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**A HUSUM DIARY 2016 / Days One and Two**



**A HUSUM DIARY 2016**

I'm back in Husum, Germany for the second year in succession. After spending three nights at the 2015, I have been totally hooked, like some cocaine junkie. All thanks to the Japanese professor-critic-musicologist Satoru Takaku, who has himself become a regular fixture in these parts of Schleswig-Holstein. This year, I was determined to experience the full monty, which spans nine days in total with 12 recitals and other fringe events thrown in. It will be piano music flowing into both ears, and oozing out through the pores by the time I return to Singapore. As I had written in an article for the *Singapore Medical Association News*, "*Muslims go to Mecca, Roman Catholics go to Lourdes, Pianophiles go to Husum*". Just wondering, am I the only Singaporean who has done this piano pilgrimage?

Friday (19 August 2016)



The Brahms Museum in Heide,  
just 20 minutes by train from Husum.

It takes 20 hours to get from Singapore to Husum. Twelve hours from Changi Airport to Helsinki, two more hours to Hamburg Airport, and thence two further hours by train from Hamburg's Altona to Husum itself. Not to mention the waiting times, and a brief stopover to the modest little Brahms Museum in Heide (the home of his ancestors), which by the way is a Pokemon Go stop of some relevance.



The large festival banner at the gate  
of Schloss vor Husum.

Husum in summer is blue skies and bright sunshine, a far cry from the “grey city by the sea” description by its most famous native, the German writer-poet Theodor Storm. Its market square is a hive of activity, with commerce and holiday-makers making the best of the warmth before autumn inevitably arrives. Pianoraks (a term coined by British writer-broadcaster-educator and all-round pianophile Jeremy

Nicholas) gather at the 16<sup>th</sup> century Schloss vor Husum for their annual harvest of musical manna, and anticipation is thick as Kaiser Wilhelm II's moustache for the annual Rarities of Piano Music at Schloss vor Husum, now in its historic 30<sup>th</sup> year. Peter Froundjian is the festival's founder and artistic director, proud father of a baby that has not only grown up, but become piano esoteria central of the world.



### **Concert 1: Jonathan Plowright & Symanowski Quartet (4.30 pm)**

These two piano quintets in the key of C minor are true rarities perhaps until the Hyperion recording by these performers get released. If there is any justice in the world, both ought to be far better-known, especially the Ludomir Rozycki quintet with its massive 40-minute sprawl. It matches every bit the passion and intensity of favourites like the Brahms or Franck. There is Brahmsian richness of themes and harmonies in the 1<sup>st</sup> movement, but it is the slow movement's lament – with big tunes by cello and viola – that steals the show. The light-heartedness of the finale does not quite erase the pathos of the preceding movement.

The quintet by Ignaz Friedman is less intense, but no less listenable. The charm of old Vienna (think of Kreisler and Korngold) permeate the opening movement with the second theme reminiscent of old movie music, and do I hear echoes of Dvorak and Grieg in the slow movement, which is in the form of Theme and Variations. Similarly, Slavic folk music take over the dance-like finale, before a welcome return of the melody from the slow movement. Jonathan Plowright and his Polish partners give the best case possible of both quintets, which I hope to hear again soon. The best fix: buy the CD when it comes out next month!



### Concert 2: Duo Grau-Schumacher (8 pm)



The piano duo of Andreas Grau and Gotz Schumacher look like a pair of solicitors and advocates from Stuttgart or Dortmund, but they are seriously good musicians. To perform an all-Busoni programme completely from memory is no joke, and the seriousness of their intent is stamped from the first note to the last.

Rambling is what one might describe the opening work, *Improvisation on the Bach chorale Wie wohl ist mir, o Freund der Seele* (a mouthful in itself), which is a hotbed of counterpoint, mildly disturbing harmonies and the obligatory fugues. No argument

with the committed and reading. What followed is hyphenated Mozart, including the *Fantasy* in F minor (K.608) for mechanical organ and the *Duetto Concertante* (a transcription of the *finale* from the *Piano Concerto No.19* in F major). Those performances were on the rough and ready side, which could have done with a more rehearsals, and somewhat more charm.

