

— INTERVIEW —

‘The beauty of Bach is the freedom he gives us . . .’

Andr as Schiff, Pianist

Andr as Schiff gave a piano recital in Hamburg, Germany, on April 25, 2001, which aroused such a storm of enthusiasm in the audience that, following the artist’s content-rich, as well as extraordinarily technically demanding, concert, three encores were called for. Schiff had deliberately provoked his audience with the program: Bach’s art of composition ran through the entire concert like a “red thread.” The principles of Classical composition could be heard clearly, not only from Beethoven and Schumann (of course), but in the “modern” works by Jan a ek and Bart ok (both of whom were composing at the beginning of the last century). And, Schiff manifests this self-same courage—to use deliberate intellectual challenges to surprise and to educate his audience—even beyond the concert hall.

For example, his fight against the absurdly high “Karajan-tuning,” which he broadened with a new battle on the sidelines of the last Salzburg Festival. Because of his invitation, members of the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics (both of which orchestras play at an extremely high pitch, even above A=445 Hz), as well as opera singers, and even conductors, discussed Schiff’s proposal, “to at least agree on 440 Hz as a least common denominator.” Immediately, Hildegard Behrens, representing the interest of singers, argued for

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Schiff’s proposal; given that, certainly none of the participants were startled when, after some hesitation, the Berlin, as well as the Vienna Philharmonic musicians, supported the proposal. Yet, even this small consensus was not possible, because, unfortunately, the influential conductor Pierre Boulez buried the discussion, with nothing resulting at the end.

*On the day after the Hamburg concert, Ortrun and Hartmut Cramer had an opportunity to conduct an extensive conversation with the pianist. This interview appeared originally in the Third Quarter 2001 issue of *Ibykus*, the German-language sister publication of *Fidelio*.*



Manfred Thomas

Fidelio: We were very inspired by your concert last evening, and it can serve as a good starting point for our conversation. Above all, we noticed, of course—and that fits well into a discussion about the music of Johann Sebastian Bach—that you began with an early piece by

Bach—“Capriccio  ber die Abreise des geliebten Bruders” [“Capriccio on the Departure of a Beloved Brother”], and then covered a very large musical timespan, up to Jan a ek and Bart ok, and then, interestingly, ended ultimately with Bach again, as an encore. Natural-

ly, that prompts the question: What value do you place on Bach’s music?

Andr as Schiff: Of course, “framing” with Bach was no accident—I wanted to close the circle. And Bach’s value? That’s not easy to put into words. Bach’s music is very important for me; it is the most important for my life. The entire music literature following Bach—all music intrigues and interests me, and everything I treasure in music comes from Bach. If a composer has no relationship to Bach, then, it doesn’t really interest me at all. Bach is an entire musical, yet human, worldview. Here, the music must be spiritual, not physical. It can make me happy, and sustain me, but it is much more. It is the *content* of Bach’s music that intrigues me so.

Above all, Bach’s lack of egotism—the incredible devotion and modesty.

With Bach, we don't have the "image of genius" that certainly so strongly characterizes Mozart. But, people must be very clear about Bach's enormous gift, his uniqueness. For me, Bach is a very religious man, in the best sense of the word: a man who considers the composing of music as a mission, as a duty. The quality that comes forth in his work is truly astounding; he writes his compositions day-in and day-out, and yet, they don't seem labored. Bach's music radiates this purity: purity in the polyphony, as well as clarity and transparency of the entire composition, whereby each voice, each note is important. In Bach, nothing is subordinate.

This is otherwise an aesthetical principle in art for me. I'm mainly thinking here about economy—that one not write as many notes as possible. In this respect, composers such as Liszt and Berlioz fail completely: because, first of all, they have nothing to do with Bach; and second, they lack the modesty, as well as the economy and discipline. I could remove half of a gloss by Liszt and the piece wouldn't suffer. You can't remove one note from a Bach fugue!

Bach's music is the most important for my life. Bach is an entire musical, yet human, worldview. The music must be spiritual, not physical. It is the *content* of Bach's music that intrigues me so.

