



Review by Declan Townsend

Míceál O'Rourke at Cork School of Music

For the large number of intrepid music-lovers who braved the elements recently in order to hear Míceál O'Rourke playing Chopin, the journey was more than worthwhile. Internationally recognized as one of the leading Chopin interpreters of the present, O'Rourke gave us a display of musicianship that will remain in my mind for many a year. I have not heard such wonderfully thought through interpretations of Chopin since the much lamented Dinu Lipatti died. Listening to O'Rourke's recordings, I have frequently marveled at their depth of feeling. Hearing him play live was even better.

O'Rourke is an artist of rare sensibility who takes great pains with his reading of a composer's text. This I know from a long interview I conducted with him and the over-riding impression he gave me then was one of tremendous honesty, humility almost, in reading a composer's intentions. When he plays Field and Chopin, in particular, it feels to me that he is in direct communication with the spirits of the composer, so ethereal, dreamy, restrained yet intense is the playing.

He chose to play two Ballades, four Nocturnes, five Mazurkas and two larger-scale works, the Polonaise-Fantasia in A flat, Op. 61 and the Andante spianato and Grand Polonaise brillante, Op. 22. Beginning with the Polonaise-Fantasia he immediately enthralled his audience with the sheer beauty of the sound he created. This ravishing tone quality never deserted him throughout the evening. At every dynamic level, from the spider's-web delicacy of his pianissimo to thundering fortes, even when playing a shower of wrong notes, his tone was never anything other than beautiful.

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Mere beauty of tone, however, does not make a great performer. There are so many other elements involved also, sense of style, phrasing, voicing, understanding of what differentiates composers' voices, harmonic awareness and, perhaps most important of all, understanding what gives the music its impetus, what compels it forward, in a word, Interpretation. O'Rourke seemed to me to have got inside the head of the long-dead composer and delivered Chopin's messages to us as if Chopin were present.

Chopin (1810-1849) lived through one the great cultural, philosophic, social upheavals of history, one in which the concepts of Nationhood and the Rights of Man were taking root. Perhaps it is because he did not possess the obvious rebelliousness of Beethoven, Berlioz, Smetana et al that he is often thought of as genteel, safe. O'Rourke, however, reveals the harmonically adventurous, mold-breaking, innovative composer, with an unexpected contrapuntal skill, in playing that is always far more than display.

Two examples demonstrate his thoughtfulness; in the f minor Nocturne, barely using the pedal, he tiptoed through the principal tune, drawing us into his vision and, again in the Grande Polonaise brillante he created, at the keyboard, the orchestral sounds that Chopin published to accompany this work. Above all, though, in his playing he revealed inner melodies who presence, in music that I thought I knew, had passed by me, totally unnoticed.