

Schumann's Piano Music in China

Interview with Li Ming Qiang by Wolf-Dieter Seiffert

Summary of the Interview
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Question: Dear Professor Li, to begin this interview, may I ask you to give us a short overview of the situation of Chinese professional music education?

Prof. Li Ming Qiang: Yes of course. First of all you have to know that there are very big differences depending on where you are in China. Shanghai and Beijing are the two major cities with a long history in teaching and playing western "classical" music. And even here you face big differences. In Shanghai we have a strong Jewish-German influence, because especially in the 1930s and 1940s a lot of musicians from Germany immigrated to China or fled here from the Nazis. This is not the case with Beijing. Since 1949 there was, for decades, a strong influence from former Soviet musicians, who came to China to play and teach. This is true for the whole mainland China. Altogether we have 10 important music conservatories around China at the moment: Beijing (with two conservatories), Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Wuhan, Shenyang, Tianjin, Xi'an und Hong Kong.



Dr. Wolf-Dieter Seiffert and Prof. Li Ming Qiang in Shanghai

Question: Are those conservatories all on the same level of students and teachers?

Li: Not by far. There are more and more excellent students now also in the Provinces, but a major problem is the lack of enough excellent teachers. There are some, but still not enough.

The more open China gets the better it is for the cultural exchange

Question: Do you expect any development to the better here?

Li: Oh yes, a lot has been achieved during the last years. You know, music is a culture and a language. The more open China gets the better it is for the cultural exchange between the West and the East and for our understanding the "language".

Question: Talking about language, we should skip to Schumann's music and his musical language right here. Generally asked, is the Schumann tone easy to understand for the Chinese?

Li: Not at all. Maybe Schumann is even the most difficult "romantic" composer of all.

Question: Why is that so?

Li: Because his music displays very personal emotions and feelings. This is very difficult to understand for Chinese people, for Asians in general I would guess. We Asians tend to not show our emotions in public. It's a very private, intimate thing. So, if you cannot understand why a composer is so emotional how can you even play his music adequately?

Question: So, "romantic" music is the most difficult for the Chinese, and it would be easier for them to understand and play Bach or the composers of the "classical" period?

Li: No, just the contrary is true. I think I have to explain this: The Chinese audience much more loves pieces where the melody is more dominant, especially they like music from Russia, like Tchaikowsky or Rachmaninov. I don't know why, maybe it is a cultural heritage (because our own music has no polyphony or counterpoint) or it is simply a remainder of the strong influence of the Russians for so many years. But as a matter of fact, Bach is much more difficult to accept for the Chinese audience than say Mozart or Schubert, and the same is true for Chinese musicians to a certain extent. I myself played much more Beethoven, Schumann and Brahms than is usual in China.

Question: So, the language of Schumann is difficult for the Chinese because of the polyphony you will find in there?

Li: Yes indeed, that's one point. Another is the German language he normally uses for titles, movement indications and so forth. You have to understand the western, the German romantic background to understand what he really means with "Kreisleriana", or "innig bewegt". That's not simply "Allegretto".

Question: *So you recommend your students to read German literature, like E.T.A Hofmann or Jean Paul.*

Li: How could I? There are no translations of those poets into the Chinese language to my knowledge. And even if so, it is very hard for us to understand the real meaning of those words. So I more encourage them to find their own, personal access to the music based on the correct Urtext.

Question: *Schumann may have used the German language to express more precisely what he intended. He is very special in this regard compared to others.*

Li: Yes, I agree. Another aspect also strikes me. Around 1800 those European countries became more and more proud of their own heritage. It is the wakening of nationalism. So your mother language is an important part of this tendency of nationalism, not only with Germany, but also with a lot of eastern European nations, like Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, etc. Look at the "Mannheim School" for instance. This has to be interpreted as a German school, but in fact, most of those composers came from the eastern parts of Europe. One generation later such composers wanted to use their own language, musically.

The most played piece of course is Schumann's Piano Concerto

Question: *Let us return to Schumann. Are there any pieces by Schumann that are more often played and taught than others in China?*



Li: I guess the situation is very comparable to the rest of the world. There are true "warhorses", like "Papillons", "Davidsbündler Dances", "Carnaval", "Fantasy Pieces", "Symphonic Etudes", "Kinderszenen", "Kreisleriana", "Fantasy in C", and "Album for the Young". These pieces you can hear all around China in the conservatories as well on stage. The most played piece of course is Schumann's Piano Concerto. But there is, on the other hand, no such piece like "Etudes" by Chopin, that everybody has to study when he or she wants to become a pianist. The "Paganini" Variations op. 3/10 are very rarely played in China.

Question: What about the many other piano works by Schumann?

Li: *I must confess that Chinese pianists generally have little awareness that there are more works than the popular ones. I am not only talking about the late works which I regard to be very interesting and worthwhile to study and play.*

Question: This seems to be the proper moment to talk about the big project G. Henle Verlag and Shanghai Music Publishing House (SMPH) just recently started. SMPH has licensed all six volumes of Henle's Schumann new Urtext editions during these days. You are the advisor and consultant for this project. Why not a selection, why every single work?

Li: *As we said before, because there is so much wonderful piano music that has to be discovered by the Chinese musicians and the audience. A selection would even cement the situation.*

Question: How long will it take to undertake all the translations?

Li: *My personal estimation is about two years minimum. You know, it is very difficult to translate such Prefaces, Critical Commentaries and footnotes into proper Chinese. We have only a few excellent translators capable as well of the English as of the music terminology. So everything has to be checked and rechecked. But I am optimistic that this licensed edition will be a great success in China.*

Question: Which Schumann editions do the Chinese use right now?

Li: *As far as I know it is mainly the old Sauer edition published by Peters. I know this is a very bad situation, and another reason why it is so important to have the best Urtext available.*

Question: Many thanks for this nice compliment. Many thanks also for our conversation.