The main event was the *Fantasia Contrappuntistica*, which for 2 pianos is a quite different beast from the solo version. This was probably what J.S.Bach might have done for *The Art of the Fugue* had he lived into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The subject was a Bach chorale but transformed into a quite unrecognisable behemoth that lasted the best part of 35 minutes. Bring on its parade of fugues, variations and chorales, and the duo delivered it with the authority which engenders a new admiration on the craft of Busoni. You either love him or hate him, and there can be no middle ground.

That was the best performance of the evening, which drew two encores. The first was Busoni's transcription of the *Magic Flute Overture*, now with far more ebullience than previously and a Bach-Kurtag chorale transcription. Still that might be all the Busoni one will want to hear for the rest of the year.



The first evening at Hartmann's Landkuche with Ludwig Madlener, Satoru Takaku & Monsieur Cortot (distant relation of Alfie).



The Wasserreihe in Husum, near the harbour, is where Theodor Storm's house is located.



Husum's quaint little inner harbour with the Marienkirche in the background.

**Saturday (20 August 2016)**



**Recital 3: Florian Noack (4.30 pm)**

One new aspect on this 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary year is the introduction of the Young Explorers Series, which highlights younger pianists with the penchant for rarities. The young Belgian Florian Noack is already fairly well-known for his piano transcriptions of orchestral works. He did not play any of these, but introduced instead Theodor Kirchner's *Nachtbilder (Night Pictures)*, comprising some 10 character pieces. The style is along the axis of Schumann and Brahms, but with a streak of fantasy and tempestuousness beyond their mere titles (which were just tempo indications). Noack brought a gamut of impulses and moods, but seemed to over-pedal to make his point.

One way of describing unknown piece of music is by referencing already well-known works or styles. So to say that William Sterndale Bennett's *Fantasia* (dedicated to Schumann) was Mendelssohnian is not an understatement. The German's manner was so well relived that one might call the four-movement work derivative. There was a Chopinesque opening in the 1<sup>st</sup> movement, but the rest was Mendelssohnian in its melody, decorative touches and general note-spinning. Pleasant but not memorable. Noack gave as good an account as he could, and it could be surmised that he will play Mendelssohn very well too.

His final work was Stephen Heller's *Tarantella*, which is gentle and nimble, without the coruscations of Liszt; another pleasant listen. His two encores were of a totally different ilk, two of Sergei Lyapunov's *Transcendental Etudes*, the *Berceuse* and *Dance of the Phantoms*, which were very well played.



#### **Recital 4: Simon Callaghan (8 pm)**

One thing that can be said of the Briton was that he brought out the most gorgeous sound from the piano, one which the earlier pianists had missed out on. There was a warm burnished tone created for Arnold Bax's *May Night in Ukraine*, which carried off from the earlier Lyapunov with its Borodin-like melody but filled with dark hues, and just as evocative was Bax's *Gopak*, a folk dance with some delicious syncopations.

The piece de resistance was surely Roger Sacheverell Coke's *15 Variations and Finale*. Its slow theme in a minor key was not unlike that in Mendelssohn's *Variations Serieuses* or Grieg's *Ballade*, but the variations were more aligned to Rachmaninov or Medtner with more dark asides balanced with occasional sentimentality. Definitely more demanding than Rachmaninov's *Corelli Variations*, this deserves to be heard more often, especially with Callaghan's dedicated and most musical advocacy.

The built-in encores were Stephen Hough's Rodgers and Hammerstein transcriptions: the *Carousel Waltz*, *My Favourite Things*, *Hello Young Lovers* and *March of the Siamese Children*, all of which I've heard from Hough himself in concert. Callaghan cannot pretend to be Hough but his performances were still persuasive. Just do not play *The King & I* pieces in Bangkok, lest the *lese majeste* laws get the poor pianist thrown into the slammer. There were three further encores, all *Preludes* by Coke. From Callaghan, who has recorded them, it's the real thing.





