





"I always find my role as a pianist very similar to an actor. Fundamentally speaking, we are all interpreters trying to decode a piece of art and transmitting to the audience through our own means."

Cheng Zhang, Haskil Prize 2011, signs his first CD, dedicated to Béla Bartók, in interview with Patrick Peikert, both responsible of label Claves and Clara Haskil Competition

Claves: *In 2011, you were the first Chinese to win the Clara Haskil International Piano Competition since its inception in 1963. Tell us about your motivation to enter the competition, the preparation and the consequences of this Prize in your life.*

Cheng Zhang: It is quite unbelievable for me that nearly ten years have passed since this special experience. I have been asked this question numerous times, but to this day, I still find it difficult to fully articulate my feelings and thoughts on this.

Back in 2011, I was still a university student living in Texas. After having spent almost five years in the USA, it was time for me to decide whether to stay or leave. I had a wonderful teacher who supported me unconditionally and we got along extremely well. However, when it came to the idea of entering competitions, we had opposing points of view. Although I started playing piano at a very early age and attended arts school before moving to the USA, it was only in my late teens that I decided to fully pursue piano as my future career. This was probably the reason why I always felt a lack of confidence and constantly doubted about my ability on the instrument. No matter how many times my teacher encouraged me to enter competitions, I was always hesitant and

told him that I would prefer to step away from it to concentrate on improving my technique and to accumulate more repertoire.

At the time I was extremely fascinated by all the German-speaking composers. This whole discovery had shifted my taste in choosing repertoire from show pieces to something more profound and personal. Then the Clara Haskil competition happened exactly around this period. I was first of all very attracted to the competition's specific repertoire requirement which consisted of mainly pieces by composers that I like. Moreover, I felt quite safe that virtuosic playing was not the focus of this competition, contrary to some others. When I decided to apply, there wasn't any contradicting thoughts or doubts. Everything just felt right.

During the preparation, I already knew that I would relocate myself to Germany and start a new chapter with a new teacher. It was a very stimulating summer preparing for the competition. I moved from the middle of nowhere in Texas to Berlin, a city that impacted me with energy and cultural shock. I was too overwhelmed and preoccupied by the change of environment to feel nervous for the competition.

As for the actual competition, I made a conscious effort not to remember anything as it wasn't easy for me to get through it. After the result was announced, I went to Menahem Pressler, one of the jury members, to ask for his feedback. He smiled and said something I would never forget, "we give you the prize not because of how you played this evening, but for your potential to grow." Indeed, receiving a recognizable prize did not make me a better pianist overnight. It was not until many years later that I realized the value of this honour.

I was extremely grateful that my "winner" title opened up some doors for me, especially for someone who just moved to Europe. It gave me a glimpse of the life of a concert pianist. However, deep inside I knew I wasn't ready for a career. Although the prize boosted my confidence a lot, I was still quite ashamed of calling myself a winner in my biography. I would sometimes convince myself that it was the "winner" who got invited to a performance, not me. Furthermore, I did not feel comfortable at all in a business which socialising and self-promoting played a huge role. I tried my very best preparing for all the concert engagements for about two to three years.

Then my life gradually went back to normal along with the diminishing of concerts. It was a rather depressing period to endure after having experienced the feeling of performing in public regular-

ly. I became very insecure and full of doubts. not knowing if I really possessed the talent to live up to this prize. At times I even wished that I wasn't the one who won the competition...It took me a huge amount of self-evaluation to determine what I really wanted to do with piano and music after this depression. The process of getting myself back to concertizing was not easy. I started trying every possible way to get more performance opportunities. It was only then that I started to understand how lucky I was in the very beginning.

Now looking back, with a different perspective, I believe the consequence of this prize has now become an endless search to identify my potential...

This first recording is devoted to Bartók. Why his music and why these works?

I always find my role as a pianist very similar to an actor. Fundamentally speaking, we are all interpreters trying to decode a piece of art and transmitting to the audience through our own means. The relationship between interpreter and composer is exactly the same as for actor and his character role. In this sense, I tend to choose composers with whom I could identify. It is a very subtle decision because very often, our understanding of someone can be easily mystified by stereotypes. During the preparation, what interests me the most is probably how one should form a picture

of the composer based on the materials at hand. One has to be extremely honest during this process, since this will be the backbone for all the artistic and musical decisions later on.

