

DARMSTADT CHOPIN MARATHON, Saturday 21st March 2015

Some reflections by Roger M Nellist

I would like to thank **Jill Rabenau** and her colleagues in the Chopin Society of Germany (*Chopin-Gesellschaft in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*) for organising and delivering such a magnificent and historic event in Darmstadt on Saturday 21st March 2015. Although more than 400 people came and went during the day, and many apparently stayed longer than had been anticipated, I was one of just a handful of people who sat through the entire 16 hours - hearing 23 highly talented pianists from 12 countries play in one continuous session all 204 of Fryderyk Chopin's solo piano compositions. In that format this Marathon was quite probably a world first, not just a first for Germany and Europe. I came from London specially to be at the event - mainly because of my enjoyment of Chopin's music but also because I knew a few of the pianists and organisers. (Having also attended the Xth International Chopin Piano Competition in Darmstadt in October 2013 I knew that a very high standard was assured).

I found the entire event not only exciting but also energising. The frequent change of pianists, most in their twenties and thirties, all elegantly dressed and performing pieces varying individually in length from 1 minute (of which there are several works) to 28 minutes (3rd Sonata Op58), added variety to the changing styles and moods of Chopin's wonderful compositions: Ballades, Etudes, Mazurkas, Nocturnes, Polonaises, Preludes, Rondos, Scherzos, Sonatas, Waltzes and many more.

That said, tiredness had inevitably set in as the end of the Marathon approached at 1.30 a.m. on Sunday morning. (It began just after 9.30 a.m. on Saturday morning). Eight pianists played during the final hour (**Pawel Sobowiec, Justine Verdier, Lukas Klansky, Marek Kozak, Tatiana Orlova, Artur Pacewicz, Yuri Blinov and Mariko Sudo**) - and I truly marvelled at their stamina and high performance standard on stage at that very late hour, each having also played several times earlier in the day. **Aleksandra Bobrowska** too, who completed the beautiful Sonata 58 just before midnight. It was obviously an endurance test for these last scheduled players too - and they much deserved the final group bow and round of applause at the very end, along with Jill Rabenau (who is the Vice-President of the Chopin Society, and the initiator and organiser of this most memorable event). I imagine that all 23 pianists felt honoured to have played in this world premiere.

One of the Marathon's interesting features was the order of play, with each piece performed in the date order that Chopin composed it. This enabled listeners to see how his composing evolved and matured with age (he was just 7 years old when he composed the Polonaise in B flat major, his first work); interesting too to see how much of his output in the 1840s (after his rift with George Sand and with his increasingly debilitating health problems) became sadder and more melancholic. (The famous 'Minute Waltz' - his 200th composition - is surely an exception to this trend). Chopin's last piece, composed in 1849, the year he died, was the Op68 Mazurka in F minor.

As a complete listing of Chopin's solo piano works, the Marathon's programme included the 34 pieces without an Opus number (including the three extra Etudes,

played by **Alexander Koriakin**). The event gave the audience an opportunity to hear the numerous Chopin pieces that are rarely played or in any event are less well known. For me, these included the lively Tarantelle Op43, played so well by **Tommaso Carlini**, and the beautiful short Largo ("Gebet der Polen") played so emotively in the last half-hour by **Artur Pacewicz**. (Did I hear some stifled weeping in the audience...?).

It might be invidious to single out too many individual pianists, since each one contributed hugely and distinctively to a tremendously successful international event. But surely three will be remembered for their masterly playing of the big blocks of set pieces, all from memory of course: **Vladimir Matusevich** for his playing of the first 12 Op10 Etudes, teenager (and youngest Marathon pianist) **Vincent Neeb** for the second set of 12 Op25 Etudes, and **Miyako Arishima** for the 24 Op28 Preludes. Sweating a little in the increasingly warm concert room, Vincent deservedly received an enthusiastic second round of applause, the only pianist in the Marathon to be accorded that honour. Miyako's memory and playing also deserve particular mention: she was on stage for the longest single performance of the day, playing the complete set of Op28 Preludes in 45 minutes.

Another pianist who will most certainly be remembered for his energetic playing, charisma and sheer stamina throughout the whole Marathon is **Yuri Blinov**. He was possibly the favourite of the constantly changing audience, being the third pianist of the day just after 10am on Saturday and still there near the end playing two of the last five pieces at 1.15am on Sunday. (Yuri played 16 pieces in total during the day, including the rarely-heard 1st Sonata Op4, and earned the record for the longest playing time by far at the piano, playing a total of 83 minutes in the Marathon).

