

THE FOURTH BALLAD BY F. CHOPIN IN PERFORMING INTERPRETATIONS

BALADA NR. 4 DE F. CHOPIN ÎN INTERPRETĂRI DE PERFORMANȚĂ

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Baladele pentru pian ale lui Chopin ocupă un loc special în repertoriul concertistic al pianiștilor din secolul XXI, reprezentanți ai diferitelor școli naționale și tradiții interpretative. Articolul este dedicat analizei interpretării Baladei a patra de F. Chopin de către reprezentanți remarcabili ai artei pianului contemporan: A. Sultanov (Rusia), Li Yundi (China) și Kh. Buniatishvili (Georgia). Analiza comparativă a interpretărilor performante ale Baladei permite autorului să se apropie de înțelegerea multidimensionalității ideii compozitorului, să înțeleagă originalitatea și profunzimea fiecărei interpretări în contextul principiilor stilisticii pianistice a lui Chopin. Această rezonanță interpretativă unică ne permite să înțelegem, în primul rând, specificul interpretării textelor muzicale ale lui Chopin și, în al doilea rând, al tradiției romantismului în cultura muzicală contemporană.

Cuvinte-cheie: interpretare performantă, Balada a patra de F. Chopin, tradiții de pian, Alexei Sultanov, Li Yundi, Kh. Buniatishvili

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Chopin's piano ballads occupy a special place in the concert repertoire of the pianists of the 21st century, representatives of various national schools and performing traditions. The article is devoted to the analysis of the performance of Chopin's Fourth Ballad by outstanding representatives of contemporary piano art: A. Sultanov (Russia), Li Yundi (China) and Kh. Buniatishvili (Georgia). A comparative analysis of the Ballad's performing interpretations allows the author to come closer to understanding the multidimensionality of the composer's idea, to comprehend the originality and depth of each interpretation in the context of the principles of Chopin's piano stylistics. This unique performing resonance allows us to comprehend the specificity of the interpretation of Chopin's musical text and, more broadly the Romanticism tradition in contemporary musical culture.

Keywords: performing interpretation, Fourth Ballad by F. Chopin, piano traditions, Alexey Sultanov, Li Yundi, Khatia Buniatishvili

Introduction

The music of F. Chopin appears to the modern researcher not only as a symbol of romantic and national music, but also as a universal formula of beauty, of the ideal world in its eternal conflict with the surrounding reality. The multiplicity of approaches in various scientific studies and practical understanding of Chopin's music makes it possible to create a kind of „virtual encyclopedia” with countless interpretations and subtexts that reveal the essence of this phenomenon.

The title of the monograph on Chopin by the Polish researcher Mieczysław Tomaszewski [1] denotes the succinct word „resonance”. It is this concept that reveals the procedural component of the life of F. Chopin's music in the space and time of culture, the reaction to his musical works, the perception and personal attitude to a particular opus of the composer, listeners, performers, and researchers. In this context, the interpretative aspect of Chopin's works is of particular relevance, because music in the process of interpretation (performing and musicological), according to B. Asafiev who thinks that music can turn into „a living figurative speech full of significance” [2 p. 215].

It is the performing interpretation that contributes to the discovery of new facets of Chopin's musical world in all its depth, provides a look „inside” the musical text and builds its multidimensional contextual relationships. In this respect, the study of interpretation becomes one of the ways of knowing music, relying on modern scientific methods – historical, semantic, musical-psychological, etc.

The purpose of this paper is to reveal the diversity and individual features of the performing readings of F. Chopin's *Fourth Ballad* by Alexei Sultanov, Li Yundi, Khatia Buniatishvili.

Among scientific sources, let us mention the works of B. Asafiev, A. Kudryashov, Y. Tyulin, devoted to the problems of interpreting the content of musical works, including the *Ballads* by F. Chopin [2, 3, 4]. A separate range of works (studies by M. Tomashevsky and O. Skorbyashchenskaya) is connected with the study of Chopin's own performing manner and the development of traditions of interpretation of his opuses from the second half of the 19th century to the present [1, 5]. A comprehensive study of F. Chopin's *Fourth Ballad* is presented in the studies of Ya. Flier, N. Vieru [6, 7].

I. Ballads by F. Chopin in the space of contemporary piano art

It should be noted that modern interpretations of Chopin's music tend to follow the classical principle of strict adherence to the musical text and remarks. However, along with this rather strict approach, there are occasional drifts towards „pseudo-romanticism” or unified, impersonal „pseudo-classicism”. At the same time, the fundamental features of Chopin's performing manner were always „poetry and intimacy, the absence of any pompousness and pathos, affectation and sentimentality; simplicity, naturalness and restraint with spontaneous liveliness ... and continuous changeability” [1 p. 138]. The special meaning of the expressiveness of the Polish genius's playing is revealed in the quality of sound production, the peculiarities of the touch, *the rubato* principle, and the subtle gradations of the pedal.

