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Interviewed by Stephane Martin

Chopin Préludes for piano

Questions to... Myriam Birger - mai 2022 :

1) MCM. - Hello Myriam! How did you hear about Chopin's Preludes?

Myriam Birger. -The Chopin Preludes were revealed to me by the record and my discovery of Samson François. This went hand in hand with my discovery of this artist, whose records I bought and listened to with passion! Moreover, his very personal interpretation of these Preludes still remains a reference for me today.

Both too short taken separately, or too gigantic when played in their entirety, the Preludes were not among the works that were systematically studied at the Conservatoire, in the same way as the Etudes, the Ballades etc., essential works that we all worked on very early.

2) MCM. - What do you like most about this work? What makes it unique?

Myriam Birger. - Even though I obviously adore Liszt, Schumann (for whom I have a veneration) and all the great composers, as a pianist I consider Chopin to be the greatest genius of the piano: he is THE piano. And in this sense the Preludes, like the Etudes, represent the very essence of the piano.

One cannot but be amazed by the perfection of the writing, the variety of style and the incredible creativity that make each of these Preludes a world in itself. Far from being miniatures, each prelude is a masterpiece in itself, brief but essential, like No. 20 for example, which in 3 lines expresses all the pain of the world. Of the 24 Preludes (26 in truth), not one is weaker than the other, some are better known but all are brilliant. In this sense, this work is a true prodigy which remains unequalled.

3) MCM. - What difficulties does the interpreter face in this cycle?

Myriam Birger. - Each Prelude must be performed as a separate work, each expressing a particular mood and feeling. The Preludes are a journey that allows one to unfold the full range of possibilities in terms of virtuosity and musical expression. In 24 short pieces, we take stock of just about every difficulty that a pianist may encounter in his or her training. Once you have worked through the 24 Preludes, you are sure to know how to play the piano!

4) MCM. - What advice do you give to your students about studying them?

Myriam Birger. - It all depends on the level of the student, of course, but I cannot recommend enough that a young pianist work on one on a regular basis. Not all the Preludes are of the same caliber in terms of virtuosity, but the choice is so vast that one can slowly build up to a higher level, starting with the more accessible ones, without the intention of playing them all. It is one of the great advantages of these Preludes to be able to play just a few of them without being obliged to play the whole set.

5) MCM. - Do you have any personal memories of this work, or reactions from the public?

Myriam Birger. - My most striking memory is the exaltation I felt when I went to work on this colossal work because I worked on all the Preludes at once, under the guidance of Jean Fassina, a great teacher to whom I would like to pay tribute here and who particularly adored this score.

The wonderful thing about the Préludes is that they are for everyone, some of them have even been used in songs and films. Unlike, for example, the Liszt sonata or some of the Schubert sonatas which may seem less obvious, the public never complains that the Preludes are too long.

6) MCM. - In your opinion, is it really necessary to know everything about the personal history of Chopin and George

Sand in the Balearic Islands in order to better experience these Preludes?

Myriam Birger. - Perhaps it is not necessarily necessary, since the genius of the great composers is precisely to express through music the feelings and states of mind that inhabit them at certain particular moments in their lives and to make them universal. The interpreter is there to retranscribe all these emotions, he must feel them, not by an intellectual knowledge, but by an intuitive relationship, a dialogue from soul to soul.

However, all knowledge has its value and, in addition to being very interesting, knowing the context and history of a work can of course help to get closer to the composer.

7) MCM. - Do you listen to many recordings of the Preludes? Which ones?

Myriam Birger. - I must admit that I have remained faithful to Chopin's Preludes by Samson François. He continues to fascinate me by his originality, an originality which is, in my opinion, the most important thing in the interpretation of these Preludes. It is a question of truly recreating each one of them by giving free rein to his inspiration.

On the other hand, with time, I think I have listened to everything that exists in terms of recording, because it is of course very enriching, even indispensable, to confront different approaches.

I have often played at a friend's house who owns a magnificent vintage Pleyel piano, and I remember the idea of playing the Preludes there!

8) MCM. - Do you regularly play the entire cycle in recital?

Myriam Birger. - I don't systematically play the entire cycle because the challenge is great and one rarely comes out of it entirely satisfied, there are always a few Preludes that one feels one could have done better. I have often preferred to play a few of them, mixing the most emblematic ones that the public adores - such as No. 4 or "La goutte d'eau" - with others that are less well-known. These are also wonderful encore pieces. In any case, as

with Bach, Chopin's Preludes follow a concert performer to the end of his days, they are the bible!

9) MCM. - Can one make one's own choice of Preludes according to you?

Myriam Birger. - Of course you can. In fact, they were conceived with this idea in mind, as Chopin himself never, to my knowledge, played all 24 in a row. Nowadays, we tend to consider them as a whole, we hesitate to play only some of them. Without denying that playing the complete works is a deeply satisfying experience for a performer, this was not Chopin's original intention.

10)MCM. - Have you already recorded them or would you like to record them?

Myriam Birger. - What pianist who loves Chopin would not want to record the Preludes! On the other hand, since there are already so many wonderful recordings, one has to be sure to bring something to the table and have something to say. But it's a dream I would like to realize.

Thank you Myriam !

To find Myriam Birger's recordings (including 2 magnificent Chopin albums!) : <https://soundcloud.com/myriambirger/sets>