



Release October 6, 2023
catalog number: (CD-Digibook) SM425
(2 Vinyl Gatefold 180gr.) SMLP431

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN PIANO CONCERTOS

Margarita Höhenrieder
on the historic
Pleyel grand piano (1846)

Established master pieces like Frédéric Chopin's two piano concertos always benefit from fresh approaches in their interpretation. Munich pianist Margarita Höhenrieder does exactly that on her new album by presenting two different recordings of these concertos. On a historical fortepiano manufactured by Austrian-French piano builder Ignaz Pleyel – the kind Chopin himself performed on and worked with – Höhenrieder approaches the original sound ideal of the composer. The First Piano Concerto opus 11 in E minor was recorded in Zurich together with the Italian orchestra La Scintilla under Riccardo Minasi. To record the Second Piano Concerto opus 21 in F minor, Margarita Höhenrieder traveled to Vienna, where she cooperated with the orchestra Wiener Akademie under its conductor Martin Haselböck. The album is available on CD and in the form of an exclusive double LP which features richly extensive photo and booklet materials. An enlightening essay by Chopin specialist Ernst Burger is included in the digital as well as the analogue version.

Margarita Höhenrieder, what do these new recordings mean to you?

“The two Chopin concertos, just like the piano concertos by Beethoven, are the gold standard for every concert pianist. It makes me happy that I was able to record both concertos in the scope of this one project. I started playing them at quite an early age – I believe when I was 16, 17 years old.”

Orchestra La Scintilla
Riccardo Minasi

Margarita Höhenrieder

1st Piano Concerto op.11 in E minor

Orchester Wiener Akademie
Martin Haselböck

Margarita Höhenrieder

2nd Piano Concerto op.21 in F minor

What are you doing differently today than in the past?

“I used to play with a lot of spontaneity and brilliance. Nowadays, I probably do more reflection in my interpretations. Most of all, I am on the search for the most authentic sound. I always go to the bottom of things and read the respective literature to prepare. In addition, I get the sense that my sense of hearing has improved, my ears are more finely tuned to this music. I learned this from making music together with Claudio Abbado.”

How does playing on a Pleyel piano from the 1850s affect your musical performance?

“I have become an absolute fan of this particular sound. The Pleyel piano brought me even closer to Chopin. I realized that this is the right way to go. For future Chopin recordings, I would also use this instrument. The Pleyel piano has a silvery treble and a very elegant and warm sound overall. For Chopin, these pianos were the gold standard precisely because of the high level of nuance they offer. And I feel the same way about it whenever I interpret Chopin. When playing on this instrument, I immerse myself into the sound world of a different century, even though I live in the present and am acting out of this present moment. The playing experience and key strokes are completely different from modern instruments. The large sound volume of a modern grand piano is missing. The intensity of expression has to manifest on a different level.”

Why were the two concerts recorded in different locations and with two different orchestras?

“After the first recording with La Scintilla, I was attracted to the idea of continuing the project with an additional orchestra. Listening to the recording now shows fine differences which make the comparison between the pieces more interesting. Most certainly both orchestras are first class.”

What qualities are embodied by the two orchestras?

“With both orchestras, it felt to me like I was playing chamber music: the sound volume is drastically reduced. I also got the feeling that everyone was really invested into creating this authentic sound. Whether in Zurich or Vienna, we were on the same shared path.”



Are there differences between the orchestras?

“The recording with La Scintilla gains its vibrance through the conductor Ricardo Minasi, who gave the orchestra strong impulses. With the Wiener Akademie, the strength can be found in how all the musicians are connected through their shared passion, which conductor Martin Haselböck accompanied in a sensitive manner.”

Both recordings were not undertaken in an austere studio setting, but in very atmospheric locations. How did these spaces impact the music?

“In both cases, the music was ennobled by the space it was performed in. I experienced the atmosphere of the Zurich Oberstrass church as especially meditative and spiritual, which was helpful for the slow move-

ment of the concerto. In the Musikvereinsaal, a meaningful energy was in the air, if you think about what great personalities of musical history have already performed in the historic Brahmssaal.“

Margarita Höhenrieder has performed concerts with conductors like Kirill Petrenko, Claudio Abbado, Lorin Maazel, James Levine, Riccardo Chailly, and Fabio Luisi, and with many world class orchestras like the New York Philharmonics, Staatskapelle Dresden of Saxony, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Mozarteumsorchester, BR Symphonieorchester, Munich Philharmonics, and the Mahler Chamber Orchestra.

The Munich pianist studied piano under Anna Stadler, Ludwig Hoffmann, and Leon Fleisher in Baltimore, which she considers an especially influential experience. She also thanks Alfred Brendel for significant artistic impulses. In 1981, she won first prize at the international Busoni piano competition in Bolzano. In 1984, she became the youngest professor at a musical academy in Würzburg. Since 1991, she has been teaching at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater in Munich.

A long-time friendship connected her with composer Harald Genzmer, who dedicated two great works to her: the Concert for Piano and Trumpet and his last big composition, a Fantasy of Farewell (Fantasie des Abschieds), which she premiered in Rome with solo flutist Emmanuel Pahud of the Berlin Philharmonics. Over the last few years, Margarita Höhenrieder has felt increasingly inspired by the impressionistic charme of French composer Françoise Choveaux, who dedicated several works to her.

Her audience is currently especially excited about the collaboration project with painter Bernd Zimmer under the title “Two left hands“: While the pianist is playing pieces for left hand only, Bernd Zimmer paints with his left hand. Ingfried Hoffmann, too, dedicated several works for left hand to Höhenrieder. Islandic composer Hjálmar Helgi Ragnarsson wrote the piece Stilla for the “Left-Hand-Project.“ The loudly applauded premiere took place in December 2022.

The original sound ensemble La Scintilla consists of members of the Zurich Philharmonics. It was founded in 1995 and is dedicated primarily to the music of the 17th and 18th centuries. The orchestra’s artistic focus relates to keeping historical performance practices at the Opernhaus Zurich in the tradition of Nicolaus Harnoncourt alive. Since 2022, Italian conductor and

baroque violinist Riccardo Minasi is the artistic director of this ensemble. La Scintilla regularly plays concerts and opera productions at the Opernhaus Zurich and other locations.

The orchestra Wiener Akademie was founded in 1985 by its artistic director Martin Haselböck. Today, it is one of the most important original sound orchestras of the world. Among other things, the orchestra focuses on a yearly cycle of the Vienna Musikverein, as well as global tours and their own concert formats,

which bring back the experience of original sound with historical instruments into the locations where they were originally performed. Another innovative area the Wiener Akademie explores are multi media theater projects.



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