



Chopin & The Poet @ La Soiree

Piano (Benny Hui, piano) and Poetry Recital (David Tait, poetry)

Reviewed by Charlotte Starkey September 2010

This was a wonderful evening in a beautiful setting, the Unitarian Church on Cross Street, Manchester, to mark the bicentenary of Chopin's birth. A varied selection of Chopin's piano music, played with great deftness of touch and variety of mood by Benny Hui, was juxtaposed with poems by David Tait in which aspects of Chopin's life provided a main theme. The combination of some of Chopin's piano music and the poetry of David Tait was an exciting and new way of inviting an audience to celebrate the anniversary— and in a setting that truly suggested the atmosphere of a salon where, of course, Chopin himself was most at home when performing his music (he hated performing in public to large audiences, apparently, considering his music more suited to the salon atmosphere - and he suffered from nerves before performing).

The music chosen was composed between 1835 and 1843 – important years in Chopin's life. He had then moved to Paris where he met many well-known composers of the day and played in many salons. During this time he met and fell in love with Maria Wodzinski; but it was to be a love that remained unfulfilled and the sense of loss that is connected to a number of events in Chopin's biography recurred in many of the cadences in Benny Hui's playing. In 1836 Chopin met the no doubt daunting George Sand (Baroness Dudevant) – he had major problems with her at first but that did not cool her interest in him (David Tait's "George Sand" vividly caught images that persist of the complexity of their relationship). By 1838 they were an 'item' among their circle of acquaintances but Chopin's health was not good. They moved to Valldemossa on Mallorca in late 1838 for his health (beautifully evoked and sensitively discussed in David Tait's poem "Death in Mallorca" – Chopin bitterly complained that the doctors had all but given him up for dead there) and he had many problems renting what George Sand considered a rickety upright piano on which to practise and compose). Ill-health struck again and he and George Sands moved at least three times from January to October 1839. Finally late in 1839 Chopin, now in Paris again, was able to find some calm in order to compose at the piano. The years immediately following were productive before illness struck again (Chopin suffered greatly from

lung complaints) and, as the poem “Funeral” suggested – read after Benny Hui had played Scherzo, No 2, Op. 31 – even after death it was to be a long time before Chopin finally ‘came to rest’.



The modern voice of a contemporary poet of promise set alongside the romantic intensity of Chopin’s nineteenth century piano work enabled the audience to experience an event which was musically intense, often elegiac and humorous by turns; and the sense of a musical world living on – Chopin’s world – is powerfully captured in Tait’s “love chord” – very short, but resonant with the suggestion of the ‘heart’ of Chopin (his music?) ‘skimming ...like a discus towards you’ ... striking images that we are left to ponder in ways recalling the ambiguities in Chopin’s own music (his own heart survived the bombing of Warsaw in 1944 with various reports as to who saved it).

Benny Hui has a fluent and enthusiastic approach to the piano and engaged the audience from the start. His choice of music included Chopin’s Etudes Op.10 (3 & 12 – 1835/6), three Nocturnes Op. 48, No. 1 (1841); 27, no. 1 (1835); 55, no. 1 (1843) and other works included the famous Polonaise, Op.40 no. 1 (1838), the Scherzo No 2, Op. 31 (1837) and, finally, the Allegro de Concert Op. 46 (1841) The opening Etudes Op 10, no.3 was beautifully played, fluent, gentle, evocative and setting a standard of accomplishment that was sustained throughout the evening with the majestic Nocturne Op. 48 no. 1 – some lovely touches in the right hand here with disturbing rhythms and melodies powerfully conveyed in the central sections. That was followed by the beautiful cadences of Ballade no. 1 in G Minor (Op.23) after the dramatic opening – delicate and deft playing – a stunning performance. Benny Hui’s ability to control the runs up and down the keyboard and to pace the music was much in evidence. He captured the

‘conversations’ that left and right hands so often hold with each other in Chopin’s music.



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David Tait’s poetry has a rich contrasting force – lyrical, careful, rhythmic – and this was borne out powerfully in his ‘Death in Mallorca’ following the powerful resonances of the Nocturne (Op. 48, no. 1).. We heard images conjured of a child protégé from Poland facing the angst he was to bear throughout his life: eventually he was to become a French national. The suggested cruelty of Chopin’s relationship with George Sand is cleverly evoked in the image of ‘her Little Chopin’ (poem called “George Sand” – which, incidentally, punctuated the playing of one of the early pieces – Fantaisie-Impromptu Op. posth. 66 (1835) – although it is possible to sense in the powerful beauty of the music an inner strength within his quiet that perhaps those around him mistook for weakness.

David Tait's poetry is a good example of how a theme (Chopin's life and music) can inspire a thread of poetry through lyrical, humorous, dark and sometimes disturbing issues whilst suggesting a philosophical detachment to let the listener/reader draw individual conclusions. There is something definitely Elizabethan in these lyrics but that's another review. In the end we were left with the beauty of the music that still inspires both new art and the appreciation of those who will always come to listen and find anew the beauty of Chopin's compositions.

Altogether, the intertwining of Chopin's music and the spoken work worked wonderfully, and David delivery of moody and paced poems dovetailed delightfully with Benny's injection of mood and rhythm to the music. This was a very enjoyable and inspiring evening and both the performers and organisers of the La Soiree series are to be congratulated on making it so. If you haven't been to one of these events yet, then you really are missing out on something very special indeed.

A review by Yvonne Cawley of the first performance in this La Soiree Concert Series can be read by clicking on this [Diaspora](#) link.