

SEARCHING FOR CHOPIN

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The famous Chopin autograph sign hanging above the stage at the National Philharmonic, home of the Warsaw Philharmonic, and venue for the 16th Annual International Chopin Piano Competition.

My sheer appreciation of classical piano music didn't quite develop until early on during my adult years. It probably didn't help when I was forced into taking piano lessons at the innocent age of twelve, fiendishly schemed and executed perfectly by my mother, despite my repetitive refusals to comply. The real reason, of course, was that I feared that my pre-teen image would be greatly tarnished by the younger kids of the neighborhood. I couldn't let that happen.

At that time of my life, I was much more interested in rock music. The Rolling Stones was my idea of what classical music should be. Though, I didn't really form much of an opinion in "classical" music in my teens, I definitely enjoyed hearing to it in movies, especially in such great films, such as Stanley Kubrick's "2001 – A Space Odyssey". Nowadays, when I hear a Johann Strauss waltz, I no longer think of 18th century revelers in Venetian masks and fancy gowns, dancing in a grand ballroom with twenty foot

chandeliers hanging above them; but instead, slow rotating floating space stations or airline stewardesses walking carefully down the aisles in zero gravity.

My piano teacher recognized my passive taste for classical music immediately and offered different genres of music to keep me motivated in learning the instrument. Unfortunately, I spent most of my practicing hours learning kitschy popular piano pieces to near perfection, but put aside anything remotely classical, since I had no idea what the music was supposed to sound like.

Ironically, five years later, I started working for the Art & Music department at the Berkeley Public Library, which changed my whole perspective on classical music completely. Oddly, the strict policy of the department, developed by the senior librarian, was to exclusively play classical music recordings, excluding any type of vocal music, including opera that would “distract the patrons”.

Since all the librarians had different tastes in classical music, it still came down to what was “acceptable” to everyone, as anyone had the authority to veto the selection. Chopin and Mozart were the only two composers that were unanimously accepted in the department. In other words, no one ever found offense in Chopin or Mozart’s music. Notably, the most played record, regardless of performer, was the Chopin Waltzes.

Discovery....

One day, I was driving through the beautiful scenic valleys of Sonoma County in Northern California, listening to the local classical music station on the car stereo. After missing out on the announcement of the piece, I turned up the dial to see if I could identify the music and composer myself. I was drawn in immediately after the opening few bars of the solo piano were heard. The music demanded attention. I slowed the car rolling up the windows, so I could hear every single note, including the quietest and softest passages of the music in my car.

The music had Chopin written all over it. Familiar with only his waltzes at the time, it initially sounded like it could have been a sonata; but I wasn’t certain. It led me to an unfamiliar journey filled with poetry and harmonics, leading into loud and thunderous chords during the middle passages, and long running scales that transcended and sped to a thrilling climax. It was unpredictable where the music was going, which added greatly to the tension. I was in complete awe after listening to the final note. I didn’t realize how expressive and dramatic piano music can sound.

It turned out to be Chopin’s Ballade in G minor, opus 23, which has remained to this day, my favorite composition for solo piano by any composer.

Curious to research about the history of Chopin’s first Ballade, I discovered that Chopin, while touring in the spring of 1831, learned of the Russian invasion of Warsaw. Not only was he cut off from his family and friends, but also of his country. According to Chopin’s diary, he felt grief, fear and rage and finally finished the piece, when he had been living in Paris four year later, in exile. I definitely felt his range of emotions reflected in this nine and a half minute composition. This was a much darker Chopin that I had grown accustomed to.

After rushing out to buy the piano music to the Ballades and discovering how extremely difficult it was for me to learn, I still aspired to the challenge. I knew I didn't have the necessary skills to tackle this piece, but was never discouraged.

While attending college, pursuing my business degree, I would find myself during lunch hour, sneaking into college campus music rooms to practice the Ballade, sometimes even skipping my classes, knowing very well that I was never ever going to be good enough to be a concert pianist. I finally learned how to be dedicated.

My arrival in Warsaw

Upon my arrival at the Frederic Chopin International Airport in Warsaw, it became very obvious to me that the International Chopin Piano Competition was probably the most prestigious music competition in the world; certainly for pianists. As soon as I exited customs into the baggage claim area, I was struck with sudden inspiration of emotion, as I found myself gazing at the massive billboard of Chopin in the lobby that took up an entire whole wall of the terminal. This is the birthplace of Chopin.