Fidelio: You said something very important at the beginning: That all great composers arise out of Bach, that you hear him poking out from inside the music, since among other things, you consciously work out the reference to Bach. Even in the Janáček and Bartók—as well as the Beethoven and Schumann—Bach was heard inside the music.

Schiff: That's natural, since I'm very influenced by Bach, and haven't played, and don't play, any other composer as frequently as Bach. I do it every day. I play other composers very frequently, too—some also every day,

some not. But I play Bach every day.

Fidelio: So, you do exactly what Pablo Casals did? He played Bach every day, too.

Schiff: Yes, I've indirectly learned, or ascribe that to Casals. To be sure, you have to have an urge for it, too. A spiritual, but above all an intellectual—yes, even a physical urge. I do it instead of pianistic exercises and scales, which bore me to death.

Fidelio: Bach thought so too.

Schiff: Surely. I'm very much against it, when people drum into a young musician's head, to play études. Most young musicians exercise incorrectly, and stupidly—and hence, lose a lot of time. Moreover, it's not efficient when people sit for ten to twelve hours at an instrument. That must not be, and is lost time. If you work daily, say, three, four hours, very concentrated and intelligently, then people achieve much more! Never permit a person to exercise mechanically! Mechanization of music-making is unworthy of human beings! When you walk through the corridors of music schools, you very

often hear how people will play a passage taken from a piano piece mechanically, fifty times in succession, rapidly and loudly. It's frightful to witness how idiotically people practice.

Fidelio: How did you handle that in your development? Did the study of Bach's music play a very great role?

Schiff: Yes, its influence was very great. In Hungary, I had the good fortune to get a very good education; but concerning Bach, studying with George Malcolm—which happened entirely fortuitously—had the greatest influence on me. Because, the art of fostering Baroque music and style did not generally exist in Hungary then. Of course, Bach was part of our study—that's the case everywhere; but in almost every music school in the world, one is taught, today, just as one was a hundred years

ago. Almost nothing has changed there. And that's bad, because it has petrified a bit. Even in Hungary it was so, even though I had great teachers there, especially György Kurtág.

From Kurtág, and my other teachers Pál Kadosa and Professor Ferenc Rados, I learned a great deal about Bach, too. I benefitted as well from the fact that Kadosa and Kurtág were, first of all, composers. My development was shaped more by composers, than by pianists. That's why I have—even though, unfortunately, I'm no composer, for this I have no talent—an "antenna" to think musically as a composer. At least, that's my goal.

Next to Bach, I have occupied myself very intensively with Bartók, and have even studied his recordings as a pianist. I know them very well, and esteem them very much.

Fidelio: Do you mean, the recordings that Bartók made as a pianist?

Schiff: Yes. Indeed, whether Bartók was playing his own music, or playing piano works of Bach, Beethoven, or Chopin—and thank God these documents provide it—there is simply a much more elevated kind of music-making, than that which "interpreters-only" do. It's difficult to explain why that is so, but composers "see behind the notes"—they recognize the coherence, the structure.

To a certain extent, a composition is a primeval forest; one can easily go astray. An interpreter is the equivalent of a scout, but they don't all know the way! Another comparison would be to a mountain guide, with whom one makes the grand tour of the Himalayas. A composer knows how to get through in a case like this; it's incredible, but because of this knowledge, he is able to realize tremendous freedom.

To perform music like that, would be my chief aim; and that has everything to do with Bach.

Fidelio: Did Béla Bartók hold Bach's music in high esteem, too?

Schiff: Above everything else! It's especially interesting, because Bartók was, of course, a Twentieth-century Classical master—although it shouldn't be for-

gotten that his roots still lay strongly in the Nineteenth century. He was born during the time of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, and for a while Liszt was his ideal. Among others, he studied with Liszt's pupil Thoman, and therefore his way of thinking was initially influenced by Liszt; and also by late Romanticism, for example Richard Strauss—Bartók wrote a piano reduction of *Zarathustra*. But then he drew far away from this direction—I believe, because he occupied himself very intensively with Bach. He even prepared an entire edition of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*; indeed, a very interesting one. Although I don't play it, because Bartók changes the order of the pieces . . .

Fidelio: . . . Based on what criterion?

