

By the same token I can no longer rise to the demands of the Liszt sonata, also in the key of B minor (but ending in B major!). More than of a technical nature, those demands arise from a place within oneself. I've tried, but I can no longer find that place.

I found it once – and I ask the listener's indulgence for having added it and another work by Liszt at the end of the second disk. These live-performances date from March 1983 and unabashed throat-scrappings, coughing and noisy wooden seats, adds their own local color. But that wood also made possible a magnificent sound

Before the sonata there is a work from Liszt's Swiss Year of Pilgrimage, the *Vallée d'Obermann*. The agony and ecstasy of this magnificent work must have deeply resonated within Liszt's own soul, acquainted as he was with these opposites in his life. He quotes from Sénancour's fourth letter: "Ineffable torment of our wasted years ... universal passion ... highest wisdom, voluptuous abandon; I have experienced it all in that memorable night ... I have devoured ten years of my life."

Reading it again after so many years, the last cry still sends shivers through my spine. For raw power and gut feeling this live (and un-retouched) performance will be hard to surpass. I like to think of the long interval between the end of the work and the applause as an audience overcome with emotion. I know better, of course. Likely no one in the audience was aware the end had come and gone.

The same can be said for the Liszt sonata: this rendition is wild. Nobody in their right mind would dare to let go of all brakes in a major venue (with critics on the look-out) as I did that memorable night.

Liszt's sonata formed the model for Berg's work, but the differences are enormous. Berg's work is drawn in miniature, Liszt's painted on a huge canvas. The latter has been rightfully compared to Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*; it is a consummate summation of the tenets of Liszt's Catholicism in its powerful opposition of God and Satan, Good and Evil, Death (most graphically the hammer blows that nailed Christ to the Cross) and Resurrection.

There are many passages of sublime beauty as in the literal setting of the Latin Credo text "*Et incarnates est de Spiritu Sancto*" (and He was incarnate of the Holy Spirit), to the most tender transformation of the hammer-blows motive into the delicate and tender tone-painting of the new born Jesus himself, the way Liszt must have admired him in the Rafael paintings in the Vatican.

It is all there, every article of the Catholic faith, and most notably a vivid portrait of Satan himself, who re-appears in what Alfred Cortot calls the "satanic fugue" where, expelled in the previous Exposition section, he returns "with seven others, more vicious than himself."

I have a vivid memory of the night I played this fugue. About half way through the work – it may have been the loud cough just before, or perhaps the wrong note right after the beginning of the fugue – but I took off, quite literally as a bat out of hell. Even listening to it now fills me with awe and dread. As I have done for my commentaries on the other works in respect to the negative aspects of my interpretations, I consider silence golden!

I am so very grateful to Dr. James March, Professor of Music at Morningside College in Iowa, whose guidance is palpable for me in each one of the Nocturnes. A former student and dear friend, it is to him I turn again and again for advice in musical matters.

My thanks also to another friend, Lee Hanley, who once more saved a text of mine from obscurity and excessive verbosity.



Willem Ibes

A frequent performer in solo recitals and as soloist here and abroad, Ibes made his Carnegie Hall and Kennedy Center debuts in 1990. Commenting on that debut in Washington, D.C., Joseph McLellan of The Washington Post wrote he "could not help wondering why his arrival has been delayed so long." On the occasion of his repeat performances on the East Coast, The Washington Post welcomed Ibes back as "an artist of the highest quality."

Willem Ibes graduated from the Amsterdam Conservatory in 1952, with a degree for solo-performance under Willem Andriessen, and spent the next three years as a student of Marguerite Long in Paris.

In 1957 he began teaching at St. John's University in Minnesota. During the university's January term he often led groups of students in Zen study and meditation. Mr. Ibes holds the equivalent of the Doctorate in Musical Arts and earned a degree in philosophy from St. John's University. Since 1991 he has traveled almost every year, during the university's summer holidays, to China and Japan to teach, lecture and concertize. The next to last of his previous CD's, "A Beethoven Triptych," was issued in 2006 and contains the recording, with in-depth analysis, of three late Beethoven sonatas.

In November of 2008 Ibes celebrated the 60th anniversary of his professional debut (as soloist in Grieg's piano concerto with the St. John's Symphony Orchestra in 1948) in a Gala concert, together with former students and friends.

