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Roving Reviewer:

## Chopin et Son Temps à Lausanne

by Christopher Greenleaf

Some few years back, Suisse-Romande pianist Pierre Goy set about crafting an international setting for a spirited exchange of ideas, informed opinions, and in-depth information touching on music for and with keyboards. Each even year since 2002, his *Rencontres harmoniques* have conferred total immersion in the theme at hand on performers, professionals in the field, and a growing public. This being the big Chopin year of our era, M. Goy assembled an astutely chosen firmament of specialists at the International Colloquy in Lausanne from Thursday through Sunday, September 9 to 13. They shared their thoughts on the interpretation and parsing of the composer's musical milieu and cast light from many vantage points on the instruments, original scores, living performance heritage, and original *paysage sonore* — the very soundscape — germane to Parisian music between the just-post-Napoleonic age and the rich dawning of the Deuxième Empire.

The site for most of this early-September gathering was the lovely and pleasingly stylish interior of Lausanne's Conservatoire de Musique. Without the firing off of authentic performance rockets and the hoisting of banners to announce pure early-music probity, all present simply assumed, with cosmopolitan and welcome maturity, that the subject was Chopin and his contemporaries as conjecturally heard in their time, *et voilà*.

Grands by the three major Parisian builders of Chopin's day. L-R: an 1842 Pape, an 1839 Pleyel, and an 1850 Erard (Christopher Greenleaf photo)

The dialing-in started from this rather sophisticated place, and so no one bothered to waste energy asserting the validity of what was, to those who came, self-evident. Modern pianos thus did not figure on stage, as their advent postdated the focal era by more than a generation. We heard the models of Pleyel and Erard grands known to have been favored by Chopin, and we had the great privilege of encountering rare and unusual music on some striking square grands — *carrés* — from the same makers.

The presence of celebrated modern makers who build carefully researched and musically satisfying copies of historic keyboard instruments was among the prime attractions of this *Rencontre*, as it has been in the four previous colloquies on the steep north shore of Lac Léman/Lake Geneva. In haring about North America and all over Europe to attend and sometimes collaborate in festivals and symposia over two and some decades, I have never

yet encountered as high a standard of technical polish as we experienced from all of the many pianos we milled, critical attendees heard in Lausanne. Hats off to M. Goy for setting the standards, and heartfelt thanks to the Swiss, French, German, Czech, and American builders who swarmed around the pianos to bring them to such an unheard-of level of tuning and voicing. Hearteningly, two of the performers demanded acclaim for the staunch and semperternally anonymous tuners. This was provided, as a grinning British colleague quipped, “with bells on..

The playing in the concerts was on a uniformly high level, as was the choice of repertoire to illustrate and bring to life Chopin and his time. The opening pair of concerts, back-to-back in the Grande Salle du Conservatoire, recreated the enormously long first Chopin program in Paris, on February 25, 1832. A lovely, just-restored 1839 Pleyel held the place of honor. Perhaps in uneasy emulation of the at times notoriously under-ventilated salons of mid-19th-century Paris, the temperature and humidity were unfortunately high enough to sap already tired travelers from four continents of what energy they had left.

‘Twas a long, blessedly worthwhile evening! A Beethoven string quintet (not the official one, but a contemporary diminution of forces for the Septet, op. 20), chamber reductions of arias by Meyerbeer, Donizetti, Bellini, and Rossini, chamber versions of movements from Chopin’s e-minor concerto, Op. 11, and his *Grandes variations brillantes*, Op. 2, on *La ci darem*. Fine German Lieder pianist Sonja Lohmüller somehow managed to infuse the dreadfully clunky aria accompaniments with interest. Pierre Goy, in his one substantial presence on stage during the *Rencontres*, acquitted himself ably in the concerto movements. One of the eminent names of French music today, Alain Planès, held forth in an almost entirely unknown Introduction, Grande Marche et Grande Polonaise by Friedrich (or Frédéric) Kalkbrenner, with string quintet accompaniment, and the Chopin Mozart variations. Just how, you ask — at least, I hope you wonder about this — does a man whose numerous recordings stem largely from sessions with modern grands go about adjusting his technical and artistic æsthetic so as to do justice to a 171-year-old “ancestor piano”? In a word, brilliantly. Mid-19th-century instruments are responsive and timbrally multihued in ways to which we’re no longer accustomed. These pianos are capable of an astonishing dynamic range: absolutely gossamer *pppp* textures and a powerful but memorably clean roar when called upon to provide one. M. Planès simply assumed that all that was on tap within the 1839 Pleyel and called it forth, with especially lovely results in combination with the accompanying string instruments.

Alain Planès’ solo recital the following evening, in the other *Rencontres* venue, the Salle Paderewski in the nearby Casino de Montbenon, was on the same Pleyel grand. He delved into fairly unfamiliar works, as well some of the famous ones, and managed to evoke a great deal of the *paysage sonore* around which this colloquy was centered. A moment of sorcery, in which we were bathed in the evanescent, quiet treble of the instrument and its warm, imposing bass, enwrapped the two central Nocturnes of the evening, Op. 9, No. 2 in Eb, and Op. 27, No. 2 in Db. The celebrated “Aéoline” étude accounted for a good many sighs and murmurs, too, as M. Planès drew painterly, deft swathes of sound from an instrument that, for all its horsepower in grander passages, appeared most at home when asked to sidle off in fey, mystic directions.

Among the impressive events during *Chopin et son temps* was a mid-day demo-cum-recital by glowing pianist Jean-Jacques Dünki, who is on the faculty of the Musik-Akademie der Stadt Basel. He titled his program “The Three Great Parisian Piano Makers.” Arrayed on stage were a substantial 1842 grand by “the other” Parisian maker of the day, Pape, and standard, modest grands by Pleyel (the familiar 1839 instrument) and Erard (1850, verging on modern). As was the peculiar though consistent custom of the *Rencontres* stage set-up, all instruments were arrayed with their tails upstage, away from the audience; as you may imagine, this occasioned interesting seating gyrations by those members of the audience, myself among them, who prefer the more balanced sound of the full instrument, which one would normally hear by being right of center. The arrangement was a visual success, however, and one at least heard all three pianos in reasonably equal balance. M. Dünki entertained his largely francophone listenership with amusingly delivered period quotes and with repertoire drawn primarily from Viennese and Central German composers, always filtered through the highly distinctive Parisian pianistic soundscape. Rarely do members of an audience have the benefit of so eloquent, engaging, and informative a guide in erring down unexplored byways, in our present terms, that were once the stuff of mainstream concert life. Jean-Jacques Dünki, an irrepressible teacher and musical co-conspirator, returned to his post-concert stage in shirtsleeves to trot out further unusual and intellectually challenging scores to illustrate not only the striking differences to be discerned among the pianos, but also to quietly underscore their common French national characteristics of clarity, transparency, and finely judged note attack.