Schiff: Based on degree of difficulty. He regarded these works literally as “teaching pieces,” and began with two-part fugues, and then continued to three- and four-, up to the five-part fugues, which he put at the end, because they are naturally the most difficult in the collection. In addition, he supplied Bach's score with dynamic markings, articulation, etc., as was the custom in the Nineteenth century among publishers. That is legitimate as interpretation of these works; however, unfortunately, it influences us—especially as it is in print—negatively. Of course, this isn't an issue any more—such editions aren't used now, only the original text; although, as we know, even there gigantic differences exist.

Fidelio: Still, if you consider the question of differing editions, in light of what you previously mentioned—the key word was “guide”—then it's certainly interesting to pursue this; whether one follows every detail, or even imitates, is a completely different matter.

Schiff: It's very interesting today, to know how such giants as Bartók, Busoni, or Francis Tovey intensively—or, very intimately—interpreted such a gigantic musician as Bach. One would simply like to know their opinions. That's why the study of such editions is important. But each interpreter must decide for himself how he's going to play Bach. The beauty of Bach is the

freedom he gives us. It never existed after him again. A Bach score is a *quasi-tabula rasa*—yet full of spirit. Bach gives nearly no instructions; he specifies nothing regarding tempo, dynamics, phrasing, articulation, accentuation. Only the notes are there—but *how* we get them to ring, there we have endless possibilities. Although, within a certain framework.

Bach's music radiates a purity in the polyphony, as well as clarity and transparency of the entire composition, whereby each voice, each note is important. In Bach, nothing is subordinate.

Glenn Gould, for example, whom I otherwise much admire, because he is a brilliant interpreter, is very often outside this framework, in my opinion, because he considers Bach to be abstract material. In my opinion, Bach is not abstract, but an historical figure. He hails from a certain time and a relatively strictly defined, geographical region—Germany, or rather, Thuringia and Saxony—and he is very Protestant. For that reason, people can't say Bach could be independent of religion. That's nonsense. Anyone who doesn't engage himself with Protestant church music, can't do much with Bach: with his chorale melodies, the cantatas—indeed, even the German language plays a great role for Bach. It's very easy for an English-speaker to say, “That has nothing to do with his music.” It's a good excuse, since these people don't speak a word of German! So, the matter isn't settled there.

I've clearly witnessed this, when I had the good fortune to be able to conduct the *St. Matthew Passion*.

Fidelio: Where?

Schiff: First, in Winterthur, then in London; three times altogether. It was

certainly always a dream of mine, and now it's happened. It was a key experience for me, illuminating everything. For example, it confirmed my belief, how important the language, or the general culture is, for music. In preparing, I couldn't stop finding interesting things: Quotations in the great choral settings from Bach's instrumental works—for example, in the Second Part of the *Passion*, a “turba” chorus,¹ “Sein Blut komme über uns” [“His blood be on us”]. I detected this really innocuous “Echo” there, from the “French Overture,” where it's called “Echo,” and people play it as such: merry and joyful. But, when one adds the cited text, it makes one's blood boil! Interestingly, it's even in the selfsame key—B minor.

Previously, I had no idea of this coherence. And that's only one example of how connected and intertwined Bach's sacred and secular music are. There also exist in the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Part I, a Prelude in E-flat minor, and a Prelude in B minor, which could be part of the *St. Matthew Passion*. By the same token, we find minuets, bourrées, gavottes, gigues, also dance settings, in the *Passions* and religious cantatas; everything goes hand in hand. That's why Bach's music is no abstraction, but something very concrete.

Fidelio: Furtwängler had a fitting reply to the endless controversy of music historians, over whether people should be permitted to perform Bach only in churches, or also in the concert halls. Furtwängler's terse reply was: “What's that? Wherever Bach is, is church!”

Schiff: Magnificent!

Fidelio: So, for that reason, with Bach, it doesn't matter, whether one, for example, goes to church every Sunday, because his music is accompanied by an entire worldview.

Schiff: Yes, people say that God is everywhere; and so also in Bach's music throughout. His music is something divine. A manifestation of divinity.

