

Nancy Tsou

Chopin Nocturnes

Brunswick Beethoven Festival, 5/2/2015

Chopin's Nocturnes have a reputation of being pieces of dreamy sentimentality, as elegies whispered in the moonlight. Nancy's recital was a useful corrective to this view, showing that they also contain moments of great drama. Her more balanced understanding of the Nocturnes became evident early in the recital with the three Opus 9 works. The performance of the B major piece from this set was noteworthy for revealing its expressive breadth from the wistful beginning to the dramatic coda.

Nancy took great care over every aspect of the music and her performance was impressive for the clarity of articulation for which she clearly aims. These pieces may be regarded as narratives whose development comes about by progressive changes of expression. It was noted just above how the Opus 9, B major nocturne moves from a wistful beginning to moments of dramatic tension. Perhaps one way of putting this is to compare the musical development in the nocturnes with changes in tone and how words are articulated in connected speech. For this to come about in the performance of a piece of music the performer must know exactly where the piece is going and what is happening at any given moment. So playing a nocturne may be compared to reciting a poem with the right expression of emotion for every word given the context in which it occurs.

A piece of music is more abstract than a poem, or other verbal work, which is seen as soon as one becomes aware that a composition has no meaning that can be stated, its parts not being like words each with a meaning in a syntactically correct whole. Schopenhauer's theory of music (*The World as Will and Representation*, I, p.256ff (Dover)) comes close to explaining what is going on with music. Rather than representing things found in nature which themselves he holds to be copies deriving from the underlying reality of the world, namely the Will, music is a direct copy of the Will itself, of the world's underlying reality. Whatever one might think of Schopenhauer's account, and one might well not want to get entangled in his metaphysics of the Will as the thing in itself, at least it acknowledges the intriguing

fact that music sounds like speech but without any semantics and offers an explanation of this. In the light of this, we can see that it is a musician's task to take infinite care of every nuance or shade of expression in the piece being performed so that its "narrative" may be realised and conveyed to the audience. Nancy, with her clarity in this recital took the requisite care. Such a careful exercise is, of course, really only worthwhile with the music of a master like Chopin.

Such care, for instance, was shown by her in the treatment of dynamics. Chopin did not put dynamic markings in melodies, so the performer must supply them. And they must be supplied in the light of the understood narrative development of the piece. A passage which is repeated should not necessarily be played the same way, with the same dynamics, each time. To do so can result in a dead, wooden performance. Pollini makes this mistake in his recording of the nocturnes.

There is nothing trite or hackneyed in Chopin. He has a thoroughgoing conception of what he is aiming for in a given piece. This imposes a rigorous challenge on the performer to realise a conception which is always fresh and original. It also requires an appreciation of Chopin's refined manners.

The nocturne in C# minor, Opus 27, No. 1, may be held to be the great essay in the form. Nancy has recorded this and three others. They are well worth listening to and shed much light on the nocturnes. This nocturne starts with a haunting elegy and then slowly moves in the middle section to a cry of ecstasy which answers the beginning and then returns to something like the elegy to conclude. Nancy manages well the ascent to the moment of ecstasy with impressive weight and avoids having the coda just trail away afterwards. Her slower tempo is quite justified, though it might be unexpected.

So, Nancy's performances in both the live recital at the Brunswick Beethoven Festival and on record are rewarding to hear and full of insight: a real privilege to hear.

Chris Opie