The „musical world” of F. Chopin's *Ballads* is conditioned by the semantic dominants of Romantic culture, including the incomprehensibility of existence, the inseparable connection of the human soul with nature and national history. Among many contemporary performers who have turned to

Chopin's work and, in particular, to the interpretation of *the Fourth Ballad*, we have chosen three pianists representing piano schools of different countries and directions – Alexei Sultanov (Russia), Li Yundi (China) and Khatia Buniatishvili (Georgia). Each of them is a vividly original musician who has been able to say his own word in piano performance, and for each of them turning to *the Fourth Ballad* was a crucial stage in their professional development. As analytical material of the study we chose recordings of a Chopin's performance of the *Fourth Ballad*. A. Sultanov at the 13th *International Frederic Chopin Piano Competition* (Warsaw, 1995) [8], Li Yundi's concert at *Carnegie Hall* (23.03.2016) [9], a studio recording by Kh. Buniatishvili (2015) [10].

Pianist Alexei Sultanov (1969–2005), who tragically passed away early, won the second prize at the 1995 *International Chopin Competition*. Having adopted the traditions of the H. Neuhaus school in L. Naumov's class, A. Sultanov, in his work, relied on its fundamental principles, filling his own performing interpretations with deep figurative content, meaningful emotional expression and spirituality, expressiveness of musical speech [11].

The Chinese pianist Li Yundi (born 1982) is a graduate of Shenzhen Art Institute (class of Dan Zhao Yi). Li Yundi won the 14th *Chopin Piano Competition* in 2000 at the age of 18. His outright victory in this competition is the first in the musical history of the PRC, and in 2015. Li Yundi had already been invited as a jury member for this competition in Warsaw. Today, in an interview, the pianist admits that his interpretations and understanding of the great Polish music have changed considerably over time: „I feel that ten years ago I was performing Chopin's works in an academic style. Now, however, I feel more free and play more freely” [12].

Khatia Buniatishvili (born 1987) is a representative of the modern European piano school. She studied in Tbilisi with Professor Tengiz Amirejibi, a renowned Georgian chopinist performer. She later continued her studies at the Vienna University of Music and Performing Arts with Oleg Meisenberg. Among the many official albums recorded by the pianist is a mono-programme of works by F. Chopin in various genres.

Let us turn to a semantic-interpretative comparative analysis of the performing readings of the text of Chopin's *Ballad* by the above pianists.

II. Comparative analysis of performing interpretations of F. Chopin's Fourth Ballad

The Fourth Ballad in *f*-moll Op. 52 with an official dedication to Baroness S. Nathaniel de Rothschild was written by F. Chopin at the turn of the middle and late stages of the composer's work — in the summer of 1842. Semantically, this opus combines romantic poetics and deep philosophical reflection on the eternal values of existence. According to researchers, the hidden programme of the work contains a dualistic concept opposing „love” and „death” [quoted in 3, p. 259, 4, p. 41]. The thematic basis of *the Fourth Ballad* consists of an opening theme and two main themes reflecting the diversity of lyrical experiences, the clash of idyllic contemplation and sensual expression. The dramatic collision of the development of the „musical plot” leads to a tragic denouement. Thus, each pianist faces the complex multilevel task of interpreting *the Ballad's* musical text and conveying its figurative content.

The introduction-prologue is interpreted by the performers in a similar vein. However, let us note some distinctive features in their interpretation. Thus, Kh. Buniatishvili performs this section with an emphasized clear ending of each phrase, accentuating them with dynamics, *ritenuto*, listening to all the concluding sounds. It is subtly pedaled, creating a contemplative and enlightened image.

Li Yundi performs the introduction at a slower tempo than the set *Andante con moto* (mm. 1–7), measuredly, somewhat deliberately lapidary, without agogic deviations. A slight slowing down is made by him only at the very end of the section (mm. 6–7). A. Sultanov elects a slightly more lively pace for the introduction to the *Ballad*. In his performance, the whole fragment sounds in one breath, holistically, with a slight slowing down in the final bars. The pianist achieves dynamic variety in the sound of the instrument from *pp* to *mp* (mm. 1–3).

