: depending on the performer's individuality and psychological makeup,

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11  
Andrzej Jasiński, excerpt from an interview with Mieczysław Kominek, 20 October 1995, quoted in Niewiarowska et al. (eds), 241.

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12  
Zbigniew Drzewiecki, 'Próba charakterystyki współczesnego polskiego stylu wykonawczego dzieł Fryderyka Chopina' [An attempt to characterise the contemporary Polish style of the performance of the works of Fryderyk Chopin], *Rocznik Chopinowski*, 1 (1956), 254–262.

the approach to the performance of Chopin can range from the constructive, more classical to the more emotional outpouring of temperament and virtuosity. However, each of those approaches must be subordinated to the atmosphere of Chopin's music. That music is always bathed in the light of pure poetry, perfection of form and nobility of expression, free of superficial effects and fake pathos. It always respects the vocal aspect of each phrase, figure and ornament. The element of improvisation need not be rejected, provided that it does not intrude on the musical content and arises out of the mood of the performer. Artistic honesty must be the foundation of everything. [...] Among other interpretive goals of the so-called Polish School are fluidity and the natural use of rubato, which in Chopin infuses every subtle turn and tremor of the emotional and musical line, emphasis on the narrative quality of the music, and careful avoidance of exaggeration.<sup>13</sup>

The influence of Drzewiecki (and of other prominent Polish teachers, since the ideas he expressed were the result of not just his own work and experience) on the interpretation of Chopin was considerable, and extended beyond Poland. For example, pianists and Chopin Competition laureates from outside Poland consulted him, including Fou Ts'ong, who studied with Drzewiecki in Cracow for over a year before the 5th Competition, and Martha Argerich, who visited him on several occasions before the 7th.

Despite Drzewiecki's expressed belief in the evolution of performance style in the future, it is worth considering the possibility that the ideas he expressed with such clarity, force and conviction, and that influenced not only future generations of pianists but also the teachers who would prepare those pianists for the Competition, may have had a conservative effect on the interpretation of Chopin. Along similar lines, it would not be an exaggeration to conclude that the influence of decisions made over the years by juries of the Competition has played a dominant role in determining the possibility and the range of stylistic changes. Which performance style is rewarded and which is rejected is naturally of key importance.

It is logical to assume that the majority of candidates for the Competition to some extent learn from and model their playing on previously accepted, rather than rejected, interpretations. Let us therefore consider the performance style of the majority of First Prize winners of the Competition and, in addition, of several other prominent participants, based on live recordings of their performances at the Competition. We will start in 1955, since that was the year in which audio archives were begun.<sup>14</sup> The most recent Competition – the 17th, held in October 2015 – will not be considered here.

Speaking generally, past winners of the First Prize in the Chopin Competition present a *fundamentally similar* though not identical

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13  
Ibid., p. 60.

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14  
The previously quoted text by Drzewiecki discusses editions of the Competition from 1927 to 1955.

style and level of performance. There are three exceptions: Adam Harasiewicz (5th Competition), Stanislav Bunin (11th Competition) and Yulianna Avdeeva (16th), each outside that norm in his or her own way. Those other prominent participants, among whom I include some of the Second Prize winners when the First Prize was not awarded – and here I also propose to discuss Ivo Pogorelich (eliminated at the 10th Competition) and Nelson Goerner (7th prize winner at the 13th) – share certain elements of style unique to that group of first-prize winners.

It seems that successive juries of the Competition, with the exceptions already noted, have been consistent in rewarding one style and rejecting another. Let us consider specific examples, while keeping in mind that the following discussions are by their very nature (at least to some degree) subjective and express the perceptions and opinions of the author.<sup>15</sup> We should also bear in mind that certain limitations apply when examining recorded performances. The recorded sound may be somewhat different from what the jury experienced in the hall during the performance, partly due to the state of the technology. The following quote gives one example of the issues in question:

[In m]odern recordings of classical music [... o]ne can usually hear the detail very well – often better than in the concert hall – but [...] the dry, clinical approach has mercifully gone out of fashion, and the result [...] is something not unlike the sound from the best possible position in the ideal concert hall. Whether such a position in such a concert hall could ever really exist is another matter. Modern recordings have an impact and clarity that is often an exaggeration of what one hears when sitting in a real hall.<sup>16</sup>

