

7-15 SIERPNIA 2020
DUSZNIKI-ZDRÓJ

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MIĘDZYNARODOWY
FESTIWAL CHOPINOWSKI



7-15 AUGUST 2020

DUSZNIKI INTERNATIONAL CHOPIN PIANO FESTIVAL

Review by Michael Moran

SATURDAY, 8 AUGUST CHOPIN MANOR 8.00 pm

FEDERICO COLLI



I have heard Federico Colli on many occasions during the Duszniki Zdrój Festival and all have been outstanding examples of penetrating and brilliant musicianship. I briefly heard the Italian pianist on the radio during the 2012 Leeds Piano Competition which he won. Held every three years, previous winners include Andras Schiff, Radu Lupu and Artur Pizarro. Colli, a native of Brescia, is instantly recognizable by his curly hair and his luxuriant cravats. He admits that his pianistic god is Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli and assured me he was born in a house in the same street exactly opposite to that in which Michelangeli was born! He has previously also won the 2011 Salzburg International Mozart Competition. In an interview on BBC Radio 3 the pianist Kathryn Stott called him ‘totally amazing’ and a pianist who ‘completely reinvented The Emperor Concerto. It was fresh. He’s a superb pianist.’

Over the intervening years since I first heard him play at Duszniki Zdrój in 2013, I feel, as was clear in this magnificent and philosophically profound recital, that he has matured immensely personally both as an artist and pianist. Not a great deal has changed in his outward appearance except possibly the quieter tone colour of his *foulard*. The Renaissance *principe* of yore has certainly matured. I had written in 2013: *A great evening given to us by a great artist with tremendous personality, individuality, charisma, pianistic and musical brilliance.* Tonight I have no reason to alter this judgement.

His recital was both musically interesting and emotionally deeply moving in design. For me it was assembled thoughtfully and compassionately, perhaps in response to the pandemic and the tragic deaths of many of his friends in Brescia, in Lombardy. He courageously gave an *in memoriam* recital in the city recently.

In a suitably Italian style he opened with the Bach *Italian Concerto in F major*, BWV 971 (1735). In every movement Colli grasped all these expressive, poetic and formal qualities in the most artistic and musical way imaginable. I had never before heard the counterpoint in the left hand articulated so clearly in dynamic and throughout employing such a wide variety of duration, touch, dynamic, texture and colour. His judicious employment of the pedal was masterly. The lyrical *Andante* was possessed of a superb cantabile not possible on a harpsichord but perhaps on a clavichord. A spectacular up tempo and highly articulated *Presto* concluded this masterpiece. I play the harpsichord and for me his interpretation of the work was a ravishing and deeply considered transition from the plucked to the percussive instrument.

In choosing the Shostakovich *Sonata in B minor No. 2*, Op. 61 (1942), Colli had chosen piano music that is relatively rarely played. The sonata is a memorial work, dedicated to the piano pedagogue and composer Leonid Nikolayev, who had died in Tashkent in October 1942 aged sixty-four. The loss of his own friends in the pandemic may well have contributed to Colli's choice. The Sonata No. 2 consists of three movements. The first *Allegretto* movement is fairly lightweight and Colli expressively brought out its mischievousness, anger and busy intensity. The sound of his opening was unforgettable. Colli extracted a mesmerizing quality from it with an hypnotic texture, dynamics and colour. The tempo on occasion almost reached stasis and came within a fraction of halting altogether. The powerful contrast of the *Largo* aroused in us the deep melancholy of human loss. Philosophical conclusions on death, meditative moods carried on gossamer wings, a true breath of the mind. The *Moderato* revealed Colli's supreme, what one might term 'abstract virtuosity' and sense of musical coherence. Again this hypnotic stasis emerged and a powerful philosophical atmosphere was created until the final scarcely bearable flicker of life. I found his entire approach to this work profoundly philosophical and emotionally deeply moving.

The rarely performed Schubert sonata Colli chose, the posthumously published *Sonata in A minor*, D 784 (1823), illustrates this aesthetic pattern well. Colli created a tangible atmosphere of melancholy from the beautiful, yet desolate, *pianissimo* A minor opening phrase of the *Allegro giusto* and made much contrasts and expressive, almost agonizing lurches of psychological mood using his fine control of dynamics, tone and refinement of touch together with inspired pedalling. He effectively hypnotized the audience with this profound existential utterance from Schubert.

Colli concluded his recital in 'Italianate fashion' with the Johann Sebastian Bach *Chaconne*, the fifth movement from the *Partita for solo violin (1685–1750) in D minor BWV 1004 (1720)* transcribed for piano by Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924). Again the musical consolation in the face of death was clear in Colli's choice. He gave the work a monumental high seriousness from the very opening and at the right tempo, so vital to this work. His pianistic virtuosity and deep musicality became clear throughout the sixty-four variations of the work as this great opera he constructed unfolded. The subtle colouristic organ-stop effects in the long legato melodic lines and the weight and significance of single notes in chords, so important in Busoni, were well understood by Colli.



We did feel the piano being transformed into a great seventeenth century Thuringian organ although at times the small hall must have limited his dynamic extravagances and imitation of the 16' organ stop. Overall a monumental and satisfying performance of a piece too often abused.

A most memorable recital both philosophically and musically. He received an immediate standing ovation from the audience, not common at Duszniki.

As an encore he played a piano transcription of the famous Handel soprano aria, the deeply moving *Lascia ch'io pianga* ('Let me weep over...') from his opera *Rinaldo*. How appropriate a choice in response to this devastating pandemic, especially in Lombardy. His second encore was a Scarlatti sonata, his interpretations of which have become deservedly world famous.
