

A review of music from the motion picture The Pianist

By Dorian Griscom
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The Warsaw Philharmonic National Orchestra of Poland; Hanna Wolczedska, clarinet; Janusz Olejniczak, piano; Wladyslaw Szpilman, piano; Tadeusz Strugala, conductor.

To devote any serious listening time to a film soundtrack is often a pointless enterprise, as the music is written for film accompaniment rather than independent listening. This particular album, *Music from the Motion Picture: The Pianist*, differs in that it consists almost entirely of serious classical compositions. It is meant as a companion piece to the film, which is a sympathetic and moving portrayal of pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman's struggle for survival in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Holocaust (*see review* <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2003/02/pian-f18.html>.) While in this capacity the album is more than adequate, this review will focus primarily on the music itself.

Of *The Pianist* soundtrack's 11 tracks, eight are Chopin compositions played by Polish pianist Janusz Olejniczak, one is an orchestral composition (from the film) written by Polish composer Wojciech Kilar and played by the Warsaw Philharmonic National Orchestra of Poland, and the last track is a Chopin mazurka played by Wladyslaw Szpilman, whom Adrien Brody portrays in the film.

Though this soundtrack is made from distinctly different material than its counterparts, it still suffers from some of the same general limitations. Its greatest weakness is the manner in which the music's substance is forced to take a back seat to the notion that it was "inspired by" *The Pianist* and thus to the general mood of the film itself. The result is a very heavy musical emphasis on general moods.

There is no question that Chopin's pieces do have a general mood and that Chopin's temperament weighed very heavily on the substance of his music. A large portion of his writing and performing was done in the throes of a serious personal depression, during which he could "only groan, suffer, and pour out [his] despair at the piano!" (Chopin) Aptly enough, one of the principal causes of this depression was Chopin's Polish nationalism and his sorrow at the Russian invasion of his country. But to present his music as though this general sorrow was its only element would be to condemn it to caricature. And that, though not severely given the circumstances, is what this album has done.

In the bulk of the album—the eight tracks played by Janusz Olejniczak—we hear several of Chopin's most famous piano pieces delivered with unquestionable virtuosic poise and technical aplomb. But while much of this music is played lovingly, Olejniczak's love is that of a somewhat neglectful parent. He gives his children a more than suitable allowance and generally steers them in the right direction, but he doesn't always listen to what they have to say and is often unaware of what they are going through emotionally.

His rubato (the speeding up and slowing down of a line for musical effect) is very generous, and more than anyone, Chopin allows for generous rubato. However, rubato should only be heavily applied to the melody and not so much to the accompaniment. The musical concept in much of Chopin's work is that of a soloist accompanied by an orchestra, and a soloist obviously has a great deal more flexibility than an entire orchestra. One might say that this is irrelevant, as Janusz Olejniczak is obviously just a soloist and not an orchestra, but in doing so one would be missing the point. Chopin's music wasn't simply pulled out of thin air. It was heavily influenced by the other forms of his time, which usually involved full orchestras, small ensembles, or an ensemble or accompanist with a soloist.

The medium of solo piano wasn't nearly as developed then as it is now. Frederic Chopin (1810-1849) and Franz Liszt (1811-1886) were the two greatest innovators in 19th century classical piano, but just as even the greatest scientist operates on the basis of past technical achievements, so the innovators had to build on already existing forms. Their music bore the imprint of these forms right down to its essence, and was, in fact, designed with those forms in mind. To ignore this is to lose an essential component of Chopin's music. One of the surface manifestations of this problem is the lack of a steady beat.

Ironically, Olejniczak uses so much rubato that it somewhat compensates for itself. There is most definitely a discernable flow to the music. The trouble is that where this flow should proceed as a dance or a flourish, it proceeds as a limp. While rhythmic tension can be a good thing and is necessary to a degree, there is simply too much of it here. The listener feels pulled on, and often uncomfortably so. Though it is the job of the musician to move his audience, an audience prefers not to be moved through jerking motions, or through needless pushing and pulling.

The cause of this overabundance of tension appears to be the absence of anything to keep it in check. Olejniczak makes certain demands of the music, and where the music doesn't meet these demands voluntarily, he extracts them by force. His approach is of an unfortunately one-sided character. One of the central dialectics of music is that between rhythm and harmony. Here the harmony goes neglected and as a result, the rhythmic side of the equation falls out of proportion. When I say that Olejniczak uses too much rubato, I refer not only to the sheer amount of rubato, but also to its placement, particularly in a harmonic context.

There are certain points within a harmonic progression that call for rhythmic or dynamic emphasis. Olejniczak rarely fails to miss these points of emphasis and hits them very effectively on some occasions. There are, particularly in his rendition of Chopin's first "Ballade in G

minor,” some beautiful moments. But these beautiful moments lose a good deal of their meaning next to the emphasis he places on beats, phrases and chords where it is not due. While it is admirable for a shooter to hit 10 bulls’ eyes, it’s not so admirable if that shooter has taken a thousand shots. This doesn’t sound as lyrical as Chopin’s music should, and not for lack of effort—Olejniczak tries to play *too* lyrically—but because musical credibility has been lost.

