



The American pianist Garrick Ohlsson needs no introduction. Winner of the 8th International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw in 1970, Ohlsson belongs to the very top flight of pianists in the world today.

Garrick Ohlsson

Working with a millipede

If today there are hundreds of piano competitions worldwide, the number was far more limited in 1970, and the very important ones could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Today's internationalisation, the increasing number of competitors and the big competitions' tremendous outreach out has completely changed the cultural scene.

“Back in 1970 you could easily distinguish between pianists and which country they came from based on playing styles and typical musical and technical manners. Now it's virtually impossible”, says Ohlsson. He sees a fundamental difference these days compared to the past when the student was regarded as a “possession” by the teacher, and he sees both musical and interpretational benefits from students seeking and receiving instruction from more than one teacher. Therefore we see a loosening of the clear-cut definition of the so-called “national schools of piano playing”.

In Warsaw in 1970, Garrick Ohlsson belonged to a very strong Juilliard-trained generation of young pianists including Ax, Fialkowska and Swann. “I believe that we were actually the first poly-

glots of piano playing, not cast in any kind of nationally representative way or fashion but rather standing as results of the American history of immigration and multiplicity”, says Ohlsson, himself of Italian/Swedish descent.

Ohlsson won his first major competition in 1966 in Bolzano (the Busoni) when he was still a student in the pre-college division at Juilliard. This win became an important indicator of strength and purpose, and later he won the Montreal Competition in 1968 and subsequently, the Chopin in 1970. His Warsaw win led to coverage in every major newspaper in the world, and his career and recordings engagements took off. It's hard to believe that such an outcome would have been possible without consistent training and Ohlsson's renowned teachers – Sasha Gorodnitzky, Rosina Lhevinne, Claudio Arrau and Olga Barbini.

Now 73, Garrick Ohlsson has in recent years served as professor at the San Francisco Conservatory, where he teaches a few Master students who are already autonomous. Master instruction is a delicate matter. How do you teach a talent who already has a highly

developed personality and integrity? “Teaching talent is like working with a millipede where you don’t really know which leg is doing what and why. In order not to obstruct, careful and non-dogmatic instruction is crucial. In a way, I can only provide tools”, says Ohlsson.

Being experienced at giving masterclasses internationally and also as a private tutor, Ohlsson is also open to digital solutions – which has resulted, for example, in high-end video productions for the highly regarded platform tonebase.co. “We have all learned as we’ve been going along but I have been amazed by what we really can do in terms of details and nuances. Sound production, dynamics and not least pedal work are aspects, though, which clearly suffer in my Zoom technology experience. However, reaching talents who live in geographically remote places is a plus that should not be forgotten.”

“An artist never puts in his bio all the competitions he didn’t win, but everyone has them”, Ohlsson says and laughs. For those who want to compete and have the proficiency to do so, Ohlsson recommends smaller local competitions so that the student can concentrate on the work and repertoire. “There’s nothing better than a goal and this is actually about the learning experience. If you go with the right emotional and mental approach it can only be bene-

ficial regardless of whether you win a prize or not. You learn from the juries, by listening to others, what’s good to do and what’s not good to do. Students need to form opinions; these help you grow and be more objective about yourself.”

So, how can we judge a digital performance compared to a live one? An online presentation could even be favourable for a contestant who is not able to project the sound to a full hall. Should we give out two kinds of prizes, live and online? Do pianists receive training for a digital performance reality? “This is a very difficult question as digital solutions arose spontaneously out of the pandemic necessity. Recording in any medium is something the performer learns about step by step and through experience. The online reality has made us more interactive in a way. It opens doors and doesn’t close them. I also believe that we have moved away from the old conception that competitions are anti-social, not least through what good a piano competition can do for a city or a whole country, for that matter. Just by watching the amazing international outreach of the recent Chopin Competition, it’s clear that the old and new have to meet. In spite of technology, old-fashioned values are still very universal: playing well and being a good musician.”

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