

VICTORY LAP

DMYTRO CHONI COMES CALLING, FRESH OFF HIS BRONZE AT THIS JUNE'S VAN CLIBURN INTERNATIONAL PIANO COMPETITION



At 29, the Kyiv-born pianist Dmytro Choni has won his share of international honors, most recently a bronze from the Van Cliburn, in Fort Worth. Three months into his inaugural tour as a Cliburn medalist, Choni visits the MACC, performing colorful virtuoso repertoire from the 19th and 20th centuries. The debut recital is one of five on four of the Hawaiian islands. In this recent e-mail exchange, the music writer Matthew Gurewitsch sounds Choni out as a prize-winner and an artist.

Matthew Gurewitsch: *According to your biography, you began studying piano when you were four. But not until you were 14 did you reach the “turning point” that put you on your way to a life in music. What were you playing? And what happened?*

Dmytro Choni: I believe that I had been on my way to a life in music since childhood, but in this particular moment I was finally able to feel it. I was playing Chopin’s E Minor concerto with an orchestra for the first time ever. It was such an inspiring experience being on stage and performing in front of the audience. At this moment it became clear for me that I want to devote my life to music and playing piano.

MG: *In 2015, after completing your bachelor’s degree at the Tchaikovsky National Music Academy of Ukraine in Kyiv, you transferred to the Kunstuniversität Graz, in Austria. Were there specific technical or interpretive aspects of your musical formation you wanted to work on? Or did you simply feel the need to broaden your horizons?*

DC: The main reason why I moved to Austria was my teacher - Prof. Dr. Milana Chernyavska. I met her back in 2011 where she gave a masterclass at the Music Academy in Liechtenstein. Since then, I attended several masterclasses of hers there and came to a decision to study under her guidance on a regular basis. Milana inspires and supports me a lot. She is my role model and a true friend.

MG: *By this point in your life, you have plenty of experience both of competitions and of concertizing for the general public. How does a competition affect your mental preparation? Do you play differently when there’s a jury? Are you more nervous? More cautious about technique? More daring artistically?*

DC: Every single performance on stage is very special for me. I prepare in a scrupulous way for each of them. There might be more pressure at the competition, but I can’t say that my performance changes in a particular way. First of all, on stage I always try to open up emotionally, to share my vision of the music with the audience and touch their hearts with it.



MG: *Your recital program seems designed to show very different sides of your artistic personality. To start with, there are four pieces that are quite short. I’d call the Prokofiev’s Sarcasms, op. 17, ironic, or perhaps cosmopolitan, is that about right? And the two Debussy pieces would be diaphanous and “poetical”? While Scriabin’s Sonata No. 4 in F-sharp Major, op. 30, would be filled with an esoteric, mystical spirit? But do these pieces also add up to some secret “story”?*

DC: I must say that the reason I included these pieces in the program is because I simply love playing them. Every work holds a special place in my heart, and I have a deeply personal connection with each of them. They are very imaginative and distinctive. In the cases of Prokofiev’s Sarcasms and Debussy’s “Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut” [“And the moon sets on the temple that is no more”] and “L’isle Joyeuse” [“The happy isle”], there are titles which would certainly help audience to create an image and understand the music. Although Scriabin’s Fourth Sonata doesn’t have a title, it is programmatic music too. Scriabin wrote a poem after composing this sonata that explains its meaning. I think it all combines very well together, and I hope the audience will enjoy it.

MG: *And to close, there’s Liszt’s “Dante” Sonata, a virtuoso showcase that demands huge technique and involves the huge cosmic ideas of damnation and salvation as laid out in Dante’s Divine Comedy. Is that the “hardest” music on the program to play? And if so, would you also call it the most thrilling?*

DC: It’s a wonderful piece! The complete title is “Après une lecture du Dante [After reading in Dante] - Fantasia quasi sonata,” which I think is very appropriate. It’s either a fantasia with elements of a sonata or a sonata that incorporates a great fantasia. It is probably the most technically demanding piece on my program, but I wouldn’t call it the “hardest” since there are a lot of difficulties of different types in other pieces which require the same hard work.

MG: *Before the Liszt, you’re playing a sonata of about the same length by Valentyn Silvestrov, a Ukrainian who fled from Kyiv to Berlin after the Russian attacks began. What can you tell us about the piece? And what does it mean for you personally to be playing with your country at war?*

DC: The Sonata by Silvestrov definitely holds a special place in my program. The music is mostly lyrical, quiet and fragile, representing the composer’s unique stylistic language. It’s the first of three sonatas by Silvestrov. The final version was completed in 1972, exactly half a century ago. I’ve performed one of the movements previously, but in Hawaii I’ll be playing the whole piece for the first time. I’m very much looking forward to that! It will be my tribute to Ukraine, its people and music.



Matthew Gurewitsch, a full-time resident of Maui since 2011, is the classical-music specialist for Air Mail (www.airmail.news). Please visit his archive at www.beyondcriticism.com.