Willem Ibes latest CD with piano music by Debussy and Fauré was published in 2010. He will be retiring from Saint John's University at the end of this academic year.

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Cover "Birch Tree" painting in private collection

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CHOPIN

WILLEM IBES, PIANIST



THE BERG AND LISZT SONATAS

THE COMPLETE NOCTURNES

NOTES

Twenty-five years ago I made my first professional recording, the *Complete Nocturnes* of Chopin. A few years ago I felt the urge to do it again. I was hard put hard to grasp the urge myself, but as I listen to the proofs of my latest CD, I can identify some of my reasoning – reasoning, as Pascal noted, of the heart, not the mind.

Somewhere in all of us there is a blind, inchoate drive pushing against the walls of who we think we are towards something greater and more whole. Its manifestations run the full gamut of human aspirations. It is the dissatisfaction the saints experienced so profoundly (“restless is our heart until it rests in Thee, O Lord”), that grabs hold of a Vincent van Gogh, the great inventors and prophets. It a restlessness that propels us all, often causing us, as Goethe wrote of Faust, “to jump over the joys of life. “

Martin Buber recounts Rabbi Jizchak of Worki’s answer when asked about the “sin of Adam,” the Biblical understanding of original sin. “Original sin is Adam taking thought of the morrow,” he responded. What a relief this is to hear! What could be more innocent and natural than to ponder tomorrow?

And yet, I have found – like thousands of poets, philosopher and other ordinary folk – that the key to our unease might well have an explanation this simple and with such vast consequences: the nano-second gap between “now,” this very instant, and tomorrow, the next moment; a gap, as a Zen saying has it, that splits heaven and earth asunder.

I came to this understanding rather late in life, but take heart in the fact that the great Rilke grasped only as he grew older that his poetry’s driving force had been, and continued to be, “die vollzählige Zeit zu leisten,” to “realize,” that is, to make real, in the poem itself, the fullness and wholeness of Time.

It would have made perfect sense to the ancient world where the Greeks understood the distinction between Chronos and Aion, between Time separated into distinct particles (analogous to the dimension of space) and, as Plotinus called it, “Aion,” Time (he speaks of it as “Life”) not consisting out of many (successive) time elements but out of all Time together, at once.

Quoted in *Psychology Today*, seventies quarterback John Brodie said: “the player cannot be concerned with either the past or the future. At times I experience a kind of clarity that I’ve never seen described in any football story: “sometimes this (game) seems to slow way down, as if everyone were moving in slow motion. It seems as if I have all the time in the world ...the defensive line is coming at me just as fast as ever, and yet the whole thing seems like a movie or a dance in slow motion. It’s beautiful.”

The “fullness of the present” is the same for poet, musician, football player, Everyman. It is in arriving there, at Eliot’s “the still point of the turning world,” that we find whatever one may want to call it: rest, God, Love, satori or, in Plotinus’ words, the fullness of Life.

The understanding that Socrates and his student, Plato, had of these matters is profound. “When our soul was still

connected with God,” Plato writes, “she had an overview of all that is (*ta onta*), Being,” but that connection got lost when we assumed this life-form. We all instinctively want to find again that which we once lost (or wanted to lose) and in terms of Time it means that we want what Rilke and John Brodie found, die vollzählige Zeit, that ballet in slow motion, Eternity instead of eternal time.

I explored this existential problem in depth in a lecture in the Grande Salle of the Unesco in Paris in 1990, “La Musique: Plénitude du Présent” (Music: the Fullness of the Present). That essay and other articles can be found on my website: willemibes.com

Still more inchoate than my search to go beyond chronological time, always urging us on to the next satisfaction of desire – and thereby preventing us from finding completion in the here and now – was my search in life and labor for what I could only haltingly and subconsciously identify as “feeling.”

It is not that my performances lacked “feeling” or that I lacked sensations of such desires as frustration, drive, love and anger. But it always seemed to me that those feelings came from outside and that it was “I” who put them in my life and performing.

I am learning how the many avenues I pursued in my life have shared a purpose: to lead me closer to a point where Wim (“Willem”) Ibes is no longer obscuring the picture, thus making it possible for the image to become clearer, for the composition to be heard the way the composer conceived it.

