

Concert Report

The current report is based on a concert performed at the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest on April 29th, 2017¹. Featuring Cyprien Katsaris, a renowned French pianist known for his masterful technique, improvisation skills, and mannered interpretation of classical pieces, the concert was conducted by Kalman Berkes and conjointly performed by the Gyor Philharmonic Orchestra. A total of seven programs were performed, namely the spontaneous improvisation by Katsaris, Piano Concerto in D major, BWV 1054 by Bach, Piano Concerto No. 21 in C major, K. 467 by Mozart, Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major, S. 125 by Liszt, which was adapted as a solo piano version, Chopin's Nocturne Op. 9, No. 2 in E flat major, Le tombeau de Couperin by Ravel, and lastly, L'Arlésienne by Bizet.

The 1st composition I chose is Chopin's Nocturne Op. 9, No. 2 in E flat major, not only because it is arguably the composition of Chopin that receives the most exposure, but also because of its artistic ingenuity as well as the overall melancholy feeling attached to it. Starting with a docile two-note sequence, the repetitive signature of the composition, the piece then blends in a series of major, minor, and seventh chords, all of which transpired under an unrestrained tempo: *senza tempo*. The *andante in* and of itself creates an all-around solemn and melancholy tonality throughout. Notably, while the majority of the notes are played in *andante* under *senza tempo*, the sporadic and rapid trills and legatos incorporating chromatic scale ultimately help the composition exude a unique feeling, for the phrasing is dynamic and is without the typical restraint posed by *andante*. Perhaps to laymen, it is rather

¹ Cyprien Katsaris, "Cyprien Katsaris Live in Budapest - Bach: Concerto, BWV 1054 & Mozart: Concerto No. 21, K. 467," www.youtube.com, 2014.

difficult to find traces of its time signature-12/8 because of the auditory illusion created by the *senza tempo*. Just after nearly one and a half minutes, it returns to the opening note, followed by a different yet similarly phrased section. This pattern of iterative elaboration of decorative notes repeated several times throughout the composition until it ended about three minutes later, showcasing Chopin's quintessential approach to the composition of his nocturne series, which in this particular case is two distinct sections taking turns and ending with a coda section infused with *cadenza*.

My personal reaction to Nocturne Op. 9, No. 2 has nearly always been an overwhelming sense of calmness. Maybe it is a bit weird to put overwhelming and calmness in the same sentence, but for lack of better terms, it is how I feel. Once the music begins, I am on autopilot, cleansing any negative thoughts within me and delving into a deep reminiscence where I am able to see myself and my past from a bystander's point of view almost devoid of egoistic thinking that may trigger wincing and excitement at times. Besides, I visualize different scenarios during the music. My mental image kind of resembles when someone plays a 1920s black-and-white movie without sounds wherein scenes are constantly changing and undulating due to the high frame rates. In terms of the physical feeling, I find my breathing to slow down while listening. My head and limbs sometimes move along with the notes, especially after I have grown accustomed to the *senza tempo*. I sometimes even lift my hands and visualize playing the piano during the music, which I personally refer to as 'playing the air piano'. Now, although it might be outside the scope of this report, I feel I have to get it off my chest by comparing Nocturne Op. 9, No. 2 with its predecessor: Nocturne Op. 9, No. 1. I first heard No. 2 and thought it was perfect. It was not until I heard

the No. 1 that I realized how much better it is compared to the second composition. Nocturne Op. 9, No. 1 is much more progressive and diverse in terms of its use of musical vocabularies including scales and chords and the variations between each section. No. 2, on the other hand, sort of lacks depth and does not possess the same emotional valence as its predecessor. Nonetheless, the significance of Nocturne Op. 9, No. 2 is not defied.

It is known that Nocturne Op. 9, No. 2 was written in dedication to Marie Pleyel, the wife of Parisian pianist and instructor Camille Pleyel². Pleyels helped Chopin to establish himself as a well-known musician in Paris, including providing him with pianos manufactured by their company. Aside from this, little is known about the context in which the composition was produced. It may be safe to argue that the composition bears no significant sociocultural value but is a purely musical creation done with the intention to experiment with musical elements and have it heard as a simple auditory message because past research studies have largely focused on analyzing the ornamental notes and compositional structure of the piece instead of its context³⁴.

The 2nd composition I selected is Le tombeau de Couperin. The prelude strikes as playful with the fast melody of the oboe. The fast notes continue until the sound of the harp rains down and signals the start of the next movement, which starts with a totally different hue with the atonal melodies of the oboe, flute, and violin. In the second movement, there is

² Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, "Chopin and Pleyel," *Early Music* XXIX, no. 3 (August 2001): 389–98.

³ Jacob Gran, "Ornamental and Motivic Integration in Chopin's Op. 9 Nocturnes," *Indiana Theory Review* 34, no. 1-2 (2017): 23.

⁴ Nathalie Herold, "Timbre, Melody and Spacing in Chopin's Nocturne, Op. 9, No. 2: From Modeling to Performance," *A Journal of Investigation into Global Musical Possibilities*, January 2014, 3–6.

an interlude in which various wind instruments have a back-and-forth conversation with similarly phrased melodies. The third and the fourth movement also differ drastically. However, one thing observed across all four movements is the interlude of instruments ‘conversing’ back and forth as well as the fugue of three voices.

I personally feel like riding a roller coaster listening to this piece. Every time I feel I am getting into a strong and clear emotional state, the corresponding melody and rhythm that are doing the work just stop, changing direction. I certainly appreciate its complexity and the level of musical appreciation required to really enjoy it. It is magnificent and progressive in terms of its composition structure and use of musical elements. Moreover, I can see how Ravel approached composing this piece with a mindset that is programmatic and reflects his leaning toward complexity and story-telling as opposed to mere musicality as in Chopin’s Nocturne Op. 9, No. 2.

As stated, I thought the essence of the piece lies in story-telling, as evidenced by its composition of four movements and the complex use of musical elements. It turns out to be true, as past research evidence indicates that each movement is dedicated to a different person, whom Ravel was close to and lost during the war and over his lifetime⁵.

My overall experience of watching and listening to this concert has been outstanding. I was never extremely fond of classical music, but sitting behind the screen and watching European audiences being able to transition from excited rhythmic clapping to absolute stillness in a matter of seconds, I feel as though there is something about classical music and

⁵ Hope Strayer, “From Neumes to Notes: The Evolution of Music Notation,” *Musical Offerings* 4, no. 1 (2013): 1–14.

its concert that warrants respect. I am definitely looking forward to immersing myself in classical music.

Dr. P. Vessava

Works Cited

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