The Marathon afforded us the opportunity to hear so many endearing pieces of classical piano music and, for me at least, it was one of those rare life-enhancing experiences that I shall treasure. It was well worth travelling from London for. My annotated copy of the programme - listing each work (with its Marathon programme consecutive number), Opus number, year composed, length and Marathon pianist - will be a most useful crib sheet for future reference at Chopin concerts, festival and competitions. This was the first time I had heard all of Chopin's solo piano works, and there were several pieces that I heard for the first time. I realised by the end of the Marathon that I had not heard a single piece that I actually disliked and would not want to hear again. In all honesty, I cannot say this about any other composer's music. And all that for just 10 Euros !

Jill and her band of committed helpers did a tremendous job to bring such a stunning musical event to fruition, to celebrate the 45th anniversary of the Chopin Society of Germany. She and they should be very pleased - and deserved the very positive Press coverage the Marathon received in subsequent days. I think three aspects of the arrangements merit special mention here.

First, lining up - and keeping lined up - enough international pianists of the highest calibre to be able to present the full programme of 204 Chopin pieces. Devising the programme in the first place - identifying suitable pianists from so many countries and marrying them with the individual pieces - is challenging enough; but finding at short notice very capable replacements for the few who had to pull out for various

reasons just a few weeks before the event, who could play the particular assigned pieces that would otherwise go unplayed, is a very tall order. Last-minute drop-outs from a complex tight programme of this nature are always the dread of organisers. I was told that, unsurprisingly, some of the pianists learnt some of the pieces especially for the Marathon and, almost inevitably, a few (but very few) pieces were played from scores rather than memory: without this latitude, full coverage of Chopin's works would no doubt not have been possible.

Second, the audience turnout was impressively huge - obviously far in excess of expectations. (The report in the 'Darmstadter Echo' on Monday 23rd March said that all 350 programmes were sold out just after midday - when there was still another 13 hours to go. Amazing!). Organisers of big classical music events can never really know with much precision how many people to expect. (We experience the same challenge with the regular classical music concerts and festivals that I am associated with in Perivale and Pitshanger in West London, where audience numbers can be very variable. Our main concert venue - the lovely medieval church at Perivale - is about the same size as the Marathon room in the Kennedy Haus). In the early stages of the Marathon the playings got a few minutes ahead of schedule but, as the number of people trying to enter the concert room grew, the need for continuous crowd management throughout Saturday afternoon and evening extended the Marathon by some 45 minutes: there was real competition for the 105 chairs and many people had to stand and some even sat on the window ledges. Another downside of the large numbers was that the room became hot and stuffy as the day progressed and it became necessary to open the windows wide whilst the pianists were changing over in order to cool the room. In retrospect, and even with the overflow area (an adjoining room with an open doorway to the main room, but in which most people seated could not see the piano), a much bigger concert room was clearly needed - an obvious lesson for next time. An interesting question for me though is: why did so many people come? Does Darmstadt really have such a large band of Chopin followers, and, if so, why was this turnout not anticipated? Or was there some especially effective advertising that accounts for the large numbers? (I noticed the red and white Chopin advertising boards around the town and understand that there had been town, regional and national advertising, but was surprised when the Darmstadt music shop told me they had no details of the event).

According to one, the pianists too had their own overcrowding problem, with no quiet place to rest. There was just one common room for them that doubled as a practice room too. This may have been fine for those pianists who came, played their successive pieces and then left - as a few did - but it was more exhausting for the many that were on and off stage throughout the day. I don't know how they coped with the crowds, the stuffy atmosphere and the long hours. (Most were young!).

Third, the fact that the 204 pieces were played in one continuous 16 hours session, without any breaks other than the two short ones to tune the Steinway, was certainly novel - but also uncomfortable for those of us who wanted to stay and listen for long periods. If we wanted a comfort/food break then we would have to miss a few Chopin pieces and almost certainly lose our seat! But for me the main disappointment of this arrangement was not being able to talk with the pianists - the five I already knew and some of the others I would have liked to meet. I managed a few quick chats though during 'crowd control' moments and with those in the first half of the Marathon who

were turning the piece page numbers on the lectern beside my front row seat. (I was happy to take on that role a few times in the middle of the Marathon and then for most of the last quarter - it was a little welcome exercise!).