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Example 1

**Chopin: Nocturne in B major, Op. 62 No. 1, performed by Adam Harasiewicz (First Prize, 5th Competition, 1955).**

Certain qualities are clearly evident here: a beautiful, rich tone; phrasing that is narrative in nature and combines the prosody of declamation with a vocal approach to the cantilena; the clarity – but not overdone – of different layers of sound; an improvisatory feeling throughout; and simplicity, nobility and above all a natural air. This performance is not extreme in any way, and harmony and a measured approach dominate. The ideals of the ‘Polish School’ discussed earlier are expressed here in an exemplary manner. However, it is also possible to sense (probably to an even greater degree in other pieces performed by Harasiewicz in the Competition) that the pianism, which is to say the technical polish of the performance, is at a somewhat lower level than the norm established in future editions of the Competition, apart from Yulianna Avdeeva in the 16th Competition.

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The following discussion refers to excerpts of live performances, which can be accessed via the playlist ‘The evolution of performance style...’ on the Chopin Institute’s YouTube channel: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTmn2qD3aSQsDWL\\_FRgD8lqfHCdtfGyoG&disable\\_polymer=true](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTmn2qD3aSQsDWL_FRgD8lqfHCdtfGyoG&disable_polymer=true).

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Robert Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 45.



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 Example 2

**Chopin: Etude in A minor, Op. 25 No. 11, performed by Maurizio Pollini (First Prize, 6th Competition, 1960).**

In terms of pianism, this is a flawless performance, at a level of technical control and command which will become the measure against which pianists are judged in the future. Besides that, there is something new: greater clarity of articulation, which will also become the Competition standard.

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## Example 3

**Chopin: Nocturne in C minor, Op. 48 No. 1, performed by Maurizio Pollini (First Prize, 6th Competition, 1960).**

Most would agree that this is a very noble interpretation, characterised by dignified simplicity and a beautiful sound (less warm than Harasiewicz's, the colour tending more towards steel, but still individual). The emphasis is on structure rather than the improvisatory feel of the narration. But this is not cold playing. All the elements are within the bounds of moderation. Nothing gives the impression of being exaggerated. Even the dynamic scale, broader especially in its upper range than was the case with Harasiewicz, never goes beyond the limits of a pleasing sound and good taste.

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## Example 4

**Chopin: Nocturne in B major, Op. 62 No. 1, performed by Rafał Blechacz (First Prize, 15th Competition, 2005).**

One might recognise in this beautiful performance the attributes that are displayed in the interpretations that I have just discussed of both Pollini and Harasiewicz. The sound is clear and warm, but with a solid core and unvaried colour (that kind of sound is yet another Competition development), a natural approach, simplicity, nobility, technical perfection and particularly clear articulation in the fast passages. The attention paid to the clarity of structure is evident, yet the piece flows naturally. The playing is often quite emotional and dramatic. Most importantly, no single element dominates, giving the impression of a harmonious whole.

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## Example 5

**Chopin: Nocturne in E flat major, Op. 55 No. 2, performed by Ivo Pogorelich (10th Competition, 1980).**

It is interesting to note that Pogorelich brings back the habit, quite common during the nineteenth century, of separating the parts of the left and the right hands. That is, however, only a relatively harmless mannerism. What is more important in this fascinating and original interpretation is the emphasis placed on the intensity of emotion. The predominant feeling is of intimate declamation, conversation and intense meditation: there is no sense of simplicity or nobility, and the phrases are not long. Passion, communicated through a dynamic range so wide that in *fortissimo* the tone is aggressive and no longer beautiful,

with crescendos and diminuendos over very short phrases, is more important to Pogorelich than illuminating the structure of the work. The much slower tempo and the loudness of the last few chords give the impression of pathos, rather at odds with the rest of the piece and even, to put it bluntly, exaggerated.