Fidelio: When you study such a work as the *St. Matthew Passion*—for the first time for yourself, as a conductor, since that is originally not your field—how do

you go about it? You'll probably say, you've worked on it your entire life . . .

Schiff: Actually, yes, but naturally not concretely, because I only studied this piece over the recent years. I'm no conductor—I have not studied conducting, but I *have* studied *music*. So, I intensively studied the full score, and played it many times. For this, playing the piano is not a bad thing, because you can play the *St. Matthew Passion* almost entirely on the piano alone—which doesn't work on a flute. Moreover, you can analyze the work quite well by playing the full score; but, it's also very important to know what one can *not* do while study-

must prepare, and mark my material very precisely: bowing, articulation, phrasing, dynamics, accents. I try to make it as precise as possible.

Fidelio: You, yourself, even mark the bowing of the strings?

Schiff: Yes, even the bowing of the strings. In this I'm helped—unfortunately, I don't play a string instrument—in

tions], there are even voices with wrong notes and incorrect harmony—and those haven't been rectified. I can't understand the conductors, who hold rehearsals, and only then, so to speak, "see and hear what emerges."

Fidelio: Coming back to the piano: What came across in yesterday's concert, above all, was your incredible ability,

In the *St. Matthew Passion*, Bach has genuine comprehension of Judas, he is incredibly human. Then the passage, where the Scribes say: 'What is it to us?'—it is so incredibly real. It happens every day on the street, when we observe or look away. People kill and get killed; it's war, but nothing troubles us. That's why Bach's music is so important!

that I have often played with excellent string players, and have learned from them. Besides, in this regard, I always show my work to my wife, who is a great violinist. If something is entirely wrong, she warns me. She plays it for me, and then we discuss it. Meantime, I rarely make serious errors; should they happen sometimes, I adhere to the corresponding objections of the first violinist. The main thing is, that a conductor must come to the first rehearsal with a clear conception, not only with respect to the sound of the

piece, but also, for example, in regard to the bowing.

Fidelio: Would such careful preparation have been entirely self-evident formerly?

Schiff: I don't know. In former times, I believe that conductors did much better, than today. They brought their material with them—good material. I am astonished that nowadays many conductors come to rehearsal with bad editions—particularly hazardous are those of the Vienna Classical period. In Peters [Edi-

with the wide range of composers you covered, to shade or color dynamically. Where did you learn this?

Schiff: I learned that through my development and previous musical experience, but it is also a necessity. Every musician has a "sound-imagination." Some have little of it, some a lot. It's like the richness of visual color: many people are satisfied with black and white, others use more color, some a whole palette. I always heard richness of color, but couldn't realize it, because I was too young.

People talk so much today about technique: "Such and so pianist has great technique." Mostly, this is misunderstood—the pianist celebrated today by music critics as a "fantastic technician," is mostly the one who plays the fastest and the loudest, and doesn't hit any wrong notes. But, on the contrary, great technique signifies, to me, an infinitely alive "sound-imagination" and "inventiveness"—and then, to realize this. In this way, the *realization of the richness of color* is achieved. If a pianist hears only two colors, the realization of those is no great art. To me, in this sense, Alfred Cortot, who played many wrong notes, had the greatest technique, because he produced an unbelievable richness of color on the piano, millions



Johann Sebastian Bach

ing on the piano. Much has to be done "away from the piano." For example, during a walk in the woods. There a person can develop many thoughts, and also analyze and integrate.

Fidelio: Beethoven and Brahms set the example for that.

Schiff: Yes, that's how a person can really reflect, and that's why I'm most fond of walking. Many thoughts come to me that way. What's most important to me with conducting is homework. Before I go to an orchestra rehearsal, I

of colors—like a great painter. That’s very important to me. That’s why painting and the other arts, to me, are so important.

Recently, I was at a Frans Hals exhibit, and in the notes it was stated, that he could depict over thirty shades of black alone. You can see it in his paintings: there’s a tremendous technique hidden below the surface, of course, but moreover, a corresponding *conception*. First comes the idea, then the technique. And not the reverse!

Today, the concept of technique is continually misunderstood. What now is often described as technique, is actually mere mechanics. Mechanics is something motor-like, machine-like. Technique is much more refined, something humans have evolved.