However, later on each of the performers makes their own semantic accents in the dramaturgy of the musical and thematic development of the *Ballad*. In this context, here is a fragment from an interview with A. Sultanov, who reflects on the principles of his own approaches to the process of musical interpretation: „It is interesting for me to see in a piece of music what no one has seen before me <...> Any musical text objectively contains everything that can become the subject of reinterpretation, and thus, the discovery of new facets of music. Born of the composer's genius, once out from under his pen, it begins to live its own independent life. The task of the interpreter is to understand and lay bare this life” [13].

The very structure of *the Ballad's* first main theme (1m.+1m.+2m.) seems to push the performer towards its simplified solution: division into motives with local climaxes. However, the syncopated rhythm and the lack of pauses between motifs allow it to be thought of more broadly and weightily. In the performance of this theme, Kh. Buniatishvili and A. Sultanov have much in common (although the Georgian pianist chooses a slightly more mobile tempo, mm. 8–12). The theme sounds smooth, simple, with no tempo deviations.

In the process of musical development of the ballad's thematicism, a special role is played by repeated variation repetitions, which reveal, according to J. Ecker, „an authentic feature” of Chopin's creative thinking. Ecker thinks that this is an „authentic feature” of the composer's creative thinking: „The type of Chopin's artistic thinking is variation. This thinking constitutes above all the richness of creative imagination” [quoted in 1, p. 162]. The logic of the development of such thematic variants requires special attention, as they often represent a new transformed / transformed turn in the development of thought.

A. Sultanov thinks of the repetitions of motives as an echo, as a result of which the elegiac sad image is enlightened (mm. 11–12). When approaching the modulation in *As-dur*, Kh. Buniatishvili uses a dynamic wave that allows this chain of motives to be built into a unified whole. Li Yundi's interpretation of the main theme reveals its romantic nature to the full; he is more emotional in his sound production, builds a relief dynamic line, and makes extensive use of agogic techniques. They create a sense of free, almost improvisational development of the material. However, in the same fragment, the Chinese pianist reveals the bass line too prominently, in a somewhat mannered way, playing it as if lagging behind.

The main theme is interrupted by the appearance of new material (mm. 38–45) based on the repetition of a single sound; this section is prepared by the dynamic fall of *pp*. As a rule, musical phrases of this kind are associated with images of the unearthly, the otherworldly; the theme is rhythmically neutral and sounds mysterious due to the departure into the distant tonalities of *Ges – Fes*. A. Sultanov plays this phrase as if from afar, compensating for the monotony of the melody with an expressive performance of the bass line. The pianist is fluent in octave *legato*. In his reading, the music takes on a character of undercurrent, of ghostliness.

Kh. Buniatishvili, on the contrary, speeds up the tempo somewhat, compressing this section-transition to continue the development of the main theme. Thus, the next thematic wave (from m. 46) in her performance sounds already in a faster tempo. In fact, this is the first stage of culmination, to which Kh. Buniatishvili approaches it gradually, clearly emphasizing the textural polyphonic lines. Li Yundi creates a somewhat detached, as if in a light haze of muted romance, while actively using the left pedal, which helps him create a maximum *legato* effect, a sonic integrity.

The climax of the section ends with a sharp dynamic decline in the last bars (mm. 74–77). In the interpretation of A. Sultanov and Li Yundi's interpretation of the climax sounds more sharply, and the preparation for it begins only after the author's *tenuto* remark (we emphasize that all three performers adhere very clearly to this author's instruction).

The second theme of *the Ballad* (m. 80, *B-dur*) directs the development into the realm of poised tranquility. Performed by A. Sultanov and Li Yundi, it appears as a romantic barcarolle with a strict

chordal texture. A. Sultanov, along with the melodic line, highlights the bass as a counterpoint to the main thematic line. Li Yundi is more romantic in his performance interpretation, his playing is characterized by active agogic, the addition of *arpeggiato*, emphasis and accentuation of upper sounds, *rubato*. Kh. Buniatishvili also performs this theme more movingly, vividly carrying out the theme of the middle voices and bass.

The developing section of *the Ballad* (from m. 100) abounds in polyphonic techniques. All three performers carefully follow the textual remarks (*a tempo, tenuto, crescendo, leggiero*). They manage to find the reference points of the melodic line in common forms of movements and passages, at the same time each follows his individual manner of performance. In a multi-layered texture, the pianists distinguish three layers (melodic line, chordal accompaniment of the middle voices and bass line), which are well audible and, at the same time, simultaneously form a rich, voluminous sound; this is also facilitated by the performers' careful work with the pedal.