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Example 6

**Chopin: Ballade in F major, Op. 38, performed by Ivo Pogorelich (10th Competition, 1980).**

In another brilliant, visionary, innovative and inspired (which need not mean 'true to Chopin') interpretation by Pogorelich, of the Second Ballade, Op. 38, the dynamic, agogic and emotional contrasts are even greater than in his performance of the Nocturne Op. 55 No. 2. This comes at the expense of structural balance, quality of sound, technical control, and (occasionally) precision and clarity of texture. The sound is sometimes monumental and perhaps more 'orchestral' than 'pianistic' in nature (so probably more 'Lisztian' than 'Chopinesque'). It is also more aggressive than would be accepted by the tenets of the 'Polish School'.

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Example 7

**Chopin: Polonaise in F sharp minor, Op. 44, performed by Ivo Pogorelich (10th Competition, 1980).**

In yet another fascinating interpretation, of the Polonaise in F sharp minor, Op. 44, there is force rather than strength, a huge, uncontrolled sound and raging temperament. In the ostinato portion of the middle section, the emotion is a match for all the brutalities of the twentieth century; this section is played with an unforgiving, terrifying constancy of rhythm and timing, all within a completely regular, unyielding phrase rhythm.

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Example 8

**Chopin: Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35, mvt I, development, performed by Ivo Pogorelich (10th Competition, 1980).**

In this interpretation, the sound, articulation, tempos and emotion are all extreme, which some might describe as 'vivid' and others as 'grossly exaggerated'. It makes one want to reconsider the key aspects of the Chopin style, namely proportion and balance between the individual parts of the whole, in addition to the matter of good taste.

I have discussed the performance style characteristic of Ivo Pogorelich at the 10th Competition at such length because it seems that in the history of the Competition his performances were of particular import and consequence. Among other things, it was the elimination of Pogorelich from the Competition that sparked a public reaction from Martha Argerich. It pitted her, along with some other members of the jury, against a faction representing a more traditional point of view. Polish music critics, independent of the Competition, took their stance in the artistic dispute and awarded their own prize

to Pogorelich that year. Even though certain aspects of Pogorelich's style were evident in some interpretations in earlier editions of the Competition, they were not present to the same degree.

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Example 9

**Chopin: Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35, mvt I, performed by Maurizio Pollini (First Prize, 6th Competition, 1960).**

It could be said that in his interpretation Pollini reaches the outer limits of the Chopin style. The sound gestures are of tremendous power and emotional directness, and the rubato is kept to an absolute minimum. But Pollini does not cross the boundaries of 'appropriateness' surpassed by Pogorelich, who in a sense paves the way for other outstanding figures of the Competition who failed to win First Prize, such as Alexei Sultanov and Nelson Goerner.

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Example 10

**Chopin: Nocturne in C minor, Op. 48 No. 1, performed by Nelson Goerner (13th Competition, 1995).**

Besides some of the characteristics just mentioned, there is a slight but consistent separation of the left- and right-hand parts.

Among the winners of the First Prize, Martha Argerich (1965), Garrick Ohlsson (1970), Krystian Zimerman (1975), Dang Thai Son (1980) and Rafał Blechacz (2005) demonstrate a style which is closer to the tradition of the 'Polish School' of interpretation, albeit each in his or her own way.

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Example 11

**Chopin: Sonata in B minor, Op. 58, mvt I, performed by Martha Argerich (First Prize, 7th Competition, 1965).**

Here are grand musical gestures, nobility, simplicity and beauty of tone across the entire dynamic range, a narrative character emphasised strongly yet naturally, creating the effect of a song-like declamation. The second theme is broad, full of longing, beautiful in its unadorned simplicity. The drama in this interpretation is not dark: it is positive, painted in bright colours. The return of the second theme in the recapitulation seems transcendental in its life-affirming power. This playing strikes an exceptional balance between emotion, expression, consciously built structure, clarity of communication and overwhelming virtuosity. It is a beautiful example of a natural melding of the classical and romantic elements. It is not surprising that many consider Martha Argerich the greatest laureate in the history of the Chopin Competition.

The next four excerpts are Competition performances of the first movement of the Sonata in B minor, Op. 58.

