Click here for Full Issue of Fidelio Volume 12, Number 4, Winter 2003

András Schiff in D.C. Concert

Bach Master Revives Classical Musical Culture

Apart from the spirit of "happiness" produced in Washington, D.C. by Hungarian-born musical artist András Schiff, in concert with the National Symphony Orchestra, on the evening of Oct. 17, 2003 there was definitely an added element of satisfaction experienced by many members of the excited audience. Somehow, it was entirely appropriate that such a first-rate demonstration of Classical musical principles should be made available at the close of the same week in which Washington, D.C.'s most discredited politician, treacherous Vice President Dick Cheney, seemed finally to be receiving his just desserts for his war-driven acts of treason against the U.S. government and the rest of mankind.

Pianist and conductor András Schiff.

A good fraction of the audience was made up of members of Lyndon LaRouche's Youth Movement, who during the past week had tirelessly organized the Washington, D.C. population and officialdom to go after Cheney. The concert was, in some sense, a "reward" for a job well done, and they celebrated by joining guest conductor and piano soloist Schiff at about 11 p.m in the lobby of the Kennedy Center Concert Hall as he signed scores of autographs.

There is an historic characteristic of Bach-scholar Schiff's discoveries, moreover, which underscores the value of both his Washington, D.C. performances and his current tour of the United States. In recent decades, Classical musical culture has undergone a precipitous downward degeneration, with the capital of the United States demonstrating perhaps the most embarrassing deterioration of Classical educational activities among major cities worldwide. While months can pass in which inexpensive Classical performances are not even available, those Classical musical events that finally occur are entirely dominated by a deadening combination of "modernism" and "Romanticism," despite the rare efforts of the city's opera company to produce competent performances at ticket prices ranging from $125 to $250 per seat.

For reasons both individual as well as historic—which can only be referenced in this context—András Schiff's method of work and performance provides an excellent example of how a Classical musical culture can be revived and this deterioration reversed—to very great public benefit.

Who Is J.S. Bach?

For the current author, who has been a fanatic "fan" of Schiff's 1980's recordings of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* for over two years now, the opportunity to attend the performance was a deeply gratifying experience. In particular, the following aspect of the performance stood out in this listener's mind: The concert improved as the evening progressed. That is not a criticism, but rather is suggested in praise. For, in the opening composition, the audience and performers were immediately confronted with the "problem" faced by soloist and orchestra. In the course of the evening, that problem was tackled and a foundation laid for the roadblock to be overcome.

The first composition performed was J.S. Bach's Keyboard Concerto No. 3 in D major, BWV 1054. From the opening phrases, it was clear something was off: The orchestra, as a group, did not accept the soloist's view of the composition. Schiff is fully aware that his discoveries in respect to recreating J.S. Bach's compositions for performance, are controversial. In the brochure printed for one of his recent CDs, he reports attacks against him, from those who insist that compositions such as this Concerto, which were originally written for harpsichord, can not be performed on a modern-day keyboard. Schiff's response to such criticisms—"Hand on heart: can you really listen to a harpsichord for more than 20 minutes?"—demonstrates that he is prepared to "take flack" for presenting important ideas, and to counter such pressures with his well-developed musical sense of humor.

Thus, there he sat on the stage, delivering the Bach Concerto with complete confidence, reaching directly to the audience, over the obstacle presented by the deadened conventional habits of the string players accompanying him. Although the disparity was all too obvious, the audience nonetheless was

© 2003 Schiller Institute, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission strictly prohibited.

quickly gripped by Schiff's total command over the complexly interacting voices in the keyboard part. Many audience members commented later, that when Schiff returned to Bach at the close of the entire concert (the audience would not allow him to leave without an encore), performing a movement of a Bach suite alone without the orchestra, as listeners they were virtually thunderstruck by the master's ability to shape a transparent, singing dialogue, with selected strong emphasis upon the bass voice, in a Bach composition most artists would find just too note-dominated and technically crippling to present in an intelligible manner.

