

## INTERVIEW



### András Schiff, Pianist

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## ‘... one loses an ear for subtle sounds’

*András Schiff, born in Budapest in 1953, is one of the most important pianists of our time. He gives solo performances in all the great music cities of the world, he appears with the most renowned orchestras, often in the double role of soloist and conductor. In a short time, Schiff has acquired through hard work an immense repertoire, in which the works of Bach, Mozart, and Schubert form the focal point. “Good music makes people better,” he says. The following interview appeared in *Ibykus*, the quarterly journal of the German Schiller Institute and sister-publication of *Fidelio*, in the third quarter 1999, and is published with permission.*

*András Schiff, let’s discuss your beginnings.*

My childhood was very happy.

*You began piano lessons at five?*

At that time I was very naughty, and the piano was supposed to tame me. I was no infant prodigy, but rather I played quite normally, half an hour on the piano and much more soccer, and both became great friends of mine. Of course, there was a musicality; my

mother had been a singer, I sang before I spoke.

*And when did you know that there was a pianist in you?*

At 11 or 12 years, it was clear that if I wanted to do it in earnest, for life, that a half-hour per day would not suffice. But nobody told me this, I discovered it myself. I’m very grateful to my mother for this (my father having died very young)—she never forced me.

*What was your first public performance?*

There were frequent small performances, and on television, which I don’t exactly remember. I’m no exhibitionist, but I have always felt good before the public. That’s still true today, I play much better before the public. You discover something, and then want to share it with others: “Look at this, how beautiful!”

*How do you practice? Finger exercises and so forth?*

Never. I hate that, it is unworthy of human beings. I always play some Bach

first, which moves my fingers, the muscles, everything, and it satisfies me emotionally and intellectually. I would never engage in an artistic activity that was detached from the spiritual. That would be a betrayal.

*Is bad music damaging?*

I react very negatively to a lot of music. As a child, my mother gave me an opera subscription as a gift, which included a Mozart series and a Wagner series. With the Mozart, I was in seventh heaven, with Wagner, I had from time to time to be carried home in the intermission, I was physically done in. God knows, brilliant music, but I hear the character in the sounds. A disgusting man, who is at the same time a wonderful artist—that is nothing to me. The music of Richard Strauss also irritates me very much. It is well written, but I find it so placard-like and superfluous for the present, truly antique. I don’t want to hear it any more.

*And contemporary music?*

Jazz is very good. With pop there is certainly good music, but is it great? So much is done today with volume, one loses the ear for subtle sounds. In general, our time is prosaic, on the whole not poetic, and not heroic. Nothing can move us, much is sentimentality. One wants to make art for the millions, at any price, and the result is bad art: the three tenors. In addition, good artists today go into “crossover,” they play on Broadway, or tango. I love tango, but

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most pure, and so, its beauty can lead humans in the right direction. While magical, it is not *The Magic Flute*.

### Charming, Not Transfigurative

The music in *The Philosopher's Stone* is almost always charming, and occasionally poignant. Mozart's collaborators certainly benefitted from working with him, but they must also be given credit for whatever they brought to the task. When Schack introduces the bird who will sing to the most pure virgin, and four maidens get into a squabble over who will prove most pure, one is convinced that this is a case where Mozart was visiting Schack, and waiting for him to dress while he added to Schack's composition. (Surely, when the audience for *The Magic Flute* heard, in the opening scene, the three maidens quarrel over the handsome Tamino, they would have remembered the squabbling four maidens from the previous season.) Schack's following chorus is handled most effectively—where, just after Astromonte's Genie has instructed the people to pursue virtue ("Tugend"), the beneficent power of the god Astromonte is celebrated, and, in particular, the crowd revels in knowing that the ways of the god can be discerned by happily watching his messenger springing upwards, and soaring round the Sun. But hinting that humans can begin learning the ways of divinity by observing the heavenly motions, is the closest *The Philosopher's Stone* gets to what Mozart accomplishes in *The Magic Flute*.