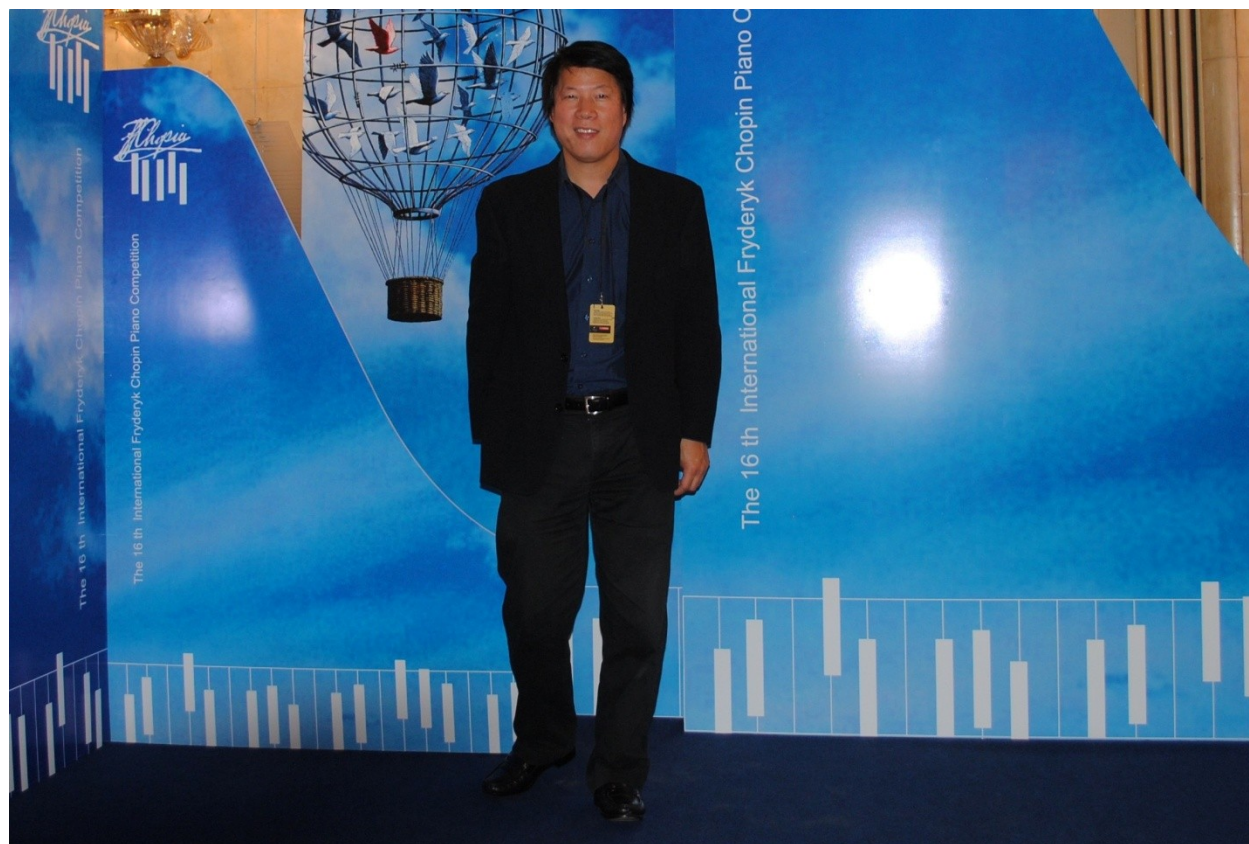


The massive lighted billboard sign at the Frederic Chopin International Airport

As soon as I found myself walking the streets of Warsaw, I noticed that there were Chopin posters not only on billboards, but also on the sides of busses, gates, lamp posts, and even, facades of buildings. Stores carried not only Chopin CD's, books and music scores, but clothing, chocolates, coffee mugs, key chains, postcards, toy pianos, and expensive jewelry...

Even Chopin benches made of cast iron stone were scattered around town, including one that I encountered on *Nowy Świat Street*, across the palace, where the President resides. The benches played 30 to 40 seconds of a Chopin melody at a touch of a button. The benches were strategically placed to places somehow connected with the composer; near houses where he lived and taught while in Warsaw.

Warsaw treats this event grander than the Olympics; and why not? The Olympics only happen once every four years. The International Chopin Piano Competition happens only once every five years. In addition, this was the granddaddy of all anniversaries; Chopin's monumental 200th Anniversary of his birth. That happens only once. Even if there was no competition this year, Poland would have a big enough reason to celebrate. It was "Chopin-mania" here, and Warsaw made it perfectly clear that they were proud of their national hero.



Standing in the lobby of the Philharmonic, for my promo shot.

The Philharmonic and the Jury of the Competition

When I arrived at the Philharmonic for the first time, it was like a dream come true. The Philharmonic is such a beautiful hall, with a ton of history, especially with the past Chopin competitions. Instantly, I was thinking of some of my favorite pianists whose recordings I would constantly play over and over on LP, who won prizes in past competitions, and whom would eventually become internationally celebrated renowned pianists: Pollini, Zimmerman, Argerich, Ashkenazy, just to name a few.