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Example 12

**Chopin: Sonata in B minor, Op. 58, mvt I, performed by Krystian Zimerman (First Prize, 9th Competition, 1975).**

Example 13

**Chopin: Sonata in B minor, Op. 58, mvt I, performed by Dang Thai Son (First Prize, 10th Competition, 1980).**

Example 14

**Chopin: Sonata in B minor, Op. 58, mvt I, performed by Rafał Blechacz (First Prize, 15th Competition, 2005).**

Example 15

**Chopin: Sonata in B minor, Op. 58, mvt I, performed by Garrick Ohlsson (First Prize, 8th Competition, 1970).**

Listening to these performances without knowing each performer's identity would be an interesting experiment: it would allow one to notice the great similarities in their styles and would invite an attempt at an unbiased identification of each performer's individual characteristics, which is no easy task. The differences between these particular pianists are not quite as striking as those between some of the famous artists of the past. When we compare recordings, not necessarily of Chopin alone, by Horowitz, Rubinstein, Benedetti-Michelangeli, Lipatti, Rachmaninoff and Cortot, for example, we recognise them immediately, if only from the characteristic sonority that each of them cultivated. (The contemporary abandonment of individuality of sound is especially puzzling in the context of what we know about Chopin's own sound at the piano, which was described as unique, one of a kind, unusual and praised for its variety of colours, shades and nuances.)<sup>17</sup> This seems all the more striking when comparing the performances of Argerich, Ohlsson, Zimerman, Dang Thai Son and Blechacz, in each of which there is a unique artistic personality despite which *the essence of the style* remains the same.

In Garrick Ohlsson's performance, there is a broad vision, energy, conviction, muscularity, elasticity of articulation, temperament, pride, simplicity, broad phrasing, artistic honesty and direct communication. The virtuosity is of the highest order (we should note that among this group of pianists it is the *sine qua non*). Ohlsson's interpretation is 'healthy' and filled with immeasurable positive energy, even in the dramatic moments. This quality is not unlike that found in performances by Arthur Rubinstein, whose positive outlook was at the core of his artistic persona.

Rafał Blechacz presents an interpretation which is measured, heroic, lyrical, nostalgic and full of reminiscence. Each phrase seems to have been surrounded by a barely perceptible feeling of sadness, grounded in pure poetry. All the elements of Blechacz's performance blend into a satisfying, harmonious and proportionate whole.

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See Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher as Seen by his Pupils*, tr. Naomi Shohet with Krysia Osostowicz and Roy Howat, ed. Roy Howat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 55–56.

Krystian Zimerman's interpretation is almost an amalgam of the those by Argerich and Ohlsson. The tone is possibly even clearer than Ohlsson's. There is steel in the chords, terrific virtuosity, technical perfection, great *leggiero*, pathos, drama, big passion – but always well controlled – poetry, naturalness, modesty and, above all, joy and spontaneity mixed with youthful élan.

Dang Thai Son conveys dynamism, strength, honesty, great emotion, long and broad phrasing, simplicity, lack of exaggeration and limited but satisfying rubato. His is a noble and epic approach in which pride, poetry, delicacy and a declamatory quality combine into a most harmonious creation.

I consider Zimerman's and Dang Thai Son's interpretations of the return of the second subject in the recapitulation to be particularly moving. Zimerman's is joyous and triumphant, Dang Thai Son's thoughtful, delicate and noble in feeling. One could not ask for better proof that a great artistic personality can find his or her individual, beautiful and utterly convincing expression, yet within the bounds of the style drawn by the composer.

The last five performance excerpts are representative of a strongly unified artistic style. Since they are performances by First Prize Winners, spanning over fifty years in the history of the Competition, it becomes clear that *there is* a style which has been consistently promoted by the juries in many editions of the Competition.<sup>18</sup>

Another question arising out of that unity of style presented by the majority of First Prize Winners is whether the Chopin Competition has finally arrived at a generally well understood, accepted and unified style of playing Chopin, which serves as a 'golden standard' and from which deviation is not allowed.

It certainly is a possibility. However, as mentioned earlier, there are laureates of the First Prize whose performance style does not fit easily into what would otherwise seem to be a quite clear picture of the stylistic preferences of Chopin Competition juries. They are the Russian pianists Stanislav Bunin (11th Competition, 1985) and Yulianna Avdeeva (16th Competition, 2010).