The orchestra, whatever the abilities of the individual players, was simply not on Schiff's level during the Concerto. Its mannerisms and tone, particularly among the strings, and the lack of any sense of "dialogue," revealed it to be controlled by the conventional, modern diktat, that J.S. Bach's works must be performed in a "certain style," alleged by academic authority to be more or less "authentic" to his era. This alleged "authentic style" requires the player to elicit dead tone in a flat, instrumental manner, stripped of any reference to passion—i.e., in no way reminiscent of human singing. For violinists and other string players, this means confining each phrase "oh-so-delicately" to the upper half of the bow, and never using the full bow of the instrument, so that the "sound" coming out of the instrument gets projected mainly as "background music."

Schiff's view of Bach, based on an entirely rigorous education and self-propelled investigation, comes from an entirely different direction. For Schiff, Bach is a man of ideas and of deep love of humanity, who dedicated his life to singing unceasingly to his fellow man in a rigorous *polyphonic* (i.e., many-voiced) counterpoint, made possible by fundamental discoveries concerning the harmonic lawfulness of the entirety of God's creation.

We know this is Schiff's view of Bach, not only because of his performances and interviews, but also because of the historic tradition he represents.

As I saw Schiff on the stage, I could not help but think of his fellow countryman, Antal Dorati, who emigrated to the United States in the 1930's, and eventually became director of the National Symphony Orchestra, as well as of the Detroit Symphony. Dorati lifted Washington, D.C.'s symphony orchestra out of obscurity, by having them master the complete symphonic repertoire of Joseph Haydn. The Hungarian musical tradition created by Haydn, survives as a living experience for these artists today.

The Bach-Haydn Principle

The reference to Dorati and Haydn pinpoints what is involved in reversing the collapse of Classical musical culture today. Significantly, Haydn had been the star child-soprano in the Austro-Hungarian boys' choir, who mercifully escaped the typical career assigned to such children, to become the musical coordinator for the Hungarian Esterhazy family. In that capacity, spending many years moving between Hungary and Vienna, Haydn became a leading expert in Italian opera, who nonetheless also craved study of the orchestral scores of J.S. Bach's most prolific son, Carl Philip Emmanuel Bach. Decades prior to the famous gatherings of the Vienna salon of Ambassador von Swieten, where Wolfgang Mozart and Haydn would finally have access to the scores of C.P.E.'s great father, Johann Sebastian, the Hungarian-based artist Hadyn was already a pioneer in combining a perfected view of Italian *bel canto* singing, with the contrapuntal polyphonic discoveries of Northern Germany's famous Bach family.

The outcome of this work was Haydn's success in creating symphony orchestras of a fully developed Classical type for the first time.

For musicians such as Schiff, the discoveries of the Haydn-Bach dialogue are a living experience, not a relic of the past. It is precisely this Classical notion of transparency which guides Schiff's work, so sorely needed today as a remedy to the combination of hammer-handed Romantic keyboard slamming popular in U.S. classical recordings of the last 50 years, along with the present flip-side syndrome among orchestra players, of sedated premature senility when confronted with musical ideas.

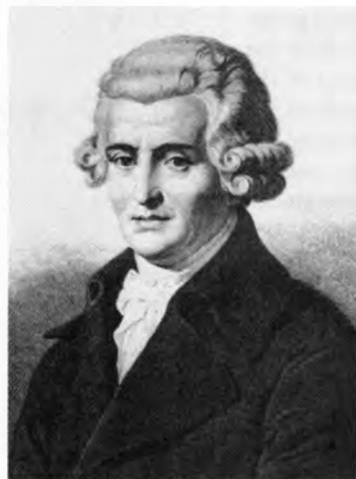
In the course of the evening, Schiff's view of Classicism began to take over the orchestra, undoutedly assisted by the acute happiness demonstrated by a responsive audience filled with young political thinkers hungry for this quality of input.