In placing so much undue emphasis, Olejniczak reduces himself to a musical boy who cried wolf, and when the really beautiful moments arrive, they are much less convincing as a result. According to one of Chopin’s students, Karol Mikuli: “Chopin’s rubato possessed an unshakeable emotional logic. It always justified itself by a strengthening or weakening melodic line, by exaggeration or affectation.” Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Olejniczak’s rubato.

It has already been said that this album’s greatest weakness is its focus on the general and that beautiful moments have been lost. But there is still a more fundamental loss to be taken into account. In his excessive rubato and over-emphasis on the unnecessary, Janusz Olejniczak presents a musical caricature of the Romantic—and not just that long-haired, curiously over-decorated creature who sighs endlessly while reminiscing about the trivial and speculating about fate and love in such grandiose terms as would add even more color to his already painted cheeks if he could only hear himself plainly.

Were this simplification of a foolishly complacent social type of the 19th century the extent of it, no discussion would be necessary. When an entire tradition of music is implicated, however, the stakes are a great deal higher. Olejniczak’s crime is an over-simplification of Romantic music. His focus is on general moods rather than on specific musical impressions. To convey the general in any meaningful way, the musician must always focus on specific musical impressions. Without these impressions—without its most essential substance—music loses its independent strength and is reduced from a statement to an ornament.

The constant portrayal of musical Romanticism as an artistic retreat into decadence, as nothing more than an ornament, has been a sinister misconception touted by the present establishment. Musical Romanticism was not a retreat in either form or content. The Romantic music of the middle to late 19th century greatly widened the scope of harmonic theory so as to pave the way for impressionistic and 12-tone music. The first 12-tone row was used by none other than Liszt, who was at the center of Romantic music. Romanticism also widened the scope of musical sensuousness.

The Romantic period saw not only the advent of programmatic music, but of a much more personal and intimate music, charged with a far greater range of emotions than had ever been attempted in medieval, baroque, or classical music. The social layer that made this music, though with some exceptions, was not a particularly complacent one either. While much is made of Wagner’s anti-Semitism, much less is made of the fact that earlier in his life he was a political radical, along with Chopin’s lover George Sand.

What is the motivation behind such a distortion of Romantic music? At the heart of the platitudinous anti-commentary provided by the mainstream press on artistic issues is a culturally backward ruling clique intent on hiding its intellectual bankruptcy. Just as many families feel compelled to put in a couple of hours a week at their local church but gain very little from the experience, so the “elites” file to the symphony in tuxedos and gowns to sit through what surely seems a dull and senseless spectacle, but is in the end part of their

civic duty. Just as the working family is socially obligated to have “a sense of spirituality,” the wealthy must have a “sense of culture.”

This sense of culture entails some very basic knowledge of classic art but excludes anything that might also inspire a sense of social impotence. Our happily cultured elites can do without a reminder that 19th century capitalism was a good deal healthier than its 21st century counterpart, or for that matter, a reminder that the music they’re pretending to appreciate is by its very nature subversive. Part of the elite’s decline in culture is also a decline in its general humanity. This decline precludes any true appreciation of art, for to appreciate beauty or lyricism one must genuinely appreciate life.

Great art presupposes a humanity to which the present ruling class and its barbaric social order stand diametrically opposed. This humanity is one of the central components of Romantic music, which the ultra-rich and their petty-bourgeois sycophants in the press seek to conceal behind a façade of triviality. And while I by no means intend to suggest that this humanity is entirely absent from Janusz Olejniczak’s playing, it is a measuring stick by which his playing leaves a good deal to be desired.

The mazurka played by *The Pianist*’s main character Wladyslaw Szpilman is of a considerably higher caliber. His sensitivity to harmonic change is not at all hampered and is perhaps enhanced by the poor recording quality. Szpilman’s well-pronounced phrases and original interpretation reveal a highly attractive emotional countenance. This album would be much stronger if it included more of Szpilman’s playing. Wojciech Kilar’s composition “Moving to the Ghetto Oct. 31, 1940” is, despite the intensity of what it portrays, musically simple and banal. While *Music from the Motion Picture: The Pianist* as a whole is far from terrible, there are much more gratifying recordings of Chopin’s music available. I would recommend Vladimir Horowitz’s recordings of the etudes and mazurkas, Artur Schnabel’s recordings of the polonaises and concertos, and Luiz de Moura-Castro’s recordings of the “Ballade in G minor” and the nocturnes. (Samples of Music from *The Pianist* can be found at <http://www.thepianistsoundtrack.com/>.)

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