Fidelio: It’s the concrete expression of a creative idea, which brings forth the technique.

Schiff: Absolutely.

Fidelio: Back again to the *St. Matthew Passion*. Your thoughts about it make a very strong impression; to which, one could add as a sort of footnote: The part “Sein Blut komme über uns und unsere Kinder” [“His blood be on us and our children”], is today often used to justify calling Bach an “anti-Semite.”

Schiff: For God’s sake, of course Bach is not that! Really, I am one-thousand percent Jewish! Of course, I know the reproaches: I have often had problems with many of my Jewish friends, who at first refused to go to such a Bach concert. When, despite this, they have come anyway, they were grateful. I’m of the opinion that there is not a trace of anti-Semitism in Bach.

Although, all the active participants in this piece—even more so in the Gospel of John, as in the entire New Testament—were after all Jews. I believe Jews must learn that there exists another worldview than theirs. Reality isn’t “it’s the world against us,” but rather, the fact that there are *human beings* who get along *with one another*, and do not act against one another. This is a question of fellow human beings, and thus of relations among human

beings. The people—how easily the people are influenced! It has nothing primarily to do with Jews, Christians, Romans, etc. It is about the *mass* of the people, who, being so easily influenced, can, indeed, be manipulated.

Besides, how Bach portrays characters like Pilate and Judas, is very important. In the *St. Matthew Passion*, for example, Bach has genuine comprehension of Judas, he is incredibly human. So much so, that Bach conveys this comprehension of, and pity for, Judas, to the listener, too.

Then the passage, where the Scribes say: “Was gehet uns das an?” [“What is it to us?”]—it is so incredibly real; because, it happens nowadays, every day, on the street; when we observe or look away. It’s an awful mess: “What is it to us?” People kill and get killed; it’s war, but nothing troubles us. That’s why Bach’s music is so important! For heaven’s sake! Bach is not anti-Semitic. No, I oppose such an opinion.

Fidelio: Lessing, in his *Nathan the Wise*, has portrayed it so beautifully, in the “Parable of the Rings,” where he develops that the greatness of the three great monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, exists in that they worship *the same God*, and stand for the idea that each person is in God’s image; also, endowed with reason, and able to think creatively. To that extent, these religions are universal. In the “Parable of the Rings,” Lessing shows this in a poetically beautiful way. And it’s also the creed of the Schiller Institute—man, *each man*, in the likeness of God. On this basis, every culture manifests a reflection of it. In fact, no culture could have developed, if the form of image of man which predominates, didn’t reflect this creative gift—this likeness of mankind to God. On that account, no culture can say: “We are the sole culture.” Instead, one must seek after what is primary: What joins all cultures to one another? It is, so to speak, the highest common principle!

Schiff: Absolutely!

Fidelio: Exactly this interests us in music. You are right, one is able to learn

very much from the other art forms, but in the realm of music—if you wish to express it religiously—with really great music, be it Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, or Schumann, and so forth, we humans are nearest to God.

Schiff: Yes, I sense that very much also; but, unfortunately, not all people have the antennae for this. The reference to “the Almighty” is always there. One need only discover it. For this, one has to educate, or invite a person. Today, unfortunately, the prevailing opinion is often that Classical music is for the elite; many, even whole groups of people sometimes feel themselves excluded. They are not excluded, but heartily welcome! Of everything, I find it most wrong when nowadays one “dilutes” Classical music to make it more intelligible, or more popular. Music has to be performed on the highest level, and you hope that people will come and listen; and I believe that it’s not so few people who do. Compared to Pop culture, proportionally, there are naturally fewer, but it has always been like that. Yet, this proportion, compared to the time of Bach or Mozart, has grown tremendously, in my opinion.

Fidelio: Since you were just now speaking of education: Although, in yesterday’s concert, you of course didn’t point the familiar “pedagogue’s forefinger,” your pedagogical intention was very intelligible.

Schiff: Yes, I didn’t “point a forefinger,” but I was definitely acting pedagogically. I always do that: above all, because, I think of the young people who come to the concert-hall, and we must show concern for the upcoming generation. It is very worrying that at the concerts—however much I love and value old people—the average age is very old, and this is the case worldwide. That’s the tendency. Although, with this older audience, I find that a concert must be much more than mere entertainment.

