



Looking back

As the 2020 Chopin Competition, along with countless others, was cancelled because of worldwide travel restrictions, Pianist Seong-jin Cho remembers playing at the Chopin, five years ago

As you know, the Chopin competition was just cancelled a week ago- it was a big shock in the competition world... and I was just wondering: five years have passed since you went to Warsaw. What do you remember most from that year, when you think of "the Chopin"...?

The Chopin Competition... it is....not a pleasant memory (laughs). Because I was really stressed

during the competition, and in general I hate competing since when I was a child. Competitions were always stressful events for me. But this one- I had to do it, in order to build up my career, and the Chopin Competition is one of the most prestigious competitions for sure; it gives a lot of opportunities to the winners, so I decided to participate. It's so difficult, because we have to play only Chopin's music. And it's really special, I can say. The whole city of Warsaw is so passionate about Chopin. Even their airport is named after Chopin, and in the city- all the bars, cafés, shops: Chopin is everywhere and it feels like a great festival.

I cannot say it was a pleasant memory. I caught a cold, I was a little bit sick, and it was very stressful. But it was very memorable event, and it changed my life for sure...

What was your first impression, when you arrived there?

I went there in April for the preliminary round. The first impression- it was my second time in Warsaw and I knew the city a little bit, but I had never played in the Philharmonie. I had always watched the competition, since I was a child- the 2005 or the 2010 editions, or even the old ones, like when Krystian Zimerman played (1975), but I was surprised when I found myself in the "real" hall!

The competition was so well organized- I participated in a few other competitions before, but this was definitely the most organized one I've ever played in.

Was there something special you did to get rid of being nervous? What did you do to prepare?

I didn't use my phone at the time, and no computer either. I didn't want to see all the comments, on facebook and on Youtube. I didn't watch other competitors- I only watched myself, to check if everything went well. At that time I didn't have a smartphone, so I didn't talk to too many people either. I didn't want much information...I just wanted to concentrate.

Was there some "comfort food" or something else that made you calm down, or was it always high blood pressure and sleepless nights?

Actually I think I slept quite well during the competition, because I practiced hard, so I was exhausted... maybe practicing hard helps to make you less nervous?

Is that the same for you today?

Well, it's a different kind of stress, but I cannot compare, because the amount of stress I had during the competition was enormous. So I feel very lucky these days.

Does that have to do with routine? There is also some pianists like Rudolf Buchbinder, who say, the older they get, the more nervous they become? Or do you think, as time goes by, you get more used to it and you don't worry so much?

I still remember the first recital in my life- in 2005. I remember that I was really, really nervous. And I have to say, I am still nervous before concerts, but I got used to the feeling, and I feel less stressed, and sometimes I feel that this kind of nervousness is actually quite exciting. Sometimes, I play better when I am a bit nervous.

But you wouldn't agree with Rubinstein, who said "better be a bit nervous in the evening than practice seven hours a day"?

Ah yes? Did he say that? I'll tell you when I get ninety years old...

Talking about Krystian Zimerman, are you still in contact with him?

Yes sometimes.

So he has become a kind of mentor for you after the Chopin competition? What role did he play for you at the time?

I was first to play at the finals. There were ten finalists, and I was number one. After my performance, I went back to the hotel, bought

a few bottles of beer, and I was drinking in my room, watching the other participants on TV- for the first time. With beer. And, suddenly I got an e-mail from Krystian. He said he really enjoyed my final round performance. I was really touched, because Krystian Zimerman was my idol since I was a child. I always listened to his recordings, and he is a very special figure for me. He told me that he got my e-mail address from Kyungwha Chung, and he even apologized for writing directly to me. He was so gentle... after the results came out, we talked a little, and eventually we met in person. That was a month after the competition, when he came to my recital in Tokyo. I didn't know that he was in the audience... if I had known, I would have been so nervous, but he just came secretly and said hello after the concert backstage. We had a dinner, and we talked about a lot of things, and he gave me a lot of advice, about management, about recordings: what to do, what not to do. It was really helpful and he was so generous.

When I look at the list of all the competitions you won- the Hamamatsu, Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky- what do they mean to you? Do you have any special memories, apart from winning?

Every competition was special to me. Talking about Hamamatsu, honestly, I was not so nervous when I played in Hamamatsu. I was fifteen years old and not so experienced compared to the other competitors, so I didn't expect much. I thought it would be a good experience, in playing a long program, but I didn't think about winning. So I just prepared well, practiced hard, and luckily I won the first prize. And then: I didn't have to go to the army because of the Hamamatsu competition- I got exempted because of the competition. Also, I really got to know the life of a concert pianist after the Hamamatsu competition: a year later, in 2010, I played fifty concerts a year....

That year, you were 16, and you played fifty concerts?

Yes. Half of the concerts were in Japan, a tour of winner's concerts, and a tour with NHK orchestra. So it was 25 concerts in Japan...

So by now you know every little town in Japan, then?

Yeah, sure! Then there were concerts in Korea, with Maestro Chung, some recitals, and I went to Poland, Russia.... I really got to know what the life of a concert pianist feels like!

