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KUBA STANKIEWICZ - CHOPIN SONGBOOK

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What are your concert plans for 2010? Are you going to mark Fryderyk Chopin's bicentenary focusing on the Songs?

We are now working on our schedule and you could say that *Chopin Songbook* will constitute and important part of our concert life next year.

You mentioned in one of your interviews that the Songbook concerts attracted more attention abroad than in Poland. Why do you think this is the case?

The world has not yet gone mad about Chopin the way Poland has, that is why our project could be experienced purely in artistic terms, without the unnecessary burden of the marketing gibberish. The more happy we are to see the project thriving on its own, collecting warm reviews... I think in Poland we overusing the Chopin name, brand, image a little bit. We have Chopin vodka, soon we might have Chopin long Johns. We need to keep to our common sense here. Avoid the mindless canonising mocked by Gombrowicz. Perhaps the Polish audience is a little bit tired of the obtrusive marketing and approaches all Chopin-tagged projects with distrust, just to be on the safe side.

In the Jubilee Year, Chopin-related content will be even more abundant than usually. Nevertheless, the music will be in the foreground, hopefully, overshadowing the associations with vodka, for example. Is there any 2010 event which you especially look forward to?

It is hard to pinpoint one particular event. I think the whole year will be full of interesting and artistically inspiring events. I also hope that it will be an opportunity to bring Chopin's music closer to wider audiences, whom the media have been feeding up to date with the Eurovision song contests and similar creations of the so-called music industry. The term "industry" is absolutely suitable here.

You have been underlining that originally you weren't very enthusiastic about recording the songs. What is your general opinion about projects combining jazz and old-time music?

Music is changing, evolving and such attempts at combining old-time compositions and contemporary music may sometimes be very interesting. It is an individual matter, however. Finding an idea is key here.

Jazz inspired by Chopin has its own glorious tradition in Poland already – we've seen Andrzej Jagodziński, Leszek Możdżer, Włodzimierz Nahorny embarking on Chopin-inspired projects. In what way were you influenced by what they did when working on Chopin Songbook?

Each of us has his own musical language, his fascinations and sources of inspiration. Yet in the course of the creative, arrangement, process you need to forget about the whole world and let the world of sounds take over. Perhaps there are some reminiscences of concerts or recordings you've once heard at the back of your mind, but these are not direct inspirations to be sure. I appreciate my colleagues' work a lot, but I think each of us has chosen his own musical path.

Who, in your opinion, is the target audience of jazz interpretations of the music of Chopin and other great composers?

That's a very interesting question. Classical and jazz music fans are just a tiny fraction of al. consumers of the so-called music. Most of our fellow citizens unfortunately listen to, well, what they listen to. The answer to your question is: a very small audience. Yet, that just a fact of life, you cannot turn your nose up at it, but keep doing your thing, as Wojciech Młynarski used to say.

Can such projects entourage jazz lovers to start listening to classical music?

Let's hope so!!!

What is this album's place in your work as a whole? Was it a one-time "cooperation" with a Romantic composer or are you intending to embark on other projects inspired by music written a couple of centuries ago?

Yes, up until now it's been my only album combining jazz and classical music, so to say, but I do have some new ideas beginning to form in my head. But it's too early to discuss them yet...

Have you used any of the traditional recordings of the songs when working on the album? Does any of them have a special place in your heart?

Yes, naturally. I especially liked Joanna Kozłowska'a and Ewa Iżykowska's interpretations. They are very natural, they fully render the beauty of the composition.

What was the guiding principle of selecting individual songs for the album? Why does it feature *The Handsome Lad* in English only?

What was important for us, and for Inga especially, was for the lyrics to be feminine. Some of the original songs have masculine lyrics, often sang by women. It seems that it wasn't a particular problem in the 19th century, today, however, it would sound strange. That is also the reason why we decided to drop the Polish version of *The Handsome Lad* – the contrast between the Old Polish lyrics and the contemporary music arrangement would be too acute, and we wanted to avoid comic elements.