Often, concerts are superficial, and the audience leaves the hall without thoughts and new ideas. A concert is an important undertaking for me. In the first place, I have to devise a program

that speaks for itself. As pianists, we have many, endless possibilities, of course—violinists and ’cellists, for instance, or even wind-players, have far fewer choices. But the solo repertoire for piano has enormous treasures, which need to be cultivated; especially the great Bach works. One can perform a wonderful cycle: *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, the Partitas, “English” and “French Suites,” the “Italian Concerto,” the “Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue,” as well as the “Goldberg Variations.” Those are nearly all the important piano works by Bach. One can then continue with Mozart sonatas, as well as Beethoven and Schubert sonatas, with Schumann, and so on.

But, with regard to content, you can also make a mixed program coherent. Like yesterday, where each piece was allied with the others. To begin with, referencing the common Bach source. I consciously placed this very unfamiliar Bach piece at the beginning, his “Capriccio über die Abreise des geliebten Bruders”; perhaps, around here, it’s not so unfamiliar, but I played that program two days ago in Warsaw, and practically no one had ever heard this “Capriccio.” They were all astonished, and I said: “Indeed, there are such Bach pieces, too”—not merely the “Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue,” or the “Italian Concerto.” This is a quite younger Bach; you can see a young man hiding within it. Incidentally, it also is one of the first examples of “program music.”

Fidelio: Even Bach’s words are charming in themselves, where, among other things, he says: “Cajoling of friends, to hinder him from the journey” . . .

Schiff: . . .Yes, “cajoling,” and “various calamities” that could happen to him, or “general lament of friends.” . . . Naturally, Bach’s model was Kuhnaus’s *Biblical History in Six Sonatas*²; he learned that from him.

I recently played this “Capriccio” in a program that bore the title “Les Adieux.” Naturally, in the concert, I also played the “Les Adieux” sonata by Beethoven. I am entirely certain that Beethoven was acquainted with this

“Capriccio” of Bach. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have composed the “Les Adieux” like this. For example, the bugle-call—the coherence with Bach’s “Aria del postiglione” and subsequent fugue on the postilion bugle-call, is evident. And, many of these sorts of connections exist in this sonata. Incidentally, in this connection, I intentionally play one of the lesser-known Beethoven sonatas. What I particularly value in the Opus 27, No. 1, is the uniqueness of its form. This sonata is a “Sonata quasi una Fantasia”; entirely thorough-composed. And, because the form of this sonata is unique—“quasi una Fantasia”—it fits well with the Schumann “Fantasie,” which again is nothing else but a camouflaged sonata.

From the history of the origin of this Schumann “Fantasie,” we know, in the first place, that it was thought of as a “memorial” to Beethoven. Of course, it is also a love poem, generally, the first love poem in piano music. At the time Robert Schumann wrote the “Fantasie,” he was separated from Clara. The “Fantasie” is a “crying out,” in an apparently hopeless period; but it’s also a memorial to Beethoven—Schumann quotes Beethoven’s “An die ferne Geliebte” at the end of the “Fantasie.”

Fidelio: That was definitely heard.

Schiff: And, only because I discovered—quite by chance—a few years ago, the original, Schumann-composed ending of the “Fantasie.” At the suggestion of the musicologist Charles Rosen, I went to the Library of Budapest, where there is an old transcription of the Schumann “Fantasie,” which has an entirely different concluding section, than is played customarily. This transcription, with remarks by Robert Schumann, has, in the meantime, been published by Henle as the original text; but, people played the Schumann “Fantasie” with the conventional ending for practically one hundred years. The original, Schumann-composed ending, quotes the theme from Beethoven’s “An die ferne Geliebte.” So, therefore, here too a circle closes itself, like Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, where the first and third sets end alike.

I believe such a program fulfills its aim, namely, that the intelligent, sensible listener, should leave the hall filled with new ideas. That would be my wish.

Fidelio: Entirely in the sense of Schiller, who, in his “Theater as a Moral Institution,” demanded that the onlooker leave the theater, or the concert-hall, a better person than he had entered.