Why does Bartók's music move me? Is it the folk music elements that occasionally remind me of my Chinese root? Possible. To me, Bartók is one of the lonely souls who uncompromisingly confronts the world with his absolute realness and directness. Underneath his primitive strength lies the kindness to humanity and profound respect for nature. There is a certain kind of transparency and simplicity in his music, which can be easily distorted by the slightest artificial exaggeration. His music speaks to me in a very minimalistic way, in a sense that he was incapable of writing anything other than the truth. This also includes his stubborn principles, strict attitudes and serious manners. I adore how a man like him can embrace music and life in a very restrained and disciplined fashion. It's a type of dignity without any make up and perfume.

The pieces I choose for this album are probably the quintessential works from his musical output. My idea is to use the piano as a medium to bridge his three main compositional genres. This consists of his innovative ensemble work: *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*, the two most important piano solo works both composed in 1926:

Piano Sonata and Out of Doors, lastly Bartók's own piano transcription of his orchestral work: *Dance Suite*. It is fascinating to observe the composer, a great pianist himself, to achieve three completely distinctive sonorities from the piano by integrating his knowledge of the instrument and his compositional technique; not to mention his effortless way of using folk music tunes and rhythms. I cannot think of any other music that combines such primitive vitality with the highest degree of sophistication, yet still remains original.

You recorded this disc at the Salle de Musique de La Chaux-de-Fonds in Switzerland, a hall where it is said that silences speak for themselves. Can you tell us about this experience?

Yes, it is a magical hall and I'm very privileged to have my first studio recording experience done in a place like this. However, sometimes such great facility does not always make life easier. When you are offered with a variety of choices and possibilities, it is quite important to know what you want. This requires a very quick and sharp mind, and also a huge responsibility for my own decisions.

For me, the most challenging part of this recording process, apart from the very physical aspects demanded by the pieces, is to find a perfect balance of communicating my emotional power and colour nuances to the microphone. Sitting and

playing in a hall with marvellous acoustic like the Salle de Musique de La Chaux-de-Fonds, one can easily start enjoying oneself and gets spoiled by the endless inspiration of sound bouncing back from the hall. There is a slight danger of getting into a trap - one tends to forget that the nature of the microphone is not as sensitive as the human souls. Sometimes it is necessary to force oneself to stay calm and to remain slightly detached, to be aware of the surrounding, in order to bring out the finest details and nuances.

There is something very special in recording Bartók's music in Switzerland, as the composer had a very close relationship with this country during his lifetime. Perhaps he adored the nature or perhaps his works were exceptionally well-received there. To me, the hall emanates a very delicate sound and a particular kind of clarity, which I can definitely resonate from his music and his own piano playing.

Were you surprised to learn that Clara Haskil also played Bartók's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, even though she is known more for these interpretations of the classics and romantics?

At the beginning, I was very surprised to find out that Clara Haskil played this piece together with Nikita Magaloff in Vevey, Switzerland in November 1945, only eight years after the piece was com-

posed. However, after I discovered the musical scene and political background back then in Switzerland, everything was pretty self-explanatory.

At the time, Bartók was a rising star in the Western European music world. His *Dance Suite* was widely received around the globe after a huge success at the international music festival in Prague in 1925. The piece was also performed frequently around Switzerland in the 1920s in cities like Schaffhausen, Basel, Winterthur, Bern, Geneva and Lausanne. Bartók himself visited and performed his own compositions in Switzerland several times, including his composer's night recital in Basel in 1929. It was during this event that he met Paul Sacher, a Swiss conductor and patron, who founded and conducted at the Basel Chamber Orchestra. Subsequently, Paul Sacher and his orchestra started to include Bartók's music in their concert programs, among which the composer himself played the solo part of his *Piano Concerto No.2* in 1935. All these encounters were the direct prefaces that lead to Bartók's three successive commissions for Paul Sacher. The *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* was one of them. In January 1938, the composer and his second wife, Ditta Pásztory-Bartók premiered this work in Basel, where it received enthusiastic reviews.

It was around the same period that the general political situation in Europe progressively dete-

riorated. Bartók was aware of what was happening and knew beforehand that a new world war was inevitable. He explained to Aurel von Milloss, a famous dancer and choreographer, about the meaning of the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*, "It is difficult to describe because it does not have a meaning; it has an essence : in it, I sought to express fear." Soon after the outbreak of war, Bartók accepted invitations to a busy concert tour with his wife in the USA, and never returned to his home country.