The theme of the introduction (m. 123), as the boundary of this section, arises from the echoes of the opening bars of the work, but in a transformed form. The return of the main body of *the Ballad* (m. 135) combines features of completion/reprise and development. The polyphonic techniques used in this section serve as a means of dynamisation, a greater concentration of musical thought, compared to the original conduct of the theme.

Kh. Buniatishvili interprets this section as an integral structure built on the principle of dynamic accretion of all elements: textural compaction, breadth of register contrasts, voluminousness, timbre diversity, gradual wave-like accretion of the total sound mass. A. Sultanov is particularly attentive to the drawing of counterpoint lines, echoing the introduction of each voice. The theme in his performance takes on the character of a triumphant victory march. Li Yundi makes extensive use of *rubato* at moments of the greatest emotional tension, while at the same time creating a sense of continuously increasing dynamics of the sound stream.

The final passage (mm. 166–168), with its slowing of tempo and fading of dynamics, allows the beginning of the second theme (m. 169, *a tempo*) to stand out more vividly. Throughout its further development, this theme is transformed from a calm and uncomplicated barcarolle melody into a hymn of joy, sensuality with great emotional intensity. The pianists manage to achieve an orchestral sound in this section, combined with attention to varied harmonic turns and emphasizing the melodic lines of the middle voices. The emotional breakdown and coda transition that follows (mm. 201–202) is seen as particularly tragic in the context of the whole.

This transition, preceded by the luminous, contemplative music of the previous section (mm. 203–210), is one of the keys to understanding the tragic essence of the ballad. Researchers point to the hidden programme of *the Fourth Ballad*, which implies the development of the themes of life, death, love, and the worship of the ideal typical of *Romanticism* [quoted in 4, p. 44–45; 7, p. 241]. At the same time, the general emotional tone of the *Ballad* is not pathos-pathetic; there is a deeply personal and reflective tone, the essence of which is revealed in the general dramaturgy.

It is this dramaturgical situation/fracture that is interpreted differently by the performers. After *the stretto* remark Kh. Buniatishvili does not actually change the tempo, logically attaching harmonic consonances to the previous development and intensifying the contrast with the following chords on *the pianissimo* (the dominant prelude to the main tonality of *f-moll*).

A. Sultanov slows down the tempo noticeably in the marked section, bringing the semantic significance of the chords as a transition into a new emotional sphere. Li Yundi artistically plays with this situation with a deliberate closing gesture, thus „tricking” the audience into applauding him. It becomes clear that the previous triumph of the bright and positive is only an illusion.

The tragic coda (from m. 211) is a synthesis of individual intonations/motives from the previous thematic formations with the predominant use of common forms of movement, texture changes and wave-like construction of phrases with acceleration and dynamic build-up in the last bars of *the Ballad*.

Conclusions

All three pianists are colorful musicians, personalities of great artistic will, presenting deep spiritual work and mastery in their reading of Chopin's *Fourth Ballad*. Each of them demonstrates the intonational sensitivity and meaningfulness of F. Chopin's musical ideas. They avoid abstract „admirable beauties” in the lyrical sections, but subordinate the performance to the general logic of dramatic development. Their playing crosses the line of technical complexity of the opus, „virtuosity for virtuosity's sake”. At the same time, their performing skills are underpinned by a perfection of technique harmonized with the depth of the musical content.

The comparison of three interpretations of Chopin's *Ballad* allowed us to identify the peculiarities of each interpreter's performing concept from the point of view of the manner of presentation of the performed text, the quality of sound production, the touch, pedalisation, the peculiarities of comprehension of the musical time, the role of texture in the creation of the whole, the logic of form formation, and the general dramaturgy of the whole.

A. Sultanov's style of playing is characterized by increased emotionality of expression, brightness, plasticity of musical images, variety of touches, and his so-called „talking” sound deserves special attention. Note the special balance between the pianist's vivid artistry and his „ascetic” behaviour on stage, without unnecessary hand movements and additional mimicry. The pianist Li Yundi is in full command of *rubato* and pedalisation. His performance is distinguished by empathy and romantic sensuality. In certain fragments, he allows for a slightly more sentimental sound production, leading to a certain romanticization of *the Ballad*. In Kh. Buniatishvili's interpretation, the finest dynamic palette and expressive phrasing are developed, virtuoso impulsiveness is combined with flexible „shir-tiness” of performance.

Thus, the musical reading of F. Chopin's *Fourth Ballad* by A. Sultanov, Li Yundi and Kh. Buniatishvili testify to the originality of their interpretation, avoiding the unification of the performing manner. The pianists are involved in the natural process of „live” music-making, creating a musical image „here and now”. Their musical reading reflects the very pulse of Chopin's music.

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