

A CONVERSATION WITH PIANIST REBECCA PENNEYS, deuxième partie

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BY CHRISTOPHER BRODERSEN – FANFARE MAGAZINE

I'm seated together with Rebecca Penneys in one of the piano studios at the University of South Florida in Tampa, just prior to the start of the Rebecca Penneys Piano Festival, or RPPF. The topic today is her brand-new Chopin Blu-ray—which is also available on DVD, of course. It's a sequel to the previous video, which was a mixed program.

And there will be a third one. It's a mixed program like the first one.

Can you give away any secrets, or not yet?

It will have some Scarlatti and Soler on it. Some Brahms, some piano rags. So, it's really a mixed bag.

Great. Recorded on the same piano and in the same venue?

Yes, the same instrument, but in a more intimate environment than in the previous videos. I'm amazed how different my piano sounds every time I switch venues.

It probably says somewhere on the jacket, but where were the first two recordings made? It looks to be a huge hall with a big pipe organ.

It's the St. Petersburg College Music Center. The hall seats about 300 people. It's a medium-sized hall, but the acoustics are really beautiful.

You seem to be concentrating on videos. Any plans for CDs, or is this the way you plan to record from now on?

The third DVD will probably be the last of its kind, and then after that I haven't decided. I want to record as much as possible while I can still play—you never know when your number's up.

One of the projections I made when I stopped teaching full-time at Eastman was to be able to do more projects like this. When you're teaching a full load with classes, student recitals, juries, and so on, it all takes time. Not that I don't love teaching, it's just that I don't know how much time I have left on earth, and I want to set aside some time for my own projects. So, I'm not sure what will happen after this third DVD comes out.

Was it a conscious decision to record DVDs as opposed to CDs?

Yes, because my whole philosophy centers around the idea that if you're going to play an instrument in public, you have to do it with ease; you have to be comfortable. Whatever interpretation you choose, whatever emotion you want to convey, you shouldn't be working against a physical limitation. I've devoted almost 50 years to demonstrating as best I can how to play the piano with maximum efficiency and minimal effort. I thought it might be nice, while I'm still on this planet, to have some video showing the way I play. I think it's helpful for students to see how I take out the excess tension, and for them to see how I use my body without strain or stress. Because if you have an idea, you should be able to do it without having to work through physical limitations.

Well, the obvious difference between CD and DVD is that with a DVD there's little or no editing. Every piece on this video looks like it was done in a single take. Virtually note-perfect, and yet there are no discernable edits. There aren't any mistakes!

I do make mistakes, and there *are* mistakes in this video. If you really know the music, you would hear them. You know, I don't necessarily like everything I hear when it's played back. The obvious solution to that is: Don't listen to your own recordings.

As a performer, you're always moving in time. If you record a piece on Monday, by the time you get to Friday you think, "well, I could have done that a lot better." A recording is really a snapshot—it's "one day in the life of." I believe in live performance; it's much more rewarding for both performer and listener.

So that was your goal—to give people a live performance, in opposed to a heavily edited studio recording.

Right. We're all human. My view of performing—and this also extends to my teaching—is that I'm not trying to make myself more mechanical in my interaction with the piano. I'm trying to make the piano more human.

We all experience different moods, different feelings from day to day. One day you may wake up and feel great, the next you may you might be down in the dumps. I feel that everything we do is, in a way, a compromise. It goes without saying, that there are edits in all of my DVDs and CDs.

But if your goal was the re-creation of a live performance, that's a very commendable attitude. I'm sure you're aware that the vast majority of CDs are the exact opposite—heavily edited with multiple inserts.

As a pedagogue, I've watched countless students prepare audition tapes, either for a competition or to apply to graduate school, and they will record a piece *over and over again*, day after day in order to get it absolutely perfect. It needn't be said that the more perfect the playing, the duller the performance, because all the spontaneity has been removed. Let's face it; when you walk out on stage, you don't know what's going to happen, and that's half of the fun and excitement. You may have an idea, but even if you've planned out everything to the nth degree, stuff happens.

Stuff happens.