A native of Romania, Clara Haskil had long lived in Paris. In 1942, she sought refuge in Switzerland, where she settled in Vevey for the rest of her days. It was not surprising that Haskil probably met Paul Sacher during this time, as they collaborated together few years later. It was also quite natural to speculate that a strong character like Haskil would find Bartók's uncompromising musicality appealing.

At a time when the way of listening to recorded music has been revolutionised by the arrival of the internet, tell us what you think of this revolution and how, personally, do you listen to music in 2020?

There is a small passage I would like to quote from Peter Bartók's book *My Father* - "His reservations about mechanically reproduced music are set

down in his lecture text on mechanical music. While conceding the usefulness of radio for sick or otherwise immobilised people, it contained some critical thoughts : the easy availability of music coming out of a home loudspeaker at the flick of a switch - no need to dress up, buy tickets, and sit in silent attention with some thousand others in a big hall- may lead to superficial listening : people can turn the music on and off at any time, make it loud or soft, and they may even chat during the music!"

I think if Bartók were still alive today, he would probably go mad at the way people listen to music nowadays. The things we take for granted now might seem completely idiotic to him. At the same time, it is quite ironic that, after nearly a hundred years, even with the fast advancement of technology, we humans are still asking the same questions that our ancestors asked...

CHENG ZHANG



Pianist Cheng Zhang first received international recognition in 2011 by winning both the only Haskil prize and public prize at the prestigious Clara Haskil International Piano Competition in Vevey Switzerland.

A native of China, he garnered critical acclaim for his performances at such venues including Konzerthaus in Berlin, Gewandhaus in Leipzig, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, Stravinski Auditorium in Montreux and Philharmonic in Warsaw. Highlights in recent years include appearances at Klavier-Festival Ruhr, Verbier Festival Academy, Festival Septembre Musical de Montreux-Vevey, Schubertiade from Espace 2, Bonn Robert Schumannfest and Nohant Chopin Festival.

Since 2016, after winning the Schumann Piano Competition in Zwickau Germany, Cheng has established himself as a distinguished Schumann interpreter of his generation in the recent concert seasons. His all-Schumann album, recorded live at Église Saint-Marcellin de Névache in France, was released in June 2019 by Accentus music.

Cheng studied with Klaus Hellwig at the Universität der Künste Berlin in Germany, where he now lives. He also holds a degree from TCU School of Music under the guidance of Tamás Ungár. Before moving to the United States, he attended the Shenzhen Arts School in China, where he was a pupil of Dan Zhaoyi.

TOMOKI KITAMURA PIANO



Born in Aichi (Japan) in 1991, Tomoki Kitamura began playing the piano at the age of three.

Since his early years, he has won prizes at important international piano competitions including Hamamatsu (3rd Prize, 2006), Sydney (5th Prize and Special Prizes for the best performance of Schubert and contemporary music, 2008), Leeds (5th Prize, 2015) and Beethoven Bonn (2nd Prize, 2017).

After winning the 1st Prize and the Grand Jury Prize at the prestigious Tokyo Music Competition (2005), Tomoki Kitamura started his career in Japan performing as a recitalist, soloist with orchestras, chamber music player, and also as a fortepianist. He has also performed numerous concerts in Germany, France, Spain, England and Poland.

His four solo CDs (including works by Beethoven, Schumann, Liszt, Brahms, Berg, Bartók) received favourable reviews on the prestigious magazines in Japan.

Tomoki has been studying piano with Prof. Kei Itoh, Prof. Ewa Póblocka and Prof. Rainer Becker. He graduated with distinction (Diplom) from Universität der Künste Berlin in 2017 and since then he continues his study with Prof. Jesper Christensen with a big interest in researching historical interpretation and instruments at the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst Frankfurt am Main.

JURIS AZERS PERCUSSION



The Latvian percussionist Juris Azers has rapidly proven himself as a brilliant soloist, chamber musician and author of conceptual, gripping concert programs. He involves himself in multi-disciplinary collaboration with other arts, performance and promotion of newly written music. Currently, he studies percussion at the Hochschule für Musik “Hanns Eisler” in Berlin.

He is a laureate of international competitions, which include Universal Marimba Competition, Belgium 2017 (semi-finalist), International Percussion Competition, Italy 2012 (1st prize) and 4th International Percussion Competition of Jonas Talocka, Lithuania 2011 (3rd prize).