Schiff: Excellent! Schiller can say this, but I can’t! And yet, one hopes that at some time, one will also achieve this. It must be so, for we are living in a terrible world, in regard to the education level of the general population.

Fidelio: Since you have presented the relationship between Bach, Beethoven, and Schumann so beautifully, how did you, in this connection, come up with the pieces of both Janáček and Bartók?

Schiff: First, because, I wished to show how music itself always develops further. One could proceed chronologically, even beyond this—in the above-mentioned program, “Les Adieux,” I also played pieces of the underrated contemporary composer Kurtág. Kurtág wrote small miniatures for piano; completely wonderful, small poetical pieces. One was named “Les Adieux in—Janáček’s Manier [Style],” and, content-wise, it fit so fantastically in the “Les Adieux” program, that I included it.

As to the program of yesterday’s concert: Janáček and Bartók are composers who were born in the Nineteenth century, but were masters of the Twentieth—their compositions date from the Twentieth century. Of all Twentieth-century composers, these two are the closest to me, by far. That is, I have enormous difficulties with the “Second Vienna School”; difficulties I can’t resolve—or will not resolve. Also, when I said before that all great music derives from Bach, so too has the music of Schönberg much to do with Bach. However, something about it irritates my nervous system. Actually, there are pieces of Schönberg which sound indescribably hideous, for example, his last piano piece, Opus 33, or the “Horn Quintet”—nothing exists in the world that irritates me more.

And, then, this equalization of the twelve tones; I can't think that way, it is against my nature.

Fidelio: It's against nature in general.

Schiff: Yes, I agree; even if one actually wishes to avoid such remarks *ex cathedra*. However, with few exceptions, apart from—and those concern Alban Berg, who sometimes didn't break so radically with the Classical tradition, like Schönberg or Weber, for example—what the "Second Vienna School" produced, is not real music.

In contrast to Schönberg, Berg, and Weber, an entirely different line is represented by Janáček and Bartók; not decadent, but extremely sound. The roots of their music rest in language and folklore—both have cultivated the treasure of folklore and their own language. Both are of completely different natures, but yet they are related. Their music grabs me, it is so direct. Janáček has no inhibitions, overall; he's simply not ashamed. It's so unbelievably honest, and he opens his heart and his soul. His few pieces for piano are really worth gold: the sonata in two movements *LX.1905*, and the "Im Nebel" piece played yesterday. That's almost all. I just recorded them on CD; I play these pieces again and again, since, in the first place, they are unknown—even still today—and also, because this music radiates so much force and warmth.

Moreover, I was stimulated by the paradox, that in the program there are three completely great German masters, Bach, Beethoven, and Schumann. Janáček, of course, had nothing against German culture, but was a great opponent of the then-ruling monarchy, which dominated and captured all German music for itself. In those days, this region of Europe was practically all German. Understandably, an opposition arose against it—in Russia, and also in Czechia, i.e., Smetana and Dvořák. I would count Chopin in it too. Janáček



Vera Markus

I have not studied conducting, but I have studied music. To intensively study the full score, playing the piano is not a bad thing, because you can play the *St. Matthew Passion* almost entirely on the piano alone—which doesn't work on a flute. It's also very important to know what one can *not* do while studying on the piano—for example, during a walk in the woods. There, a person can develop many thoughts, and also analyze and integrate.

also belonged to this important opposition movement in Europe, which wasn't directed against German culture, but the protagonists wished to fulfill themselves, to show that they had their own cultural way, too. I find that very valuable.

Fidelio: These artists had their own cultural direction, which, nevertheless, corresponds to a constant, universal principle.

Schiff: Right! And Bartók went a similar way, according to which I find that Bartók consciously and unconsciously, was more traditional than Janáček.

Bartók's education was Classical. Janáček was otherwise self-taught; a savage, a wild lunatic. In spite of this, these miniatures are unconsciously very Schumannesque. In my opinion, Schumann detected something very self-contained in piano music: the poetry, also the form. He didn't write strong sonata-forms or song-forms, but rather—like *Papillons* or *Carneval*, to name some pieces—miniatures; chameleon pieces, with a lot of character, but which

whisk by in twenty seconds. They actually whisk past. That's Schumann's invention. Janáček must have either known that conception, or have been influenced unconsciously by it.