So, when you make a video, if you play through the piece and something goes wrong, you simply play the piece again and hope the second time is better. One of the secrets I learned from people like Horowitz and Rubinstein was how they were able to recover from mistakes. Their power of recovery was simply amazing.

You have to put everything in a broader perspective. For my money, I think live music is best, and it's important for people to attend as many live concerts as possible. It's the best way to experience music, as opposed to something that's been picked over and over. Right?

I agree, but I don't think that topic has been addressed enough by record critics.

In general, it's not a very popular idea: that imperfections are okay. [*laughs*] Maybe it's a part of getting older, at least for me, because you can't always expect to be perfect. All my CDs and DVDs were made in a five- to six-hour recording stretch, usually in one day, and I still always play from memory.

Now that I think about it, the way each movement was shot, there were cuts between multiple cameras, but the sound continues.

Some of that was on purpose, in case one camera broke down, or a second take was inserted.

But that makes it even harder, if not impossible, to edit musically.

Yes. Also, I played some of the movements connected, because I wanted the sound to flow from one to the other. For example, I did this in the op. 27 Nocturne with the Berceuse, because that was the concept at the time: Instead of starting from silence, using the resonance of the piano to lead into the next piece. I think the visual aspect enhances that, especially because so few performers do that nowadays.

Going back to why I'm doing DVDs, there are performance styles that people did in the past that have fallen out of popularity. One of these is the historical stance on resonance and the use of the sustaining pedal. Just because it's not popular today doesn't mean it shouldn't be used. These are the sort of things I want to reintroduce in my videos.

Sure. One of the ideas that struck me in your opening remarks about Chopin is that there are moments in the music where he seems to be "transported" to a higher place.

I think that's very true. Just think of how young he was. He died when he was 39....

Maybe not all that young for the 19th century, but for our standards certainly.

In a few years I'll be twice his age when he died! [*laughs*] When I look back to when I was in my 30s, that's a long time ago. My sense of life was certainly different back then. One's perspective changes as one gets older. You can call it aging, or you can call it maturity, whatever you want. But there's no question that when Chopin gets going on the piano, there are places where he opens a window and says, "I'm going on a trip now," as for example when he uses a seventh chord and writes a little cadenza. It was his way of escaping from the "real" world and having absolute freedom.

He was transcending his daily problems.

He transcended the hardships of life and entered into a kind of trance. I've read accounts that he used opium. So, what if he did? I'm sure he didn't use it all the time. He was able to go to this special place via music, which is why he spent so much time at the piano. Anyone who does that sort of thing nowadays would be labeled compulsive, a piano nerd. Chopin loved doing that; He enjoyed having the complete world at his fingertips. He was, of course, rather shy....

He didn't do well in society.

Right. And he was sickly and skinny, so all these things contributed to his demeanor. One of his biggest joys in life was to sit down at the piano and go off on a trip.

That seems very apt. What also strikes me from your DVD is how incredibly complex Chopin's music is. It must be very challenging to play, as least from my perspective as a non-pianist.

Actually, I think Chopin spent a lot of time thinking about the *easiest* way to play the piano. All the études, and many of the other pieces that are in effect études but not labeled as such, these are evidence of Chopin's desire to demonstrate what was after all a relatively new instrument. The early 19th-century piano as built by Pleyel, Érard, and others was really a transitional instrument between the fortepiano and the modern piano. Chopin devoted a lot of thought to the possibilities of this new instrument. By introducing new figurations and a new, expanded way of playing, he added to the stylistic capabilities of the piano.

At the time, pianists were not set up to deal with these figures that spanned an octave and a third or fourth, for example. I think he enjoyed exploring that with himself and with his students. That's what his output is really about.

Pushing the envelope of the piano.

Right. Also, as far as I'm concerned, he's the first Impressionist composer. I'm sure Debussy loved studying Chopin and was inspired by it.

That's interesting. Did Debussy ever write about that?