Juris has performed as a chamber musician with the Modern Art Ensemble, the Reinhard Toriser’s Brassussion ensemble, the Belgian Marimba Group and the Li Biao percussion ensemble. He has gained orchestral experience with Sinfonietta Riga, Liepāja Symphony Orchestra, Latvian National Symphony Orchestra, contemporary music ensemble unitedberlin, Berliner Symphoniker, Karajan academy orchestra of the Berliner Philharmoniker and Rundfunksinfonieorchester Berlin.

As a soloist, Juris Azers has performed in South-Korea, Italy, Belgium, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, China and Russia.

WEIQI BAI PERCUSSION



Percussionist Weiqi Bai was born in Chifeng (China) in 1996. He completed his bachelor's degree at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing with Li Biao and subsequently entered the Hochschule für Musik "Hanns Eisler" in Berlin, where he obtained his master's degree. Currently Weiqi continues to work with Li Biao in Berlin for his Konzertexamen studies.

In 2019, Weiqi became the first Chinese percussionist to win 3rd prize at the 68. ARD International Music Competition in Munich. He was also a 2nd prize winner (category marimba) at the IPEA International Percussion Competition in China in 2017; as well as 1st prize (marimba and vibraphone), 2nd prize (snare drum) at the China Youth Music Competition in 2016.

Weiqi has performed as a soloist with Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and Beijing Symphony Orchestra. He was a member of Li Biao Youth Orchestra and has performed with Li Biao Percussion Group and Zafraan Ensemble, among others.



THÉÂTRE POPULAIRE ROMAND, SALLE DE MUSIQUE, LA CHAUX-DE-FONDS

La Chaux-de-Fonds offre à l'Europe une salle à l'acoustique hors du commun, inaugurée en 1955. Superbe écrin, elle révèle les bijoux de toutes les musiques : du classique au chant, du jazz au gospel. Elle est le prolongement de l'instrument, de la voix, de l'émotion.

Avec ses 1'200 places, elle constitue un espace privilégié de rencontre entre le public et les artistes. La chaleur de ses boiseries, du noyer, crée une atmosphère d'harmonie et de tranquillité. Le temps s'arrête. Le voyage peut commencer.

La Chaux-de-Fonds bietet Europa einen, mit außergewöhnlicher Akustik ausgestatteten Saal, der 1955 eingeweiht wurde. Ein Ort, der die Einzigartigkeit jeglicher Musik zur Geltung bringt: von klassischer Musik bis zum Gesang, vom Jazz bis zum Gospel. Er wirkt als Verstärkung des Instruments, der Stimme - er weckt Emotionen.

Mit seinen 1'200 Sitzplätzen bildet er eine ideale Begegnungsstätte zwischen dem Publikum und den Künstlern. Die mit Nussbaumholz getäfelten Saalwände erzeugen eine harmonische, ruhige und warme Atmosphäre. Die Zeit steht still. Die Reise kann beginnen.

In La Chaux-de-Fonds you will find one of Europe's finest music hall with extraordinary acoustics, which was inaugurated in 1955. A treasure which enhances the characteristic of each kind of music : from classical music to singing, from jazz to gospel. It is the continuation of instrument, of voice, of emotion.

With its 1'200 seats, it represents a privileged meeting place between the audience and the artists. The warmth of its walnut panelling creates an atmosphere of harmony and tranquillity. Time will stop. The journey can begin.

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BÉLA BARTÓK (1881-1945)**Sonata for two pianos and percussion, Sz. 110**

1	I. Assai lento-Allegro molto	13:13
2	II. Lento, ma non troppo	6:24
3	III. Allegro non troppo	6:30

Piano Sonata, Sz. 80

4	I. Allegro moderato	4:26
5	II. Sostenuto et pesante	4:53
6	III. Allegro molto	3:27

Out of doors, Sz. 81

7	I. With drums and pipes	1:50
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8	II. Barcarolla	2:24
9	III. Musettes	3:08
10	IV. The night's music	5:41
11	V. The chase	2:11

Dance suite, Sz. 77

12	I. Moderato	3:15
13	II. Allegro molto	2:13
14	III. Allegro vivace	2:51
15	IV. Molto tranquillo	3:06
16	V. Comodo	1:01
17	VI. Finale. Allegro	4:06

CHENG ZHANG *piano*
 TOMOKI KITAMURA *piano II*
 JURIS AZERS *percussion*
 WEIQI BAI *percussion*

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