



Communal joy

This year's Chopin Institute Festival proved that concerts in the age of COVID can be presented safely and with a sense of real excitement. Taking her seat among the audience in Warsaw, **Eva Doroszkowska** was thrilled to rediscover the power of live music-making

I could never imagine the world without music,' Argentinian pianist Nelson Goerner stated at a press conference for the 16th Chopin and His Europe Festival, which took place in Warsaw from 15 to 31 August – live.

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has had a devastating effect on culture around the world. Live streaming has become ubiquitous – a creative outpouring from musicians proving that performance is an essential aspect of our cultural lives. As musicians embrace technology in greater numbers, the quality of streaming has improved, becoming more stylish, with better lighting and artful camera angles. Hybrid concerts have also flourished, with performers in empty concert halls streaming to music-lovers in their homes. Meanwhile, in Warsaw, the Chopin Institute was one of the first to present a festival of live music since lockdowns began. Their initiative

proved that streaming is a poor substitute for the real thing, especially when it comes to the thrill of direct contact with an audience.

Going live again has been no easy task. This year's festival hosted a glittering line-up of 26 concerts featuring such celebrated names as Nikolai Lugansky, Gabriela Montero, Ivo Pogorelich and Yulianna Avdeeva. It's true that many of these artists have been active online throughout the pandemic; but the atmosphere was more funereal than festive when, for example, Lugansky performed to an empty concert hall in Moscow. The silence from the auditorium put a damper on the magnificent Beethoven he played. In a symbolic token of gratitude from the online audience, a solitary bouquet was presented to Lugansky from the only other human being to cross the stage. No surprise then that Lugansky, like Goerner and a host of others, were incredibly enthusiastic

at being reunited with real audiences at the Warsaw Philharmonic Hall, even if restrictions meant the venue could only fill 40 per cent of its seats. For concert halls looking to reopen, the question remains how to do this safely. In Warsaw, the Chopin Institute Festival has led the way.

Following in the footsteps of this year's Salzburg Festival, which also presented a live if limited programme, the Chopin Festival planned cautiously. Dr Artur Szklener, director of the Institute, announced ahead of the event, 'We are facing a huge challenge, those of us who are going to be together in the concert hall. It is a huge responsibility for us that contact with art should not be associated with danger.' There was even an exception to the gloomy rule of no singing, as conductor Fabio Biondi led his Europa Galante ensemble in Moniuszko's *The Countess* at Warsaw's National

Opera House – the first time the opera had been performed on period instruments.

Many venues around the world are still struggling to find a way of making concerts financially viable with socially distanced audiences. Happily, in Warsaw, the Chopin Festival decided it was important to present something, despite losing most of its potential box office income practically overnight. As Dr Szklener explained, revenue from the cultural sector forms a large part of Poland's economy, comparable with the hospitality industry. He gratefully acknowledged the help of those who made it possible – sponsors to whom the festival remains indebted and Polish Radio, who broadcast the concerts live.

Safety remained paramount but naturally there were obstacles and administrative hurdles to overcome. Signed declarations of health were presented on admission to each concert. Masks were worn throughout, enforced by ushers around the hall. Two vacant seats between each ticketed seat were elegantly sealed off by a deep red ribbon, though members from the same household were able to sit together, with further dispensations made for children and the disabled. Planning was meticulous, ensuring optimum safety. The original ticketing system was completely revised, with tickets released later than usual allowing for any necessary changes. The usual 5pm concert remained while the second concert was moved to the later time of 9pm to ensure a deep cleaning between recitals and a thorough airing of the concert hall. Air conditioning was turned off; gone was the pre-concert mingling over a glass of wine; and there were no intervals.

Admitting that offering an online element adds a huge logistical and financial burden to arts events, artistic director Stanisław Leszczyński thanked the generosity of the artists for making the sacrifices needed to allow the Festival to happen. Travel for many had been compromised, with the threat of quarantine changing daily, not to mention the strain of performing without intervals. There were last-minute changes to the programming, with European artists called upon to replace those across the Atlantic unable to travel. It is a testament to the special place the Chopin Festival holds in the hearts of many, that artists were willing to make sacrifices. For many, this was their first live performance since March.

Gabriela Montero was not the only one to thank the audience and the Institute as she performed her first concert since

lockdown. Her enchanting recital with free improvisations was a heartfelt response to the pandemic. She finished by improvising on themes suggested by and familiar to her audience. The magic that emerged was tangible proof of the sense of wonder that an audience and performer create together in a live forum: improvisations truly inspired by the enormity of the moment.

Live music matters. As Nelson Goerner said, 'I believe very deeply that what happens here in Warsaw, organised by the Chopin Institute, is truly fundamental for the survival of music, for its growth and its future development. I am overjoyed to be here performing on the opening night.' Goerner's inaugural concert was indeed spellbinding and his modest stage manner belied the firecracker of a concert that followed. There was an intake of breath before the opening three-note melody, 'Le-be-wohl', of Beethoven's *Les Adieux* Sonata. The 'farewell' motif was spun out in a tone of sadness and nostalgia, an introduction leading into the drama of the opening movement, masterfully rendered. 'Abwesenheit' (Absence) was delivered with supreme sensitivity of tone, speaking of emptiness, the fluctuation between a sense of helplessness and a spark of nostalgia. As the music moved from the grief of separation to unbounded energy in the sheer revelry of 'Das Wiedersehen' (The Reunion) in the last movement, the concert dispelled all fear that live music may be a

thing of the past. The significance of the words Beethoven penned in the score could not have rung out with more resonance in a nod to the current situation.

Goerner's programme played tribute to Beethoven's 250th anniversary with the bravura *Eroica Variations*, sparkling with clarity and effortless ease, dazzling the audience with Olympian feats of Beethovenian brilliance. The pianist's commanding virtuosity left us entranced, and as the music soared around the auditorium, all of us in the audience realised just what had been missing in our lives these last few months. The essence of music is felt in a communal heartbeat – the shared breath of audience and performer. The second half of Goerner's recital concluded with a spirited rendition of Liszt's *Spanish Rhapsody*, full of warmth and sunny optimism. The encore of a Paderewski Nocturne was delivered with a hint of mystery and the lilt of a summer breeze.

The concert offered a beacon of hope for the festival's survival and, more importantly, the reassurance that live music plays a vital role in our cultural landscape. At the outset, the Chopin Institute's biggest hope was to present the concerts they had programmed as live events. As the festival drew to a close, they proved it was a risk well worth taking. Perhaps the most wonderful sound in the concert hall was the joyous applause after each concert: the sound of communal gratitude. **IP**

Gabriela Montero offers a heartfelt response to the pandemic



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