I remember reading about that. But you can also hear how he borrowed ideas from Chopin. Certainly, Debussy built upon Chopin's concept of sound and his use of the pedal. Of course, there's Liszt as well, with his chromatic and thematic transformation, so Chopin wasn't Debussy's only inspiration. But he's a significant influence, and a different sort of voice from the other Romantics, because he wrote almost exclusively for the piano, and his music is unique in that regard.

Have you ever experimented with Chopin on a piano from his era, like an Érard?

Well, his preferred piano was a Pleyel. And yes, I have played some beautiful Pleyels.

Is there any reason to use a period piano, or is it too much of a hassle?

I think that every performer should have at least some experience with the piano of a given composer's era, whether it's a Walter, or a Graf, or a Pleyel. You'll learn a ton if you play Beethoven on one of his instruments, or a copy of one. You'll learn a ton if you play an Érard that's in good shape. Because it's important to hear, as close as humanly possible, the sound that the composer heard. That's not to say that if Chopin were to walk into this room, he wouldn't love the modern Steinway sitting here—he would. But his compositions would sound different from the sound he carried in his head, and *do* sound different, because every piece of music is “time stamped” in a way.

If you play a late Broadwood, which is one of the ancestors of a modern Steinway, you'll find that it's quite different. Different color spectrum, different nuances. It's obvious to me that every one of these composers was in love with the varying tonal colors and nuances of their respective instruments. It's a fascinating world of poetry in sound. So, if you get a chance to hear, for example, the original organ that Bach used, it can open up windows to your own interpretation.

That's a commendable attitude, but I would venture to say that there probably aren't too many modern pianists who would agree with you on that point.

I think everyone should go around and try original instruments. One of the biggest revelations I ever had was when I played some Beethoven on a late Broadwood. I discovered that the pedals of that piano were capable of such beautiful sounds. I thought, "Oh my gosh—if I hadn't played this instrument, I would have never known that." There's no way, of course, that Beethoven could have reached 200 years into the future and determined that, yeah, the piano will stay exactly the same and the people will know what to do. Obviously, that wasn't the case.

Naturally there's plenty of opportunity to hear what period instruments are all about on YouTube and elsewhere—up to a certain point. But it's not the same as sitting down and playing yourself—getting to know the sound, touch, and feel of these historical instruments. Do you know what I mean? You need the whole picture, and so that goes back to the reason why I wanted to make these videos.

I'm always amazed at the ease with which pianists like yourself conquer difficult music like Chopin. And of course, you play it all from memory.

That's not such a big deal. I've played these pieces for a while, and besides, I always play from memory. First of all, I was one of those people, fortunately, who didn't have to work very hard in order to memorize a piece. You read through it, you decide how you want it to go, and then you follow through. What is memory? It's not just the physical mapping of the piece, but also the interpretation. There are different levels of memory—mental, emotional—and you use all of them in preparing a piece. Also, you have cues, something like how you remember how to drive from point A and point B without looking at a map.

But I imagine this is also an important topic in pedagogy.

It's very individual from student to student; some people do better at memorizing than others. My philosophy as a teacher is not to concentrate on the strong areas, but strengthen the weak ones, so that the student is a much better all-round pianist and musician. One of the things we talk about is how to keep a piece alive and fresh, and that's true of daily life as well.

Let's say you have a repertoire of hundreds of pieces.

I don't know if it's that many.

Well, then, in the dozens. Like me, I imagine you need to play them on a regular basis in order to keep them in your repertoire.

Not really. Some are pieces that you've played a lot. You may not have played them in 20 years, but you go through a piece once or twice and it's back. It's like riding a bicycle. I haven't been on a bicycle in a long time, but I'm sure I wouldn't any trouble getting back up on one. It might not be so secure for the first five or 10 minutes, but it comes back.

You might be in the one percent who can say that.

Oh, I don't know. There are lots of people like me. All I can say is, the more aware you are of yourself and what you're capable of, the better. Awareness is key to keeping things alive inside. That's what enables me to go back and pull these pieces out after a long hiatus.

Do you add very many brand-new pieces to your repertoire? Something that you absolutely have never seen before, perhaps a commission?