With Bartók, everything is much clearer: what stems from Bach, and what from Beethoven; these two masters, in particular, shaped him. The polyphony, also the voice-leading, and the musical structures, come very directly from Bach, especially Bartók's piano sonata; just as the piano concertos and his string quartets were influenced by Beethoven. Incidentally, he said that explicitly, too.

Before I go to an orchestra rehearsal, I must prepare, and mark my material very precisely: bowing, articulation, phrasing, dynamics, accents. I try to make it as precise as possible.

In regard to the bowing, I always show my work to my wife, who is a great violinist. If something is entirely wrong, she warns me. She plays it for me, and then we discuss it.



Violinist Yuuko Shiokawa, wife of András Schiff.

In short, all this was the conception of yesterday's concert.

Fidelio: In every instance, it was very convincing. The reaction of the public showed it, indeed.

Schiff: Yes, the audience was very grateful, and open. And in return, I like to show the listeners that I have confidence in them. You can't take people to be stupid. I find that today, our cultural activity functions completely wrongly, and that is very bad. How is television pro-

gramming done today? The particular program organizers *assume* that they know what the public *needs* to hear. Yet, we, also, belong to the public—and have never been asked. These program organizers decide autocratically, that they will not have any cultural programs; at least, not at normally broadcast hours—if it's a cultural program, then it's on only after midnight.

Otherwise, we're given only the complete filth put on television; eighty channels, and hardly anything but muck. Why? Because those responsible know exactly what they are doing.

This conscious degrading of the culture is distinctly observable. One feels it even in so-called "little things." For instance, here in Hamburg, too. Yesterday, as I entered the concert-hall, I saw a poster with my program—but completely confusing, the pieces in the wrong sequence. And I had given so much thought to that program, and gave it to the organizers, one, even two years beforehand. And, in spite of this, these mistakes!

Fidelio: The trick is clear: The organizers think nobody will come if Bartók and Janáček are printed on the poster, even when it's András Schiff himself who is playing.

Schiff: But, isn't that unbelievable? Janáček died in 1928, that Bartók piece dates from 1926—and one speaks of "modern" music in 2001? That is actually miserable! Besides, the assumption is wrong, for listeners are fascinated with this music.

Fidelio: What you have just touched upon, especially about the kind of programming on television, is very significant. You are right—and already in our

last interview a few years ago, we had spoken about being forced to accept this politics of culture "from the top." It's as if a cultural war were being led against the reason of the population. Entirely controlled, with a great deal of money and sway, the population is indoctrinated and manipulated. Precisely in order that the educational capability you and we value so in the Classics—refinement, aesthetical sentiment, spiritual and intellectual sentiment—should be suppressed as much as possible! Classical music is truly the best medium through which to directly foster mental-spiritual development, especially in children. This is destroyed through rock music or drugs, for instance. Totally consciously producing a cultural sphere which impedes and even strangles productive human life. If you were young today, and without a strong will, or being nurtured through family home life or appropriate relationships—you'd have practically no chance to develop yourself, or to grow up from adolescence fully normal.

Schiff: So it is. The influences in school today, and rock music—rock music is a terrible drug—as well as the continuous "spraying out" of music, are negative. Today, you cannot go anywhere, not a restaurant, nor a railroad car, where you will not be "sprayed" with insipid music.

We are in complete agreement, but we constitute a tiny minority. But, of course, I don't like large crowds.

Fidelio: Mr. Schiff, hearty thanks for this thought-provoking discussion.

—translated from the German by Cloret Ferguson

1. "turba [L., crowd]. In oratorios, Passions, etc., a choral movement representing Jews or heathens." *Harvard Concise Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).
2. Johann Kuhnau was organist at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig from 1684; music director of Thomaskirche and Nikolaikirche, and cantor of Thomas Schule from 1701, the position in which J.S. Bach succeeded him. *The New Bach Reader*, ed. by Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel; rev. by Christoph Wolfe (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).