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Example 16

**Chopin: Sonata, Op. 58, mvt III and Prelude in B flat minor, Op. 28 No. 16, performed by Stanislav Bunin (First Prize, 11th Competition, 1985).**

The interpretations of Stanislav Bunin at the Competition defy easy description. Certain qualities of his playing are in agreement with the Chopin interpretive tradition, which I have been discussing in detail. Bunin's performances display great culture, elegance, virtuosity and pianism of the highest order. His interpretation of the Scherzo in E major, Op. 54 does not differ greatly from the Competition interpretations of this piece by Ohlsson or Zimerman, yet it brings a personal perspective, which highlights the elements of humour

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<sup>18</sup> See Andrew Earis and Craig Sapp, The AHRC Research Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music project 'Style, performance, and meaning in Chopin's Mazurkas' [online], [www.mazurka.org.uk/ana/pcor-perf](http://www.mazurka.org.uk/ana/pcor-perf), accessed 29 December 2017.

and light-hearted playfulness in this work. In the middle section, there is calm gravity, and Bunin creates an exceptional mood, free of the expected sadness and retrospection but entirely convincing. In addition, there is an element common to the pianism of the 1980s: a particularly clear articulation, where every note is distinctly heard.

In Bunin's interpretation of the Scherzo, there is seriousness without drama. But in other pieces, Bunin displays a different approach, more representative of the 'Russian School', such as monumentality of sound and construction, heightened emotion, a dose of affectation and sentimentality, all of which might be suited to the works of Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff or Scriabin. In some places, the tone becomes rather unattractive, aggressive, beyond the limits defined by the 'requirements, character and beauty of sound of that instrument for which Chopin composed', to paraphrase Zbigniew Drzewiecki's words.<sup>19</sup> There are certain influences of the contemporary aesthetic, as mentioned earlier: in the third movement of the Sonata in B minor, Op. 58, there is mysticism and darkness, achieved partly through phrasing without any sense of forward motion. It is no longer an approach that 'respects the vocal aspect of each phrase', such an important requirement of the 'Polish School'. Stylistically, it is reminiscent of the world created by Liszt in his Sonata and some of his late works. In Bunin's interpretations of selected Chopin preludes, the climaxes are as violently intense as those that formed the core of Pogorelich's style at the Competition five years earlier. It is difficult to resist the impression that at least in some ways Bunin was influenced by Pogorelich's interpretations from 1980.

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Example 17

**Chopin: Polonaise-Fantasy in A flat major, Op. 61, performed by Yulianna Avdeeva (First Prize, 16th Competition, 2010).**

Yulianna Avdeeva presents a different artistic personality, even though certain aspects of the 'Russian School' are also recognisable. Since the matter of purely pianistic proficiency has already been discussed, let us focus on style. In that respect, Avdeeva's playing departs from the tradition dominating the Chopin Competition after 1945. In a way, it represents a partial return to the aesthetic of the early twentieth century and possibly of the late nineteenth century, and it shares some characteristics with, for example, the style of the 'last great romantic', Vladimir Horowitz. In Avdeeva's interpretations, we sense a big personality and strong emotions expressed in a way that, compared with the contemporary understanding of the Chopin performance style, could be considered mannered and affected. It is characterised by relatively short phrases, frequent emotional shifts and rubato deployed over small fragments. The expressive intensity borders on sentimentality. We also observe some artistic choices that possibly would have seemed unworthy of the seal of approval which, in a sense, the First Prize represented to the juries of previous editions of the Competition. They include the separation

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<sup>19</sup> Drzewiecki, 'Próba', 262.

of the right- and left-hand parts (in the Ballade in F minor, Op. 52), impressionistic sonority and pedalling of the scales, and exaggerated emphasis of secondary melodic lines, which creates a 'forced' impression (in the Nocturne in B major, Op. 62 No. 1). Consider these characteristics in respect of the natural, direct and completely honest expression prized by Chopin.

The jury must have appreciated other aspects of Avdeeva's performances, however: interesting sound, individuality, poetry, drama, frequent darkness of mood (hers is not a superficially happy and sunny Chopin), depth of feeling and a fundamentally emotional rather than coldly intellectual approach.

