Interview with the pianist Jean-Nicolas Diatkine

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Interview with Birgit Koß

Jean-Nicolas, you're known as a pianist who delves into the nuances of music with great sensitivity? Where does that come from?
I certainly owe it to my first piano teacher Wilfredo Voguet, who was very demanding in this area. He pushed me to be myself without letting myself be influenced by the desire for glory or brilliance that a child and then an adolescent cannot fail to feel at one time or another. He was very strict about musical insincerity and impossible to fool.

So it's no great surprise that you've chosen the sensitive music of Frédéric Chopin for your new CD. How did you choose the pieces?
I discovered these works as a child, but it wasn't until I was a teenager that I really understood the emotional meaning they had for me. It was as if only Chopin understood me, in the midst of a foreign world, as I perceived it in my virtual solitude at the time.

There was a huge influence from Johann Sebastian Bach - Chopin admired him - for these pieces, especially the Preludes op. 28. What does this bring to your playing?
Bach's attitude in composing his Well-Tempered Keyboard was systematic in his choice of keys, progressing by semitones in order to demonstrate an astonishing creativity and mastery of all musical forms. Chopin took a similarly structuring path, but differed in his use of the succession of tonic - relative minor and the fifth of this and so on: for example, C major, A minor, G major, which are the keys of the first three. The impression produced is a kind of retreat from the emotions, as if he were constantly searching for their origin. This creates a sense of underlying unity, whereas otherwise this travel diary of his intimate emotions from day to day might seem to be of a very random order.

Chopin used to tell his pupils to listen carefully to the singers. Have you found your own way of doing this?
I worked for a long time as an accompanist with singers of all levels. I've been lucky enough to accompany some of the world's greatest artists, and paradoxically, the ones who prepared me best were the beginners, who are much harder to support. Obviously, breath and breathing are essential for singers, but not everyone knows how to breathe musically; the musical discourse could be compared to a succession of waves; these waves consist of a succession of tensions and relaxations in which the instrumentalist's breathing can find its place. These waves can only be found, sometimes coded in a sophisticated way, in the score. It was the composer Narcis Bonet, with whom I worked for a long time, who taught me how to read works from this point of view.

Let's talk about Sonata No. 3. It represents the grief that so many of us in the world actually feel and that so many people feel the same way in their lives and, on the other hand, what the

composer endured in his life? How can you show these deep feelings, do you use or have a particular technique?
I was thinking the same thing and having gone through grief myself I thought that would help me convey it in music. But that's not enough: music is also the art of feeling other people's grief and is in itself a form of empathy. Cultivating this empathy is essential to being able to touch others.

The 24 preludes make up the second part. Why are the 24 preludes the second part?
During public recitals, I realised that the sonata, with its highly structured structure, makes it easier to listen to the shorter pieces in the second part.

I read that you were 'connected' to the mantra of Nichiren, a 13th-century Japanese Buddhist priest: Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō - what does this mean for your performance?
This mantra allows us to purify our six roots, which are the 5 senses (hearing, sight, touch, smell, taste) and the consciousness that allows us to make harmonious use of the information they give us. Chanting Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō therefore allows me over time to constantly progress in my art, and to improve my empathy towards others, without exception.

In your family, there are no musicians (are there?) but there are well-known doctors. How did you get the idea of playing the piano and what influence did this family background have on your personal development and career?
We didn't have a piano at home. When I was very young, I listened to a lot of records. By the age of 5 or 6, for example, I knew whole passages of Don Giovanni, most of Beethoven's symphonies and, above all, the Grieg concerto by heart, so they took me to see a piano teacher who played the beginning for me. What a shock! My psychiatrist parents were very wary of an education designed to train a child prodigy professionally, so they encouraged me instead to study science until I was 17. But for a pianist to start working seriously at that age is very late! And you also ask yourself a lot of questions about life that other people don't have the answers to. Thanks to Buddhism, I was finally able to be supported by my parents and find a personal unity that encompasses all areas of life, of which music is a part.

Which composers are on your list for the future?
In the immediate future, it will certainly be Schubert to whom I'd like to return because he's one of the composers who are vital to me, along with Beethoven. In 2016, I already recorded the Impromptus op.142 with Teldex in Berlin. Schubert touches listeners in such an intimate way that everyone has the impression of having their own Schubert inside them. For a long time I accompanied the great cycles, Winterreise, Die Schone Mullerin, Schwanengesang and many other Lieder. In these troubled social times, I really feel the need to rediscover and share these essential emotions through his music for piano solo.