Simon Callaghan with his page-turner Satoru Takaku after the recital. Callaghan's piano duo partner Hiroaki Takenouchi looks happy on the banner behind them.

### A HUSUM DIARY 2016 / Days Three & Four



**Sunday (21 August)**



**Recital 5: Johann Blanchard (4.30 pm)**

One cannot pretend that the six numbers from Georges Bizet's *Bilder vom Rhein* (*Rhenish Pictures*) can match anything from *Carmen* or *The Pearl Fishers*, but there is a simple Schumannesque and Mendelssohnian charm which the young French-German pianist captures. Cecile Chaminade is the only woman composer represented in this festival, and Blanchard has become a sort of specialist of her music. Should a woman's music be any different from a man's? At any rate, Blanchard displayed both the sensitivity and virtuoso to handle the dark smouldering *Tristesse* and *Automne* (her most famous work bar none, an *etude* even when one least expects it) and the more mundane *Allegro Appassionata* from the *Sonata* in C minor, which showed that a woman can spin notes as much as a man.

There were two short pieces by the French-Romanian Georges Boskoff: *Vers l'inaccessible* builds up to a high decibel climax without the nuclear fission of Scriabin's *Vers la flamme*, and the Chopinesque charms of *Valse Romantique* continues to delight. Blanchard's two encores could not have been more different, Brazilian Fructuoso Vianna's *Valsa No.4* for the sweet-toothed and the recently-departed Einojuhani Rautavaara's rumbling *Etude No.4* that gave the recital a loud end.



### **Recital 6: Artem Yasynskyy (8 pm)**

The young Ukrainian truly took the rarities dictum to heart in his very varied programme. One would not have expected piano works from the first two composers, Jehan Alain and Benjamin Britten. Both showed they were well-attuned to the idioms, especially the French organist-composer who was killed by the Nazis while defending his homeland during the Second World War. One truly does not miss the organ in the pieces of his *Volume 3* for piano, which included an impressionistic *Ballade* and *Taras Bulba* with its Bartok-like violence. Britten, who escaped part of the war in USA, served the instrument well in his wonderfully evocative *Holiday Diary*, by no means a children's work.

Out of the ordinary was a work by Gerard Pesson which involved the sounds of repeated sliding the fingers on the keyboard (glissandi without actually hitting the strings) and thumping the keyboard lid of the Steinway, a percussive dance of ivory and wood with string notes added into the fray. His programme was completed with Joseph Hofmann's *Mazurka* and *Character Sketches*, the most famous of which is the last, *Kaleidoskop*, a favourite of Cherkassky's. Did one expect 5 encores from this true keyboard explorer? For the record, these include two Satie pieces (*Je te veux* and *Gnossienne No.1*) , two Scarlatti sonatas and his own take on Chopin's *Black Key Etude* with its quite charming graffiti.



Jesper Buhl, owner of Danacord, provides a little piece of showbiz post-concert.



A spot of sightseeing: on a sand dune near List, in the North Sea island of Sylt.

**Monday (22 August)**



**Recital 7: Joseph Moog (7.30 pm)**

Young pianist Joseph Moog has become a celebrity of sorts, like a cross between a German Benjamin Grosvenor and the young Van Cliburn. He has a stature that makes him stand out, and that is even before he touches the piano. His programme began with Haydn's *Fantasia* in C major, which came across as somewhat hectic but not without the humour. Frederic Rzewski's iconic *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* is over an hour long, but we get the theme and Moog's own cadenza, which uses an inversion of the theme and builds it up in a fugal manner. It is in effect an extended variation with a fair share of Busoni-isms before a grand apotheosis and the simple restatement before closing.

