




OCTOBER 31, 2020 BY COLIN CLARKE

Not one misjudgement from Grigory Sokolov in Haydn and Schubert



 Austria Grigory Sokolov (piano). 10.8.2018 concert from Haydnsaal, Esterházy Palace, Eisenstadt, Austria, live-streamed by DG Stage ([click here](#)) on 30.10.2020. (CC)

Haydn – Sonata No.32 in G minor, Hob.XVI:44 (c 1771/73);
Sonata No.47 in B minor, Hob.XVI:32 (c. 1774-76);
Sonata No.49 in C sharp minor, Hob.XVI:36 (c. 1770-75)

Schubert – Impromptus, D 935 (1827)

'Meister-Sonate', we see, on a shot of the programme booklet; And if the Schubert D 935 is not a designated sonata, it has often been posited as such. Nothing overtly showy in the programming here, but instead the lucky audience in the Haydnsaal at Eisenstadt in 2018 heard a masterclass of pianistic beauty and musical integrity.

One has also to notice that Sokolov's Steinway has 'HINVES' written on the side (the exclusive distributor of Steinways in Spain; not quite a Fabbrini imprint, but it does imply his piano travelled with him: the piano on this occasion was indeed maintained by Patrick Hinvés Ballesta).

Sokolov is not one for show in any respect: he is clearly focussed on the music and its performance, both in his approach to and departure from the piano and in his lack of bodily movement while playing. Beginning with some of the most perfect staccato I have heard, Sokolov's reading of Haydn's G minor Sonata, Hob.XVI:44 infolded as some sort of magisterial pearl. This is not what most would consider, on the surface, a technically difficult movement, but Sokolov reminds us that technique extends to the very way we make even a single note sound. Exquisite trills, perfectly judged voice-leading: this was masterly playing. Remarkable that it is captured live – the evidence is there for us to see, yet there seems to be not one misjudgement. The contrast between first and second movement, a melancholy Menuetto, was itself perfectly gauged. One of the most reflective of Haydn's keyboard sonatas, Sokolov's performance was incredibly persuasive, almost an act of love.

Hardly a gap separated the G minor from the B minor. A potent key for Haydn (as his string quartets in that key attest), this indeed seemed the logical extension from the preceding G minor. That Sokolov was able to make us feel the adventuresome nature of the first movement development in such a keen way was remarkable: despite the oceans of music thereafter available to us, we could still hear the sense of harmonic risk Haydn explored. Perfectly scaled accents bite: simple octaves, forte, held great import. Sokolov was able to give the central Menuetto and Trio such internal strength; part balm, yes, but with the shadow of the first movement overlaid. Fascinating to watch Sokolov completely engrossed in the wonderful, pecking finale: he hardly moves when playing, all his energy channelled into the delivery of the music; perfect, even semiquavers, True, when he misses it is all the more noticeable given that perfection around it (one particular slip in this movement), but the resonance with Haydn remained unflappable.

No gap whatsoever this time between the B Minor and the C sharp Minor, a sonata designated at publication as for 'harpsichord, or fortepiano' and often utilising the dynamic capabilities of the latter instrument. Again, Sokolov opted for Haydn the sophisticate: the almost Beethovenian first movement (predicting perhaps the great slow movement of Beethoven's C Major Sonata, Op. 2/3). The capricious Allegro scherzando, its mood heightened by the tightest of turns, was followed by the final Menuetto and Trio, a lachrymose lament, the ending unutterably poignant.

How fascinating to hear the first of the four Impromptus, D 935, the F minor, in a performance of luminescent beauty, the cantabile impeccably vocal in nature, the harmonic awareness complete. In one sense it was a prolongation of the Haydn Sonata we had just heard; in another it was an extension of it, extending the music's canvas. When Schubert strips the texture down to near-nothing, in context it reminds us of the power that Haydn's naturally leaner textures have to move us. And when we hear the familiar opening strains of the A flat, Impromptu it initiates a journey that is almost as wide-ranging as one of the great, late slow movements of the final sonatas, with Sokolov finding a richly resonant low register from his perfectly prepared instrument. One hardly notices the perfectly placed chords in the final bars; one is caught up in the now crepuscular beauty of it all.

How playful Sokolov was with the third Impromptu of D 935; and yet how he also found the more progressive elements in the transitions. He left the stage then, returning for the gentle, caressing Fourth, a haven of crystalline delicacy.

Sokolov is generous with encores: the present tranche began with an impeccable Rameau Le rappel des oiseaux (a wonderful piece fairly recently included by another DG artist, Vikingur Ólafsson, on his brilliant Debussy/Rameau disc). Next up, more Schubert: the Ungarische Melodie, D 817, a piece from September 1824 shot through with the highest melancholy. Sokolov seemed to be asking why we do not hear it more often, particularly given the significant harmonic darkening the piece contains, and how Schubert suddenly lifts us into sunlight, a sublime, near-instantaneous shift. Chopin's D flat major Prélude, Op.28/15, found Sokolov casting a spell: in the opening section. He could have been improvising; the central section, though, was shot through with Gothic import.

Far more obscure was the next encore, Alexander Griboyedov's Waltz in E minor, translucently delivered. The short-lived Griboyedov (1795-1829) was a diplomat, playwright, poet and composer. Gentle, related to Chopin yet somehow even more otherworldly, this was a revelation. Not a surprise that the final encore was a world away from glitz and virtuosity: 'Des pa sur la neige' from the first book of Préludes by Debussy: frozen, almost modernist, each note exquisitely placed; most importantly, seeming to exit time itself.

Sokolov's reputation as one of the greatest – if not the greatest – living pianist remains intact. Nadia Zhdanova (assisted by Maria Novikova) has done a fabulous job as director, right from the opening and closing atmospherics (the audience leaving in darkness and gentle rain) to the unobtrusive camera placement, while audio engineer Michael Serberich has captured Sokolov's myriad nuances perfectly.

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