Television and camera crews took over the best angled spots of the Philharmonic, including right in front of the stage.



The International jury (left to right): Fou Ts'ong (People's Republic of China), Dang Thai Son (Vietnam), Martha Argerich (Argentina), Nelson Freire (Brazil), Adam Harasiewicz (Poland), Bella Davidovich (Soviet

Union), Andrzej Jasiński (Poland, chair), Philippe Entremont (France), Piotr Paleczny (Poland), Kevin Kenner (USA), Michie Koyama (Japan), and Katarzyna Popowa-Zydroń (Poland).

I knew very little about this competition before going to into the festival. First of all, I did not know that there were 160 pianists from last spring, auditioning for 80 open spots, that would open up the festival... and then cut in half after each stage, until the final stage of ten finalists are chosen. I did not know that this was a three week event, and that most days would be split into mornings and afternoon sessions, of up to ten to eleven hour days, depending on the stages.

I also did not know how time consuming it would be for the jury throughout competition. If a jury member “clocked in” during the entire competition, they would have sat through 150 hours of music. That doesn’t include intermissions, let alone meetings and overtime.

My only previous knowledge going into the competition was the famous international scandal that was created in 1980, making headlines, even in America, regarding Martha Argerich, when she protested and resigned from the jury because Ivo Pogorelich was not voted into the final stage of the competition by the other jurors.

I’ve always wondered what would cause such a pianist to divide the jury in that manner. It would have been fun to see the videotapes of Pogorelich performing, just to see what the commotion was about. I also wondered if history could repeat itself.

The competition

Reducing the number of competitors from the cream of the crop seems like a very difficult task, indeed. Especially, if you have pianists who vary widely as interpreters, much like Pogorelich did over twenty years ago. As the jury announced the names who would continue after the second round, I agreed with them more than 75% of the time.

I was disappointed to see some of my favorites be disqualified from advancing any further; notably, Airi Katada from Japan with her nuanced and soulful performance of the Barcarolle in F# major, which was one of my favorite performances at the festival. Unfortunately, she didn’t even make the final twenty in the 3rd stage.

Also, other notables that didn’t make the final round, who I preferred, were Jayson Gillham from Australia, Irene Veneziano from Italy, and Claire Huangci from the US.

After they announced the ten finalists, many people already had their “favorites” to win. At this time, most everyone, including the Polish TV watchers that I had talked to in Warsaw, speculated it would be narrowed down to two pianists; Ingolf Wunder, from Austria, or Evgeni Bozhanov, from Bulgaria. Both pianists are true visionaries, and stood out in the front of the pack with their individual style of playing, whether or not you agreed they were playing “authentic” Chopin. They were quite compelling, and at quite often, transcendental.

When I first saw the animated Wunder perform in the second stage, swinging from left to right with his back arched, back and forth, I was thinking that he wasn't actually playing the piano, but the piano was really playing him. Part of me was also thinking that he was interpreting what a whimsical Mozart might do with Chopin's music. I was hearing Mozart; at least with the first three pieces that he played (Impromptu in G Flat Major, op 51, Scherzo in E major, op. 54, and the Waltz in A flat major, op.34, no.1). (Chopin, I later found out through research, had Mozart and Bach as his two major influences.)

The longer compositions that he played were less about Mozart, and more about Chopin. Wunder played the Andante spianato and polonaise in E-flat Major, op22 with nuanced authority. However, it was his performance of the Polonaise-Fantasy in A Flat Major, op61 that completely showed off his exquisite skills, especially in its rousing conclusion. His playing was illuminating, insightful, thrilling and poised, which is why he became the audience favorite, as well, as mine.



Ingolf Wunder (Austria) after the press leaves after his dynamic performance of the 2nd stage.

Bozhanov, on the other hand, shapes and forms dynamic landscapes, with an atmosphere so organic that you can almost hear the thunderous storms turning into a trickle of water. His expressive virtuosity captured nuanced sounds so compelling, as demonstrated in the third stage of the mazurkas, with its

ringing rubato in the melody in the right hand, contrasted with a waltzing counterpoint in the left hand. There was something very spiritual and hypnotic about his playing that deeply resonated in my soul.

I'm unsure if even Chopin could have even imagined such a "soundscape" one could have been created from his compositions. Like Chopin, Bozhanov also demands attention while painting music.

Going into the final stage, I felt Bozhanov didn't really need to make a statement with the Concerto. With a very impressive second stage, and a standing ovation in the third stage, (I was second to stand in the Philharmonic), I felt Bozhanov was playing it safe during the morning rehearsal of the final stage. I didn't hear any of his usual unique trademarks that I heard in the previous stages, so I was surprised that was fairly conservative when playing with the National Philharmonic.