This is in the same spirit as the notorious *Hexameron*, a combo-work by six pianist-composers namely Chopin, Thalberg, Czerny, Pixis, Herz and Liszt, and mostly Liszt who added an introduction, bridging passages between the variations and a grand finale. Moog played the hell out of the Steinway in this totally vulgar work, and it's a wonder that it remains standing after all that pounding.

Max Reger's *Traume am Kamin* (*Dreams by the Hearth*), comprising 12 pieces, is virtually unknown, because it's by Reger. What if one said these were newly discovered pieces by Brahms, which a number resemble? What about the etude-like piece in D minor which looks forward to the young Prokofiev? Finally the last piece is an unabashed tribute to Chopin's *Berceuse* down to many fine details. Does that make you want to try it out? Petrucci Library, here I come!

The formal programme ended with Godowsky's *Symphonic Metamorphosis* on *Johann Strauss' Die Fledermaus*, another barnstormer to test the Steinway's sturdiness. There were four encores, a Trenet-Weissenberg transcription *April in Paris*, a Rachmaninov *Etude-tableau* (Op.33 No.8), Moog's own outlandish transcription of Gershwin's *S'Wonderful* and the Scarlatti-Tausig *Pastorale* (based on the *Sonata* K.9). Have we found ourselves a new Marc-Andre Hamelin?



Satoru and I weren't the only Asian visitors at the festival. Lin Peiping (mugging here with Joseph Moog) and her mother came all the way from Taipei, Taiwan.

### A HUSUM DIARY 2016 / Days Five and Six



More sightseeing: Petrikerche (St Peter's Church) as viewed across the Schlei Lake at Schleswig.

**Tuesday (23 August)**



**Recital 8: Hubert Rutkowski (7.30 pm)**

It is not too surprising to see a Polish pianist performed a nearly all-Polish programme. Since this is Husum, there was no Chopin on the list! The first half started and ended with polonaises, including Beethoven's rarely heard *Polonaise* in C major (Op.89) and Paderewski's barnstorming counterpart. In between was all Leschetizsky, beginning with his edition of the Rameau *Gavotte and Variations*, which is more florid than the original.

Completely unknown is his *Venetian Ballade* (with barcarolle-rhythm to be expected), *Hommage a Czerny* (a toccata-like study), *Hommage a Chopin* (mazurka rhythm with a grand ending) and *Aria*, a rhapsodic nocturne-like piece. Speaking of nocturnes, I must revisit Paderewski's B flat major *Nocturne*, which came off beautifully in Rutkowski's hands.

More Polish fare in Ignaz Friedman's transcriptions of songs by Stanislaw Moniuszko – *Printemps*, *Chant du soir* and *Dumka*, all of which were very pleasant if not completely memorable. To close was the large sprawling *Sonata* by the young Witold Lutoslawski, composed in 1936. Like the early sonatas of Stravinsky or Dutilleux, it is a product of youth and impressionability, unlike resembling anything of the mature composer. The influences of Debussy, Szymanowski and the late Russian romantics are there, and the even the slow movement has touches resembling Mompou. It plays for over half an hour, and does get a little tiring, but it deserves to be heard once in a while.

Rutkowski's encores included a Szymanowski *Mazurka* (Op.50 No.1), Rameau's *Gavotte* and one variation, a familiar Chopin *Mazurka* (in A minor, he does get a spot after all) and quite appropriately *Der Dichter Spricht* from Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, good to close any set of music.



A view of the Marinedenkmal (Mariners' Memorial) at Laboe, near the entrance of Kiel Firth.

### Wednesday (24 August)



### Recital 9: Severin von Eckardstein (7.30 pm)

A more eclectic programme than the one by German pianist Severin von Eckardstein would be hard to find. The first half comprised mostly short pieces, beginning with two *Barcarolles* (Nos. 9 and 8) with their svelte and sometimes elusive harmonies



typical of the French composer's late style. Then came a selection of *Preludes* by French pianist Robert Casadesus, all of which have a late Romantic Scriabin-like feel with a witty play on sonorities.