I haven't been playing very much contemporary music in the last few years. No reason in particular; I just haven't been doing it lately. The piano repertoire is so huge, you can't possibly play it all. So, every year I prepare a new program, but with a mix of old and new. It's nice to see how old favorites have "seasoned" themselves, and how they juxtapose with new energy. It's just a joy for me to play to go to the piano every day and play.

That's always an important task: to put together a program where the pieces fit together logically. I know a few pianists for whom that's a continual challenge.

It's always nice to introduce new with the old. You can't always play the same stuff all the time. It would be like wearing the same clothes every day.

For example, you said that you'll be recording some Scarlatti and Soler for the next DVD.

Those are already recorded. But for example, in the upcoming season I'll be playing some Beethoven pieces that I've hardly ever played before. It's fun to keep exploring.

Well, there are the 32 Sonatas of Beethoven and the 555 Sonatas of Scarlatti. One could spend a lifetime on either one.

Absolutely. There's just way too much literature for one person to master. You'll never run out of great piano music.

I suppose one strategy might be to devise a recital, or series of recitals with your students, where you do as many of these as you can.

I used to do that sort of thing when I was teaching.

It must motivate the students.

It was a tremendous motivator. It's also nice to do "living music" projects with the students by working with both budding and established composers—quite different from working with dead composers. I don't consider the music dead, necessarily, but they're not on the same physical plane anymore. Working with a living composer can be so much more rewarding, especially for the aspiring collegiate pianist.

That's one of the small problems with classical music these days: We tend to play music by dead, white, male composers.

It should be a mix, of course. We need to hear a lot more music from women and from people of other races and ethnicities. We're *slowly* working towards that goal, I think.

I forget which writer it was who said that our modern concert halls are like “museums of music.” It’s the equivalent of going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and only looking at paintings from, say, Monet to Picasso.

Right. We don’t want to take those away—we want to add to them.

Your big festival is about to start.

Yes. It starts tomorrow. Well, that’s when everyone arrives.

From all over the world.

Yes, it’s going to be a hectic few days.

But it’s fun, too—right?

Oh yes—it’s wonderful. There are always those little bumps before everyone has arrived, but we manage to get through it.

I imagine that there will be trips to the airport, and some of them will be staying at your place.

Well, we live too far away for that, so they all stay in the USF dorms. There are people coming from as far away as China and South Korea, so it’s a big deal for some of them. It’s a nice group, and we’re going to have a lot of fun—36 students and 19 faculty.

Do you have to turn people away?

Yes. This year we had close to 200 applicants representing 17 countries. We can’t accept any more than 36, because there aren’t enough practice rooms to go around. This is a beautiful building, but it’s not the largest in the world. It’s just perfect for what we want to do. We feel blessed to have RPPF right here in the School of Music, at the University of South Florida, an all-Steinway school.

So, are you getting any sleep? Up at the crack of dawn and in bed after midnight?

That’s right—that’s about it. My next day off will be in 18 days.

Oh, boy.

But it’s going to be a great time. What’s nice is that everybody interacts with everybody else.

Do the students perhaps teach themselves to some extent?

Well, they’re constantly talking to each other, comparing notes. Everybody gets as many lessons with faculty as they want. It’s very fluid, and everybody enjoys one another.

What impressed me was your description of how there isn’t a sense of “competition.”

Right, because we do not have a competition and RPPF is also tuition-free. The festival focuses on the students; the atmosphere is relaxed and very informal. There are also opportunities for socializing, like our Dolphin Cruise and the trip to the Chihuly Museum, and also the Beach Day and the Sunset Dinner.

And getting sponsors is still a challenge?

It's coming along, but we can always use more donors. But every year, like magic, the funding falls into place.

I'm looking forward to attending the first day.

Great—see you there!

CHOPIN Piano Sonata No. 3. Nocturnes, op. 27. Waltz in A♭, op. 34/1. Berceuse. Scherzo No. 3 & •
Rebecca Penneys (pn) • FLEUR DE SON 58045 (Blu-ray: 56:28) & Comments on piano playing and
Chopin