Tchaikovsky Competition: honestly speaking, this was the toughest competition in my life. The level was extremely high, and at that time I was really excited to see the other participants' performances. I played... I think I was No. 16 or something. After me, Daniel Trifonov played, and after Daniel, Yeol Eum Son played. Not only the winners, but even in the first round, there were so many exceptional pianists... there was Boris Giltburg, who didn't pass the first round, but two years later won the Queen Elisabeth Competition; there was Eduard Kunz, who played exceptionally well, and so many other Russian pianists... I went there every day to listen. I was 17 years old and I was so excited... but the competition was a bit too difficult for a 17-year old "child", because we had to play three big concertos plus two different recital programs. Physically very challenging... and honestly speaking, Tchaikovsky is not so well organised. I am not saying it's a bad thing, but it's very... spontaneous. You have to be ready all the time, you don't know what is going to happen next...

I still admire Daniel Trifonov, and I was really happy to follow his career. He absolutely deserved winning.... And lastly, I decided to move to Europe at that time. I was in Korea,

and I thought living in Europe might bring more opportunities, in many ways. So I moved to Paris in 2012.

Next, I played at the Rubinstein Competition, as I agreed with (my teacher) Michel Béroff to do it. Even though it's a big competition, it is not like Chopin or Tchaikovsky. Still, I thought it can give me a lot of opportunities. I was happy with a few performances, but I think I was too ambitious. I tried to show so many things... I wanted to "prove" that I am a good pianist. But now I think, it was a mistake. So it just taught me just that: it was a mistake.



Different question: have you been asked to join a competition jury? Would you want to?

I think I have been asked just once, but I think

it doesn't make sense. There were participants who were older than me... I am not a big fan of competitions, but if I can take part in one jury, I would like it to be the Chopin!

Let's change the subject a bit. You have now stayed in Berlin for three months in a row... how do you manage your life during the pandemic?

In the beginning, I thought it was a gift for me! I'd never stopped working for five years... I could rest, I didn't touch the piano for a week, maybe ten days (laughs)...but I had no idea the situation would get worse and worse. And still now, so many people are suffering. I was really really worried... also my relatives in Korea, they are really suffering. But of course, I knew I had to do something. So I tried to learn new repertoire, and tried to learn some German...

Did you do online concerts?

Yes! A few...

With the camera in your living room?

Ah, no it was an online shoot at a film studio. It was a really tough time, but I was lucky that I could do "something", like an online concert with Matthias Goerne...

Living in Berlin has a lot of advantages. But now, I am going to Korea in one month, and I will have to quarantine for 2 weeks



But together with your piano?

(laughs) Yes! I have to!

Have you ever been afraid of Corona?

Yes of course! I always wear a mask... in the middle of February, there were not so many people infected. Only in Asia, there were many infected, but not here in Berlin. So, when I tried to take a taxi, the driver refused to take me... at that time I thought: this is going to be serious. Not only the virus, but there will be social and political problems.

I'm also worried about the classical music market. All the orchestras, especially in America, shut down; the infrastructure is now terrible...

But you still feel safe in Germany now?

Yes! In Berlin it's quite good now... many shops are open again, many people just go out and take a walk here.. And for once, I managed to see the city completely empty... For example, I've never seen the Alexanderplatz, with not one person there! That was very special.

Do you enjoy life in Berlin?

Berlin is very different from other cities in Germany, but I like living here. People are really open minded...

So no plans to move anywhere else?

No! For the moment, I am happy.

What's your favourite Korean Restaurant in Berlin?

I haven't found a really good one yet, if I may say.... actually there is a Korean restaurant called Kokio, a chicken place. Fried Chicken!



Last year you did a festival in Tongyeong, that is remembered by many people...it was called "Seongjin and Friends", with four concerts in four days. This must have been very demanding for you, kind of like the Chopin competition... you played a duo program with Matthias Goerne, you played Brahms Quintet, for the first time, with Belcea Quartet; you played a recital and a school concert, and you conducted two concertos from the keyboard, for the first time... how did that feel? Were you just overwhelmed, or did you like it in the end- all these concerts in just four days?

I was not exhausted, back then. I was really excited. And I have to repeat: the Tongyeong Concert Hall is one of my favourite halls in Asia. I was really happy to be there! The hall really felt like home, I went there everyday, for rehearsals, for concerts, I hardly spent any time at my hotel. I didn't think I was tired, but

after the festival, I went on playing in Japan, then went back to Germany to my home, and I got sick.... But I still remember the Tongyeong festival one of the highlights of my career: I cannot forget about my recital at that time. I was really, really happy about the recital last September. I already told one journalist, this was one of the most satisfying recitals of my life! Even now, I feel like that, because of the audience- they were so concentrated; the acoustics; all the circumstances were perfect! So I could truly concentrate on the music, and the result was really good.

Tongyeong Festival Orchestra was really warm-nice people... I know that I was not so professional at conducting, but the musicians could understand and they really followed me well, so I really appreciated working with them.

Do you have more plans for conducting, after that time?

(hesitates) ...not for the moment...

So it was just a one-off?

Maybe it was a debut and retirement at the same time...

Last question: do you have any upcoming projects, any big plan for the future?

The most difficult thing is simply said: just to continue. To keep playing well, to try to play better and better..... it's the most difficult but biggest plan for me.

Interview: Florian Riem
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