The short-lived Liszt pupil Julius Reubke's *Scherzo* in D minor is filled with high spirits, more Schumannesque than Lisztian, and this was a perfect foil for Anatol Alexandrov's *Vision* which was mellow and dreamy, benefiting from wonderful pedal-work from Eckardstein. The half ended with three *Tecludes* by the pianist himself, the second of which required some preparation of the piano, with its John Cage-like plinks and plonks qualified by thuds in a dance-like number.

His second half qualifies to be the best half-programme thus far, as the juxtaposition of Medtner, Scriabin and York Bowen has an almost spiritual-musical connection in their idioms. Medtner's *Dithyramb* (Op.10 No.2) provided a big and beefy sonority, not to mention its piquant harmonies, which led to the smouldering and dark *Polonaise* Op.21 of Scriabin, cut from the same cloth as the better known *Fantasy* Op.28.

York Bowen's *Sonata* in F minor Op.72 in three movements is a true gem waiting to be discovered, and Eckardstein played it with the vehemence worthy of the best Rachmaninov or Medtner. One gets the feel that Bowen was the most cosmopolitan and eclectic of the four late-Romantics, as one senses a distant whiff of film and show biz music within a solid classical frame.

There were two very different encores, the hymn-like *Fantasiestuck* (Op.111 No.2) by Schumann and Louis Brassin's transcendently difficult transcription of Wagner's *Magic Fire Music* from *Die Walkure*. A most satisfying evening was concluded with yet another round of drinks at Hartmann's Country Kitchen.

## A HUSUM DIARY 2016 / Days Seven, Eight and Nine



Sightseeing: the harbour of Flensburg, near the Danish border.

### Thursday (25 August)



### Recital 10: Martin Jones (7.30 pm)

The septuagenarian English pianist Martin Jones was re-invited to the festival on the strength of his recital on 26 August last year, and he did not disappoint. Like before, he began with some Czerny, his *Souvenir de Peste*, a set of variations on a very banal theme written for amateurs of the day. Despite Jones' ardent advocacy, one performance is enough for one lifetime.

Next were the three *Images Oubliées* of Debussy, works that were only published as late as the 1970s. The 2<sup>nd</sup> movement's *Sarabande* is identical to the one in *Pour le piano*, while the fast finale shares the same folk melody as that in *Jardins sous la pluie*. This set is regularly recorded in integrale sets of Debussy but seldom performed in concerts. Completing the first half was five Earl Wild transcriptions of Rachmaninov romances. Jones plays each with a beautiful tone, and summons all the resources available for *Floods of Spring*, which gets a truly thunderous performance.

Australian composer Graham Hair provided more technical fodder in three of his *Transcendental Studies*, which sound as fiendish as they are fun. Jean Francaix's *Éloge de la dance* is a play on the waltz rhythm and idiom, with some off kilter moments as if one had a glass of champagne too many.



Fun defines Franz Reizenstein's *Variations on the Lambeth Walk*, which has the popular melody dressed in the styles of Chopin, Verdi, Beethoven, Mozart, Schubert, Wagner and Liszt. There was much mirth and giggles from the audience, and these turned into gasps for the encores by Grainger, Moszkowski, Arlen-Rachmaninov-Mann (*Over The Rainbow*), Pierne and Tchaikovsky-Wild. The little cygnets took a little tumble but like water off a swan's back, got back to the lake in a most graceful way.



For his hard work, Martin Jones gets a model Kowloon Motor Bus which came all the way from Hong Kong



Sightseeing: a fantastic view of the Holstein Gate and Salt Warehouses from the Petrikirche (St Peter's Church) in Lübeck.

**Friday (26 August 2016)**



**Recital 11: Zlata Chochieva (7.30 pm)**

The name of young Russian Zlata Chochieva is familiar on the strength of her excellent recordings of Chopin and Rachmaninov *Études* on the Piano Classics label. Up live, she fully lives up to those lofty expectations. Her first half had a nice mix of Galuppi, C.P.E.Bach (which always unfamiliar but crisply minted such that one asks “why have we not heard that before?”), hyphenated Bach, hyphenated Franck and Liszt.

