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September 19, 2010

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 milling, 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 aesthetic 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, enveloped 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 Düнки, 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. Düнки 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 Düнки, 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.

The other solo recital that, for a good many who were present, completely redefined perceptions of Chopin's long-gone age was given by fine Munich pianist Christine Schornsheim. As did M. Düнки, Mlle. Schornsheim turned to three extravagantly different instruments to afford her program a degree of tonal and dynamic variety unheard of in conventional concerts. She drew our gaze, once again, to the message the *Rencontres* programs broadcast to all participants: "Ears wide open, eyes ditto. And again!" The music for this concert, played without commentary from Mlle. Schornsheim, was an arresting panoply of scores that have vanished from our modern awareness. Ferdinand Hérold (1791-1833) contributed three of six movements in his 1811 Sonata in A, Op. 3, No. 1, heard in ravishing detail on an 1801 Parisian Erard *carré*. On the same fragile, plangent instrument, we heard six German-influenced Caprices, Op. 2 (1816) by Alexandre Pierre Fr. Boëly (1785-1858). Moving three decades into the 19th century, and therefore firmly into the Romantic mould, was the warm, sweetly powerful voice of an 1835 Pleyel *carré*, the outstanding instrumental star of the evening, with an Air écossais varié in Bb (1810) by once-quite-influential Georges Onslow (1784-1853), some of whose wind music is known in North America. Unusual on many levels was the performance of the concluding work in the formal program, Boëly's Sonata in c, Op. 1, No. 1 (1810). The 1802 Broadwood grand Mlle. Schornsheim played was tuned in a strong temperament that lent vim and character to the remoter reaches of the score (again, three of six movements in a longer work), and that also pointed out the sheer splendor of this very poetic musician's technique at the keyboard. She is among the subtlest and most effective users of period pedal techniques you'll find on either side of the Atlantic, and I pray fervently that her brilliantly detailed, always elegant touch will soon become familiar in American cities. Her encore, a zippy and eccentric Scherzo from another Boëly sonata, rounded out a diverting and informative evening. In best *Rencontres* style, a number of her colleagues whizzed backstage to a) congratulate her on a remarkable accomplishment in this program; b) call her seriously to task for interpretive choices "which I'd have gone at markedly differently, you know!"; and c) see about obtaining some of those rare scores.

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The language at the *Rencontres harmoniques* is, of course, French. In the Suisse Romande, one hears "huitante" in counting, rather than the French "quatre-vingts", which brings about the gritting of linguistically orthodox Parisian molars. One hears the full gamut of German and sprinklings of Ticino (Swiss) Italian, leavened by all the accents of the Boot. The English in the halls wanders between mild Edinburgh burrs and Oxbridge flutings to the down-home tones of us visiting Americans. The lectures — *les colloques* — tend to be given *en français*, though a few given by anglophones are in English. Questions are in any of the main languages, answers either in the same or in French. The spirit throughout is of conviviality and exploration.

A few *colloque* titles will give you an idea of the range of subjects explored. "Chopin, or the work in progress, from improvisation to teaching"; "Late style, last style"; "The piano works of Frédéric Kalkbrenner and his connection with Chopin"; "The English & Viennese Schools and their Instruments"; "Transmission and Tradition in the Interpretation of Chopin, 1 & 2"; "Chopin's Pianos Once and Now"; and "Affect in Action: Hammer Design in French Romantic Pianos." The presentations were stimulating, well attended, and lively in their at-times feisty Q&As. The *Rencontres* public were numerous enough to fill the concerts and keep the Conservatoire's popular rooftop Café Mozart hopping. (I've never been in a European music school without a decent, heavily patronized café inside or at least within fiddle toss.) But there were always times when one could slip into the *sous-sol* exhibition of instruments and first

editions and have the room to one's self, or when it was possible to slide into an extended and nearly uninterrupted conversation with one of the nine keyboard instrument makers in their individual studios. Some of the makers, notably Christopher Clarke (Burgundy, FR), Paul McNulty (Czech Republic), and Gérald Cattin (Jura, FR), have a degree of presence in the US, mostly through their late-18th- and early-19th-century copies. Many attendees had looked forward to the ever-stimulating presence of noted builder Chris Maene (Ruislede, BE), but he ultimately could not come to Lausanne.

An extraordinarily effective and hard-working team supported Pierre Goy, founder and director of *Rencontres harmoniques*, in keeping the dense, complex schedule over four days from imploding. This is no mean feat, as both tuners and performers required extended access to around a dozen period pianos and a few modern copies outside of the demonstrations and the ten full-length concerts. The few delays were short in duration, and the universally patient attendees often expressed their appreciation for the remarkable state of tuning and voicing of so many veteran instruments of *grand kilométrage*. The *Rencontres harmoniques* will gather again in Lausanne in 2012. See what's coming [here](#).

For prospective travelers: Prices in Switzerland range from numbingly expensive to bold robbery, as exemplified by the price of single CDs — CHF 36. A Swiss franc is close to \$1; you get the picture.

Veteran recording engineer Christopher Greenleaf collaborates with chamber, early, and keyboard musicians in natural acoustic venues on both sides of the Atlantic. He is active as a writer, translator, photographer, and acoustic consultant for music spaces.