You've said that there is a fine line between creative interpretation and kitsch. What are definite don'ts, things that you must avoid when creating such interpretations? What in turn leaves some room for freedom?



This question links with the previous one in some way. The initial choice of the material you are going to work on is extremely important. My idea was to treat Chopin's songs in a similar way that jazz musicians have approached jazz standards. Most of the standards are simply songs mostly taken from Broadway musicals. Jazzmen would simply take such a composition, leave the melodic line intact, change the accords here and there, reharmonise, sometimes add their own rhythmic ideas... I was wondering if this approach would "work" for 19th century material. It should be said that Chopin, especially as far as the harmony goes, exceeded his contemporaries by a considerable margin and still brings inspiration to composers such as Antonio Carlos Jobim or present-day jazz pianists (e.g. Brad Mehldau).

Talking about your work on Chopin Songbook you admitted that sometimes having reharmonised a fragment you would go back to its original version. To which song have you introduced most changes?

It's hard to say. The *Lithuanian Song* has its original harmony almost fully retained (except for the coda) – besides it is just excellent and there was really no need to meddle with it too much. *The Double End*, in turn, has almost totally new harmony, with the original melodic line retained. This song's original harmony is also genius, but we wanted to try and make it a bit more "contemporary".

Do you have a favourite track on the album?

Perhaps I'd better not talk about the pieces from our album, but the songs in general. All of them are very interesting in music terms, however, my absolute favourite is *Melody*. In its harmony, there are things going on which definitely exceed the 19th century.

Some of the songs, e.g. *Melody*, *Reverie*, *Out of my Sight*, or *Sad River*, were originally very expressive, robustly Romantic, not to say – excitable. The same goes for their classical interpretations. In Inga Lewandowska's interpretation there is nostalgia, sadness, but all the traces of excitability are gone – the compositions are subtle, delicate, almost ascetic. Was it your idea for the songs from the start or did it evolve over the four years separating their pre-premiere on the 150th anniversary of Chopin's death and the album's recording in 2003?

Interpretations evolve all the time. Our programme today sounds differently than the album from 2003. We try to avoid over-expressiveness, or excitability as you call it. Let the music speak for itself.

Do you ever play Chopin's piano pieces just for pleasure? Do you have your favourite composition?

I sometimes play them at home, never in public. I think I am most moved by Ballade in G minor Op. 23, and the Horowitz's interpretation at Carnegie Hall simply has no equal...

Thank you very much indeed for the conversation.

(Interview by Agnieszka Szopińska, CHOPIN 2010 Celebrations Office)

Kuba Stankiewicz is one of Poland's best jazz pianists. He debuted professionally in Jan "Ptaszyn" Wróblewski's and Zbigniew Namysłowski's ensembles (1985–1987). He toured with the latter in the USA and Mexico and recorded the albums *Open* and *Song of Innocence*. In 1987–1990 he studied the piano at the Berklee College of Music in Boston and toured across the USA with Artie Shaw's orchestra. He received the *Oscar Peterson Award* and reached the semi-finals of the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Piano Competition in held Washington D.C. Having returned to Poland, Stankiewicz set up his own ensemble. Their album *Northern Song* was voted the best album of 1993 by the readers of the *Jazz Forum* magazine. In 1994 Kuba Stankiewicz's musical accomplishments earned him the award of the Polish Radio's Third Channel – *Mateusz '94*. Critics have also highly praised the albums he recorded with the *Traveling Birds Quintet* (also including Darek Oleszkiewicz, Piotr Wojtasik, Piotr Baron and Cezary Konrad). Kuba Stankiewicz has also worked together with Art Farmer (on the album *Art in Wrocław*), Scott Hamilton, Harvie Swartz, Sheila Jordan and is a member of international jazz ensemble *Central European Jazz Connection*. Kuba Stankiewicz runs the piano class at the Jazz Programme of Zielonagóra University, Poland. He is also an Apple Certified Trainer in *Logic Pro 8*. In May 2009 he was awarded a doctorate in instrumental studies from the Instrumental Studies Department of the Academy of Music in Wrocław, Poland.





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