Thus, the second item on the program, a symphony in which Schiff took the role of conductor, was a vast improvement: Robert Schumann's posthumously published Symphony No. 4 in D minor, Opus 120. The orchestra was coming to life before our eyes, through a piece well chosen for putting the technical abilities of its members to improved poetic use.

Schumann's Opus 120 is a piece which the Nineteenth-century composer wrote and then reworked at several different points in his life [SEE Box, page 82]. Schumann is generally known as a leading composer of *Lieder,* that is, musical settings of great German poetry. He was also a recognized spokesman for a cultural campaign against Romantic pathology in art, along with his

Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

J.S. Bach



clipart.com

Joseph Haydn

friend, the German poet Heinrich Heine. In many respects, this symphony, "tightly" organized in a manner typical of Schumann, is a polemical counter-assault against the Romantic perversions of such composers as Hector Berlioz, and a defense of the polyphonic method of J.S. Bach. (For those who doubt Schumann's indebtedness to Bach, it is a wonderful discovery to see how many of his *Lieder* playfully borrow piano accompaniments from Bach's keyboard works.)

In the symphony, the orchestra is organized around a polyphonic dialogue, in which modal and harmonic development unfold in a clear pathway, culminating in the final movement, in a surprisingly energetic fugue that provokes the listener to think of another composer, the Ludwig van Beethoven whom Schumann so revered. Because much of the buildup to that point is not as technically demanding as Beethoven's own symphonies, the piece is perfect for developing an orchestra's capability to "vocalize" musical ideas from one section across to another. Schiff gained ground as even the string players began to realize that such designations as "soft" and "loud" are not traffic signals on a musical score, but part of a musical language based on human singing.

The final composition of the evening was Beethoven's first piano concerto, Opus 15 in C major. Because of the work done on the Schumann, the Beethoven performance was nearly spectacular. The transition between the first and second movements, from humor to melancholy, successfully conveyed Beethoven's grasp, even in this composition written in his youth, of the Schillerian concept of the *Sublime*. The energy-throughput in the orchestra kept improving; the soloist gave of himself to the fullest; and the young Beethoven's eternal Promethean view of man filled the hall.

In sum, the concert was truly an experience to remember. Thank you András Schiff, welcome to America, and please come back many times more.

—*Renee Sigerson*

András Schiff was last interviewed in Fidelio in the Winter/Spring 2002 issue (Vol. XI, No. 1-2).

FIGURE 1.

Schumann's Fourth Symphony in D Minor

Unlike other composers, Robert Schumann often concentrated on the problem of one musical medium at a time. His first 23 pieces were all for solo piano. In the year 1840, he concentrated on the Classical *Lied,* producing all of his great song cycles. The following year, he turned his attention to orchestral writing, producing his first two symphonies, his piano concerto, and other works. Ten years later, he revised his Second Symphony, and it became known as his Fourth.

Although Johannes Brahms appears to have preferred the earlier version (he called the later one "overdressed"), Clara Schumann decided to publish only the later version.

The work represents Schumann's struggle to master the discoveries of Beethoven, particularly his Fifth Symphony, but also J.S. Bach, of whom Schumann said: "He knew a million times more than we imagine."

Schumann referred to this work as a "symphony in one movement." As in Beethoven's more advanced works, the movements proceed directly into one another. The transition from the third movement to the fourth is especially powerful, and invokes the transition from the third to the fourth movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

Beethoven's Fifth represented a great step forward in his mastery of "Motivführung." A four-note germ, or "cell," that opens the work, recurs in ironically different forms throughout the entire symphony. The entire symphony flows from a "germ" that is not the four notes, as notes *per se,* but a concept in the composer's mind. Beethoven's mastery of the problem of the "One and the Many," allowed him to develop a more powerfully differentiated piece (the Many), but at the same time a more coherent one, and from a much more unified concept of

FIGURE 2.

FIGURE 3.