Henneberg's aria for the heroine, Nadine ("A maiden who prates of love, And dares not all for her beloved, Never feels in her heart what she says, Her inmost feelings remain as cold as ice . . .") is handled tenderly, and also effectively; but the role lacks the sublimity of Mozart's Pamina. In response to Nadine, Schack's aria for the hero, Nadir, is quite heartfelt, and approaches some of Tamino's responses to Pamina. And Franz Xaver Gerl shows himself in the same league as the others with his aria for the hero, Nadir, in his plea to the gods for his Nadine. And what of Schikaneder's compositional skills? His aria for the heroine, Nadine ("My one

and only . . ."), even though a simple lament, uses the oboe and harp most sensitively. Especially noteworthy, is Schack's ominous, clanging chorus of the eight spirits of hell, as they forge a sword of death and revenge. (Here, the Papageno-figure, Lubano, upon hearing this unholy chorus from Hell, delivers the comic aside to the audience, "What a charming concert"! ) As Schack's techniques sound hauntingly similar to passages from Mozart's *Requiem*, one is tempted again to ascribe this either to some direct collaboration with Mozart on this chorus, or at least, to happy inspiration from collaborative work.

Even the "unattributed" composer of the precious march of "Lilliputians" deserves praise. (The reference to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is explicit, with a shipwreck, and the reference to "the land of Lilliput!"—"das Lillibutische Land!") Coming right before Mozart's first identified contribution (the cat duet), it is more than tempting to attribute this delightful pastry of a march to Mozart himself—along with the (also unattributed) powerful aria of revenge that follows his duet.

However, despite many such passages that pleasantly surprised this reviewer (having been skeptical when I heard of this group effort), there is no transfigurative moment in *The Philosopher's Stone*. Instead, there is much joy at the fortunate turn of events. While the two texts, both drawn from Wieland, may be very similar, epistemologically, Mozart transformed the flute-bird of *The Philosopher's Stone*, using his own worked-out, scientific "magic," to craft the flute of *The Magic Flute*. Buch, Pearlman, and the Boston Baroque have provided a happiness, if only for putting into fresh relief the unique gift Mozart gave us. When you sing happy birthday for Mozart every January 27, forget the silly ditty, and sing it the way Wolfgang Amadeus would enjoy it: Hear Mozart and friends working together in *The Philosopher's Stone*, then hear *The Magic Flute* for the first time all over again, and you'll know the happiness of Mozart's having been born. And your choice of song and toast for the occasion will probably also work out most happily.

—David M. Shavin

## Andr as Schiff

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why must I now hear Piazzolla from classical artists, or Mozart from Keith Jarrett? Why do these people think that they can do everything?

*How do you choose what you will occupy yourself with?*

As interpreter, it is my task to mediate between the composers and the public, so I dare not be in the limelight; but, I don't want to be retiring either. I must therefore carefully consider for which works I have a natural affinity. And, in order to discover them, I must be very alone, although solitude doesn't particularly please me.

*What pleases you then so about Mozart?*

Mozart is such a wonder, and, to interpret, the most difficult there is. I'm almost fearful before him. If one does too much, he revolts at once, and one becomes an idiot.

*How do you approach a new work?*

If it is a world premiere, I must be very open. I first only *read* the notes. I approach the instrument very slowly. With a well-known work, there is of course the burden of tradition. How was it interpreted by others? How does it compare with other works by the same composer, with composers and art of the time, and so forth, that never ceases. What also inspires me are the handwritten notes. Bach, for example, wrote such beautiful waves. Thus also is his music—it streams.

*Are there works which you would play differently today than earlier?*

Time works constantly. A Beethoven sonata after a year, there are only the notes there, it is not yet music. And there are works which one can hardly grasp as a younger man. For the late Beethoven sonatas, I waited until at least age 50.

*Then you enjoy becoming older?*

Yes, very much.

*This dialogue was conducted by Ursula von Arx. We publish the interview with the friendly permission of NZZ FOLIO.*