One question that lingered was: wasn't that Bach *Siciliano* by Kempff rather than Friedmann as indicated in the notes. Trust the ever-trustworthy Ludwig Madlener to whip up his iPad with a pdf score and the mystery is solved. Chochieva did play the Kempff version after all. There was Liszt's blustery transcription of Bach's *Fantasy and Fugue* in G minor (BWV.542) and Friedman's transcription of the Franck's *Prelude, Fugue & Variation*, which does not sound too different from the Harold Bauer version. Liszt was represented by a *Klavierstück*, the totally unfamiliar but beautiful *Hymne de la nuit*, contrasted with the rather nastily percussive *Csardas Macabre* so to end the first half with a bang.



The second half opened with one of Medtner's *Skazki* and the lovely *Canzonata Serenata*, which unfolded with great ease and fluidity. That was merely the prelude to Rachmaninov's monumental 40-minute *First Sonata* in D minor, a Faustian symphony in three movements all but in name. Chochieva has recorded this too, and the live version is just as good. Her prodigious technique is equal to all its ferocious demands, including a Mefistophelean final ride to the abyss that had one on the edge of the seat.



The amigos at Hartmann's:  
with Satoru, Ludwig and French critic  
Bertrand Boissard.



The restored Gatehouse of Schloss vor Husum.

**Saturday (27 August 2016)**



Earlier in the day, Jesper Buhl and Bryce Morrison had a lively discussion and debate on who had a greater impact on piano music: Schnabel or Horowitz?



### **Recital 12: Cyprien Katsaris & Helene Mercier (6 pm)**

Cyprien Katsaris is back, after rescuing the festival last year when a scheduled pianist had cancelled at the eleventh hour. With him was the French-Canadian Helene Mercier (perhaps better known as Louis Lortie's partner in a number of Chandos piano duo recordings) in a programme which was a repeat of a recording of Schumann and Brahms on Katsaris' Piano 21 label. To begin were a selection of Schubert *Ländler* transcribed by Brahms for four hands on one piano. Pleasant, but neither vintage nor memorable Schubert, but nicely done.

The serious business began with Clara Schumann's 1857 transcription of her late husband's famous *Piano Quintet* in E flat major Op.44. The duo's recording sounded richly sonorous but in reality, the live version on two pianos was a clangorous and banging affair, with no strings to cushion the blows. It also did not help that both pianists did not gel completely together. Its four movements started to sound percussive and it was almost a relief when it all ended.

Less problematic was Brahms' *Sonata* in F minor Op.34b, which has the same music as his familiar *Piano Quintet*. Here the duo worked better, and there was much passion and tenderness in its pages. The third movement's relentless march was very well held together, and the finale came as a *tour de force*. If only the last two bars had come with a true vehemence, it would have been close to a perfect reading. The duo's encores were two lesser known *Hungarian Dances* by Brahms, and true to form for this festival, Katsaris said that they tried to avoid the familiar ones.





One week and two days had come to an end so quickly, and I was sorry to see the festival close. There was a usual round of speeches, a buffet dinner with drinks, but the post-festival gloom was only relieved by the thought that the Rarities of Piano Music at Schloss vor Husum would continue in a year's time. Come 19-26 August 2017, pianophiles and old friends would gather again to share in the sheer joy of experiencing live music at its finest. All thanks to Peter Froundjian and his wonderful team, and to quote a certain Arnie Schwarzenegger, "I'll be back!"



Seeing double: Fritz from Switzerland,  
and Norbert from Germany,  
or is it the other way round?



Good things have to come to an end,  
final drinks and dinner!



Bidding farewell to Husum:  
Daniel Berman (who will perform in 2017),  
Ludwig & Kathrin Homburg.