These particular issues may be food for thought if the Chopin Society of Germany decides to organise anything like this Marathon again ... The (only) two features I think I would change if I was organising such an event would be to go for a much bigger room (offering enhanced facilities for the performers too, and with video recording facilities), and to run the event over 2 or 3 days, with plenty of short programmed breaks. (This is our Pitshangar festival model that our Chairman, Hugh Mather, organises. He has produced two Chopin festivals in the last five years, with 20+ pianists each time playing about 80% of Chopin's compositions. Similarly, several festivals of Liszt and Schubert music and of the full suite of Beethoven Sonatas too). The extended programme might then be arranged into 4 or 6 divisions, with separate pricing and ticketing for each and with the offer of a 'season ticket' to hear all the performances).

Nevertheless, I want to emphasise that I thought the Darmstadt Chopin Marathon was very well organised, and actually ran incredibly smoothly. With a big event of this type all sorts of things could have gone wrong that would have undermined the very nature of the Marathon - such as pianists missing their flights, encountering unexpected visa/immigration problems or falling ill, or some functional part of the piano breaking; but thankfully no such things happened. I noticed a number of nice touches too that added to the overall ambience and enjoyment of the Marathon: the impressive (Mazovian?) bust of Chopin, with the white and red roses laid on the plinth (I wondered what he was thinking as he gazed down closely on each pianist!); the print of Chopin and Sand placed on the easel at the bottom of the 1960s full Steinway grand, and the floral display in the stand beside it; the lectern displaying the piece number that was being played at any particular time, enabling new-comers to find their place in the programme quickly (and nice that some of the pianists took it in turn to turn the page numbers); the short speeches and practical announcements by the Chopin Society's Board member, **Hartmut Stolzmann**; the bouquet presented to Jill in the evening at the end of the 24 Preludes, by **Aleksandra Mikulska** - the Society's President, who also played impressively the 105th piece of the Marathon (Op31 Scherzo in B flat minor); the food and drinks pavilion outside the Kennedy-Haus (for those who wished to sacrifice their seat inside to take a break!); and the Press and camera coverage. (But I think it was a great pity that the Marathon was not fully video-recorded. Perhaps a recording exists of some parts of the Marathon that can be put on the Society's website and on YouTube).

All in all, I thought the Marathon was a singularly impressive musical event, for which the Chopin Society of Germany deserves very high praise. I look forward to attending the next International Chopin Competition and/or Marathon in Darmstadt.

Finally, it is worth noting that four of the Marathon pianists will be competing later this month in Warsaw in the Elimination Round of the 17th International Chopin Piano Competition: **Miyako Arishima**, **Marek Kozak**, **Vladimir Matusevich** and **Joanna Rozewska** (whose playing of the Op50 Mazurkas I also liked).

Roger M Nellist,

Summary Statistics of the Darmstadt Chopin Marathon, 21st March 2015

The Marathon **lasted for 16 hours** - made up of **15 hours 8 minutes of actual playing**, plus another 50 minutes of short speeches, two piano tunings and 'crowd control'.

23 pianists from **12 countries** played **204 pieces**, with a total playing time of 15 hours and 8 minutes. Unsurprisingly perhaps, Poland and the host country Germany provided one third of the pianists - leaving a good number from an impressive array of other countries (5 being outside the European Union). There was no pianist from the UK, although two had been invited but had prior commitments. The average playing time per pianist was **nearly 40 minutes**, the average number of pieces played per pianist was **9**, and the average playing time of each of Chopin's solo piano works was **4.5 minutes**. Actuals, of course, varied significantly around these averages. So, 10 pianists played considerably longer than the average and three - Yuri Blinov, Marek Kozak and Aleksandra Bobrowska (the pianists who also played the three Sonatas) - each played for more than an hour. Yuri earned the record for the longest total playing time by far (83 minutes) and, if we exclude the block of 24 preludes, also for playing the most number of individual pieces:

Summary of the Chopin Marathon, held in the John F Kennedy Haus in Darmstadt on Saturday 21 st March 2015				
Pianist (in order of first playing)	Country	Total minutes played	Number of pieces played	Main Pieces
Quyên Lê Bao	Vietnam	18	5	Polonaise, Mazurkas, others
Alexander Koriakin	Russia	54	11	Polonaises, Mazurka, Nocturne, 3 Etudes, others
Yuri Blinov	BeloRussia	83	16	Waltzes, Nocturnes, 1st Sonata , others
Aleksandra Bobrowska	Poland	64	8	Mazurkas, Nocturne, Polonaise, 3rd Sonata , others
Gabriela Eftimova	Bulgaria	31	6	Mazurkas, Polonaises, Ballade
Joanna Rozewska	Poland	32	5	Mazurkas, Rondos
Mariko Sudo	Germany	41	11	Mazurkas, Waltzes, Nocturnes, FantImpr, other
Albertina Song	Korea	38	8	Mazurkas, Polonaise, others
Nami Ejiri	Japan	50	7	Nocturnes, Rondo, Scherzo, Ballade, other
Vladimir Matusevitch	Russia	29	12	First 12 Etudes
Justine Verdier	France	40	15	Waltzes, Mazurkas, Berceuse
Susanne Hardick	Netherlands	34	6	Waltzes, Nocturnes
Eugene Choi	Korea	32	12	Mazurkas, Souvenir de Paganini
Artur Pacewicz	Poland	31	5	Ballade, Nocturne, Polonaise, Waltz, LargoGebet
Pawel Sobowiec	Poland	43	8	Mazurkas, Scherzo, Ballade
Lukas Klansky	Czech	32	6	Mazurkas, Polonaise, Barcarolle, other
Tommaso Carlini	Italy	43	8	Nocturnes, Impromptu, others (inc Tarantelle)
Marek Kozak	Czech	66	6	Nocturnes, Waltz, Scherzo, Polonaise, 2nd Sonata
Vincent Neeb	Germany	32	12	Second 12 Etudes
Aleksandra Mikulska	Poland	13	1	Scherzo
Miyako Arishima	Japan	56	28	24 Preludes , Mazurkas
Tatiana Orlova	Russia	32	7	Mazurkas, Polonaises, Prelude
Sabine Simon	Germany	14	1	Fantaisie
23 Pianists	12 countries	908 mins (= 15hrs 8mins)	204	All information summarised in this and the other Tables is taken from the playing Programme for the day

Average per Pianist		39.5	8.9	
Average per piece		4.5		

Darmstadt Chopin Marathon Pianists by Nationality

Number of Pianists from each country	Country	Total Pianists
5	Poland	5
3	Germany, Russia	6
2	Czech, Japan, Korea	6
1	Bulgaria, France, Italy, Netherlands, BeloRussia, Vietnam	6
Totals	12 (of which EU = 7 and Non-EU = 5)	23

Numerically, the *Mazurkas*, *Etudes* and *Preludes* dominate Chopin's compositions, accounting for more than half of his total solo piano works. (Mazurkas alone constitute more than a quarter). *Nocturnes*, *Waltzes* and *Polonaises* together account for another quarter.

However, when looking at the playing times the pattern is rather different, because individually the Mazurkas, Etudes and Preludes are very short (2 - 3 minutes each) whilst the few *Sonatas*, *Scherzos* and *Ballades* are of course much longer (averaging 10 - 25 minutes each). In terms of length, the Nocturnes, Polonaises and Rondos sit in the middle, averaging 6 - 8 minutes each:

Summary of Chopin's Solo Piano Compositions

Type	Number of Pieces	Number of Playing Minutes (average time per piece)	Detail
Ballades	4	40 (10)	
Etudes	27	68 (2.5)	12 Op10 + 12 Op25 + 3 Nouvelle
Mazurkas	57	154 (2.7)	
Nocturnes	20	128 (6.4)	
Polonaises	15	117 (7.8)	
Preludes	25	51 (2)	24 Op28 + 1 Op45
Rondos	4	31 (7.8)	
Scherzos	4	46 (11.5)	
Sonatas	3	75 (25)	
Waltzes	19	68 (3.6)	
Other pieces	26	130 (5)	Variations, Marche Funebre, Ecosaises, Fugue, Contredanse, Souvenir de Paganini, Lento, Allegro, Bolero, Fantaisie, Fantaisie-Impromptu, Impromptus, Cantabile, Presto, Tarantelle, Moderato, Berceuse, Barcarolle, Largo ('Gebet der Polen').
Total	204	908 (4.5) minutes	