Perhaps the years I have attended religious services at Saint John’s Abbey and elsewhere, the many grueling sesshin I spent at Hosshin-ji in Obama, Japan, were an often blind and, I must use the word again, inchoate, inner prompting to deconstruct what all of us so carefully nourish and protect mightily from the slightest provocation. That allows a process of tearing down, bit by bit, the walls of the ego so that “the true face of the person before his parents were born,” the spotless, mirror-like soul, can shine forth undefiled.

The price of such deconstruction is not small. Abbot of Hosshin-ji, Harada Sekkei Roshi once said in a teisho: “People may have come here to get a genuine Zen experience, but that is something one can find in many other places in Japan. Here, to Hosshin-ji, searchers have come for many centuries to die the Great Death, the death of self.” I have heard that message many times from the Benedictines of Saint John’s Abbey and University (where I teach): “Unless the kernel of grain dies and falls to the ground it will not bear fruit.”

It strikes me that especially my “toucher” (the sensitivity and physical ability of the pianist’s fingers to express the true emotional intent of the composer), which even with our advanced recording techniques is hard to duplicate faithfully (and certainly requires the best of playback equipment), has undergone a change. It comes through, and no longer from me.

In comparison to my previous *Nocturnes*, there is a suppleness in the rhythm that one might consider idiosyncratic, but that I would rather think of (the ego deserves a perk once in a while!), in the words of Tokyo’s “*Ongaku no tomo Music Journal*, as “*sui generis*,” of its own kind.

When I listen now to the *Nocturnes*, and especially the Berg sonata which I also recorded more than twenty years ago,

the “feeling” seems to emanate more from within rather than having been grafted onto the music from the outside.

Indeed, I have had to tear it out of me piece by piece, *nolens volens*, willing it on the one hand, but resisting it on the other; our human predicament, the spirit being willing but the flesh weak, as St. Paul put it succinctly. Often it is only after hours and hours of playing that I can shake the monkey off my back – the Willem Ibes who, thinking “I am the Do-er” is, according to the Baghavad Gita, “in error” – and allow the music to speak for itself. It becomes a nightmare to edit the countless “takes” and seek to ferret out the little that is genuine from the mass that is mediocre.

Once, after playing Beethoven’s *Appassionata*, Arthur Rubinstein was asked by a well-intentioned socialite if he could explain precisely what Beethoven meant with this work. Rubinstein returned to the piano and began playing to it again.

I will use this as an excuse to not expand on Chopin’s sublime *Nocturnes*, so varied, so refined, scaling the heights and depths, the pains, prayers, of our humanity (isn’t it indeed why art, far from being just an adornment of life, is so much more? Is it not an invitation to become human by really looking, reflecting, listening?).

The erudite Rabbi of Worki was right. Listening (as opposed to just hearing), truly feeling, loving, all those attributes that, more than intelligence alone, make us truly human, require of us to be fully present (to our self and to one another) in a Present which far from excluding either past or future, gathers them together into Plotinus’ Aion or John Brody’s “ballet in slow motion.”

I hope that the listener will find some of that wholeness in this recording.

Three more works round out the music on this disc.

The *Sonata Opus 1* by Alban Berg composed in 1905.

The mood of Berg’s lone piano sonata is perhaps best defined by a single interval, the interval of the seventh and its inversion, the descending second. It is this poignant progression from supertonic to tonic, from C natural to B, eight times repeated in the final closing group (itself a clever rewording of the opening motive), that stamps the work and brings it to a resigned, *fin-de-siècle* wistful ending in the key of B minor.

My initial recording of Berg’s sonata was more than twenty years ago and, again for reasons I don’t try to explain even to myself, I needed to do it again.

What a world of difference! I find myself much more faithful to the text, especially in bringing the left hand to the foreground as the composer frequently and specifically requests (sometimes against my grain of, what Debussy disdainfully calls, a “fifth-finger” pianist who always wants to bring out the melody in the right hand). And yes, the toucher has become so much more sensitive, so much warmer and expressive, illuminating the sound from the inside. I will leave it to music cognoscenti to point out my lapses and failings.

As I approach my own *fin-de-siècle* I understand the sonata in a way that would have been impossible when, in my fifties, I was still so very young.