However, during the final stage performance, he switched back to his trademark playing. Unfortunately, because of his choice of delicate pianissimos, the orchestra would occasionally drown him out. Rather than playing the Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, he chose to play a Concerto for Piano versus Orchestra. It didn't help his final score when he played a very obvious sour note in the final movement of the Rondo, either. After the concert, I asked him whether or not he had problems communicating with the conductor, Antonio Wit, during the performance. He said there was no problem.



Evgeni Bozhanov (Bulgaria) during rehearsal with the Philharmonic, the morning of the final stage.

The announcement of the winner

Then the announcement was made, and most people were surprised, including the winner. Yulianna Avdeeva, from Russia, took first place in the competition. “I’m very surprised, but it’s a nice surprise”, Avdeeva said minutes after the announcement. She was the first woman to ever win, since Martha Argerich, a juror, won it 45 years ago. Most people expected Ingolf Wunder to win, after his heralded performance in the Final Stage, in which received a standing ovation for his Concerto.

Verdict of the Jury - list of laureates of the 16th International Chopin Piano Competition:

Prize	No.	Name	Surname	Country
1	3 Ms	Yulianna	Avdeeva	Russia
2	14 Mr	Lukas	Geniušas	Russia/Lithuania
2	79 Mr	Ingolf	Wunder	Austria
3	72 Mr	Daniil	Trifonov	Russia
4	5 Mr	Evgeni	Bozhanov	Bulgaria
5	9 Mr	François	Dumont	France
6		not awarded		



Yulianna Avdeeva (Russia), First place winner

Looking back at my own notes, I rated Avdeeva strongly, even though I had very slight reservations of her interpretation of the F-minor Fantasia during the second stage, compared to everything else she played. The third stage was played to near perfection, as well. The Sonata was powerful and extremely moving, and the Ballade in F minor was absolutely brilliant and poetic. She was technically consistent throughout the stages; her playing was both bold and sensitive filled with depth and colours, accompanied by the most sensitive and passionate phrasing.

Perhaps the judges really do reward those who come closer to Chopin's spirit, like Avdeeva, leaving little room for personal interpretation. After all, there were times in the competition that I felt I was hearing more from the artist, rather than the composer.



Andrzej Jasiński announces the winners on behalf of the 12 jurors...

Unlike the Olympic Games, the participants of the competition do not have an idea of what their cumulative scores are, even after each stage is completed. Only after the winner is announced, the jurors disclose the point tally of each of the rounds.

Avdeeva scored the highest marks in each of the first three stages, with Bozhanov trailing closely behind. Wunder, trailing far behind, scoring much less in the first two stages compared to Avdeeva and Bozhanov, was not even close before entering the final stage. The only way Avdeeva could have lost the competition, is if Bozhanov had come up with a solid performance of the Concerto during the final stage, since that was Avdeeva's weakest category.

Whether the case may be, Evgeni Bozhanov and Ingolf Wunder, with their insightful imagination and to their art of interpretation, will be the pianists that will be remembered at this event, much like Ivo Pogorelich in the 80's. To me, they deserve gold medals, as well.



Presentation of the Statutory Prizes Ceremony (recipients Yulianna Avdeeva (Russia), Francois Dumont (France), Daniil Trifonov (Russia), Lukas Geniušas (Russia-Lithuania), Ingolf Wunder (Austria))

The best performance of a polonaise in Stage II: [Lukas Geniušas](#)

The best performance of mazurkas: [Daniil Trifonov](#)

The best performance of a concerto: [Ingolf Wunder](#)

The best performance of a sonata: [Yulianna Avdeeva](#)

The best performance of the Polonaise-Fantasy op. 61: [Ingolf Wunder](#)



Yulianna Avdeeva, with the Warsaw Philharmonic under the direction of Antoni Wit, after a performance of Chopin's E minor concerto at the Prize Winner's Concert at the Teatre Wielki – Polish National Opera, Moniuszko Auditorium

Inspiration

Looking back, I wish I had seriously studied piano much earlier in my “career”. I’m sure I would have been easily inspired by Chopin, rather than by the Rolling Stones, and pursued my dream to become a concert pianist. Also, I wished I could have witnessed the past International Chopin Piano Competitions during my childhood, since the participants alone are very inspirational. If all this had occurred, I truly believe that I could have conceivably taken first prize at the 12th and 13th International Chopin Piano Competitions in 1985 and 1990, since the jury didn’t award anyone first prize those years. I then would have participated in this year’s jury to change the outcome to my liking, as well. What a “Wonderful” world that would have been. Now, that is what I call “California Dreaming”.