

Too many records

Franz Liszt the Dionysian had a fearsome competitor: Sigismund Thalberg the Apollonian. When they both performed at the Parisian 'salon' of the Princess Belgiojoso, the verdict on this pianistic duel was: 'Thalberg is the first pianist in the world; Liszt is the only one.' The lady who voiced this *bon mot* was certainly reflecting the opinion of many. For as long as I shall regret the late invention of recording technology (and I'll do so for ever!), I shall never consider that there are too many records. Beside Liszt and Thalberg, I wish recordings of Paganini, Chopin, Brahms performing his Second Piano Concerto for the first time (in Budapest) and Beethoven playing 'con fuoco' with his crazy fast tempos (according to Czerny) or Mozart improvising were available.

When my parents emigrated from Cyprus to Cameroon, then a French colony, in the late 1940s, a little later they started an LP collection. Most naturally, I was listening to them with my mother before I was born. During her pregnancy, my mother expressed the wish to have a son who would become a conductor. My parents claim that I was trying to sing *La Raspa*, a famous Mexican song, at the age of five or six months! I remember when I was a little boy listening to Tchaikovsky's symphonies and *Marche slave*, Wagner (excerpts from *The Flying Dutchman*), Beethoven's *Pastoral* and Prokofiev's *Classical Symphonies*, Mozart's *Coronation* and Flute and Harp Concertos, opera arias by Callas, Sibelius's *Valse triste*, Ravel's *Boléro*, Handel's *Messiah* ... I was also fascinated by the continuous turning motion of the records on the gramophone.

Conversely, when I was four I decided that I would become a traffic regulation policeman. My mother lamented and her friend Christina (a music lover) told her not to worry because the policeman and the conductor use the same arm movements!

Anyhow, records have always been a big part of my life. After we moved to Paris in 1959 I attended several concerts and was overwhelmed by Cziffra performing Liszt's *Hungarian Fantasia* and Piano Concerto No. 1; it was simply phenomenal, not only because of his great pianistic skills but especially because of his expressive virtuosity. Most famous pianists play runs in an academic way; Cziffra was always phrasing them. His records were a piano bible for me. When, several years later, a major French radio station, 'France Culture', asked me to play some favourite records, I chose, beside Mahler's *Rückert-Lieder* by Dame Janet Baker and gypsy music from Romania, two Scarlatti sonatas, without disclosing the name of the pianist.



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After the broadcast, everybody was raving about the delicacy and refinement of those interpretations. When I revealed Cziffra's name they simply couldn't believe it. Wilhelm Kempff was another great musician who impressed me through his concerts and records, with some magical moments in Beethoven sonatas and Brahms's *Klavierstücke*. My passion for making recordings started during my Paris Conservatoire years. There was a studio nearby and I set down some music by Mozart, Mendelssohn, Chopin, Liszt, Ravel ... but without editing. I discovered that no audience can beat microphones as far as 'stress' is concerned. Those diabolical tools cause a shortening of one's space and it is the task and the responsibility of the performer to transcend this phenomenon during the recording process in order to communicate musical emotion.

In 1972 I was the only western-European pianist to reach the finals at the Queen Elisabeth Competition and I then recorded my first commercial LPs. An exclusive contract with Teldec followed in the 1980s. I could finally satisfy my childhood fantasy: to play orchestral music such as Beethoven's symphonies on the piano. However, I am not a conductor-trained musician. Quite frankly, I'd rather produce all those amazing sounds with my own fingers instead of depending upon the good or bad will of an orchestra – I had to wait for so long before I could satisfy this egoistic need to perform all that orchestral stuff. It's like a forbidden fruit: orchestral music played on the piano. Oh! what a beneficial and enriching experience! It developed so many factors in my playing: the sense of phrasing, the variety of colours, the different polyphonic layers. This was achieved only with the help of recordings, because when one listens to one's own

different takes, one learns and hopefully improves a lot. This is the magic of recording.

Meanwhile my record collection continued to increase, including many rarities and most of Art Tatum. After a short exclusive contract with Sony Classical, I finally decided to create my own label: PIANO 21. The venture was launched in January 2001, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, hence my choice of title. This is the vehicle for my own recordings, some of them of live performances. They comprise both new recordings and tracks from private and radiophonic archives from various countries as well as reissues. PIANO 21 gives expression to my twofold passion to share not only music from the major repertoire – naturally – but also the discovery of rare and less well-known works. I hope the audiophiles among you will forgive me, but for me the interpretation of a piece is more important than the quality of the sound.

PIANO 21 consists of three collections:

1. New Recordings. A world première recording of Beethoven's piano arrangement of *The Creatures of Prometheus*, a recital 'In Memoriam Chopin' and a selection of pieces by Sergei Bortkiewicz (1877-1952). There is also a Bach series with five concertos by the Bach family, together with Latin American music and première recordings of works connected with Cyprus.
2. The Complete Mozart Piano Concertos.
3. Archives. Double CDs of Russian and French music and a Liszt recording with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. PIANO 21 may be streamed on www.cyprienkatsaris.com

Too many records? There is no cure for my overwhelming passion for recordings. If there was one, I wouldn't take it! It's a necessary passion, a vital addiction. Why? Well, there is so much madness in the world that music makes a wonderful antidote. I'm happy when we, as musicians, can help people to forget their worries: through music we can all be elevated to higher spiritual levels. Records are the most marvellous vehicles to achieve this goal on a large scale. Music is my wife, pianos my girlfriends and records my (our) children. No, definitely no, there aren't and there will never be too many records. I calculated that I would need 375 years in order to learn all the pieces I want to record. There will never be too many flowers in a garden or too much beauty on this planet; and yes indeed, I will always miss a recording of the great organ player Johann Adam Reincken (1623-1722!), for whom J. S. Bach, as a young man, made journeys specially to hear him improvise.

Cyprien Katsaris