During the twentieth century, Chopin performance had grown 'healthier', more objective and, thanks to the progress of piano pedagogy, more technically advanced. It became firmly grounded in the latest discoveries and achievements of musicology, based on new Urtext editions and deeper historical knowledge and understanding. At the same time, it also became more globalised, less original, less connected to national 'schools' and thus less recognisable. All of this could also have played a role in the desire of the jury of the 16th Competition to acknowledge and promote the unique temperament and original personality of Yulianna Avdeeva.

Summarising our discussion of performance style at the Chopin Competition, let us ask one key question: is the Chopin Competition in conflict with at least some contemporary trends in interpretation? Occasionally that does seem to be the case, as the Competition, guided by its founding principles, reflects values that are not necessarily current. The evidence and analysis of accepted and rejected interpretations (which can be deduced from the Competition results) leads to the conclusion that the Competition does not primarily concern itself with modern trends, with what is popular, with the fashions of the day and with what speaks to modern audiences. The Competition also does not aspire to reflect or respond to the reality of contemporary life. The demands of the music business, such as the marketability of one style over another (in which novelty often plays a role), also do not seem to preoccupy Competition juries to any great extent.

The performance style that exists outside the world of the Chopin Competition and which is an expression of the sensibilities and aesthetic of our times, obviously connecting well with contemporary listeners, is exemplified by such pianists as Lang Lang and Yuja Wang, who are currently among the most popular artists, regularly appearing in concert halls around the globe. If only taking into consideration these specific examples, we must conclude that any change or evolution of style that may be observed at the Chopin Competition in Warsaw is, by comparison, modest.

Lastly, let us remember when listening to 'original' or 'individual' performances which may not follow the Chopin tradition to the

letter that Chopin the composer, performer and teacher was always breaking new ground in exceptionally original ways. While listening to performances that do follow the tradition that I have attempted to portray, it should be noted that a performance faithful to the ideal and the tradition, if not illuminated from within by the light of a great artistic talent, remains merely correct.

Let us also consider that Chopin was a man of his time but, like any truly great artist, was not bound by it. The unique world of Chopin can be reached only by rising above the constraints of any time period, our own included. It is that timeless world, the realm of that artistic inheritance, which the Chopin Competition seemingly wishes to inhabit. It is that artistic legacy which the Competition – as a community of pianists, jury members, pedagogues, musicologists, critics and audience members, each having their own point of view but ostensibly united by a common mission – apparently wishes to share and enjoy.

This seems to be the legacy that the Competition wants to discover again and again, yet also that it aims to protect.



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**ABSTRACT**

The International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw was inaugurated in 1927, in part out of the desire to promote an authentic performance practice in relation to Chopin's oeuvre. Among the main concerns were the establishment of, and strict adherence to, the original authoritative text and an authentic performance aesthetic. The debate over those issues has been at the heart of the artistic mission of the Competition ever since. As the Chopin Competition indeed exercised immense influence on the performance style of Chopin's music during the twentieth century – an influence that has continued into the twenty-first century – this paper examines the evolution of that style through Competition performances. Has the performance style evolved at all? If so, to what extent? Starting with the 5th Competition, in 1955, the year in which the Competition audio archives were started, the author discusses selected performances by most of the winners of the First Prize. Also discussed are performances by some of the pianists who did not win but whose contributions were important in terms of their influence on Chopin performance practice.

Besides addressing the question of whether the evolution of Chopin performance style is encouraged, discouraged or even possible at a Competition whose main goals include establishing and preserving an authentic performance practice, the paper questions whether that goal can ever be achieved. Also discussed is the place of the Competition in relation to the changes in Chopin performance style in the piano world outside the Warsaw Competition.

In the introduction, the author briefly considers some of the characteristics and challenges of the unique style of Chopin as understood through most recent achievements in musicology, cultural studies, editing, research, performance, piano pedagogy and music criticism. He also describes the main principles of the so-called 'Polish School' of Chopin interpretation and its impact on the development of what is currently the principal way of performing Chopin.

The article is supplemented by an online playlist comprising audio excerpts of some of the discussed performances.

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**KEYWORDS**

Chopin, International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition, performance, music performance, performance style, performance practice, authentic performance, piano competitions, piano recordings, piano performance history, aesthetics, recording arts, recording technology, musicology, piano pedagogy, music criticism

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