

Quietly confident

Only three years after deciding to pursue a concert career, Szymon Nehring swept the board at the prestigious Arthur Rubinstein competition. **Simon Mundy** meets this ambitious Polish virtuoso



Szymon Nehring: 'My main goal was being interested in music, not necessarily being a concert pianist'

Given that he is from Poland and in 2017 won first prize at the Arthur Rubinstein competition in Tel Aviv, it is hardly surprising that Szymon Nehring has been playing a great deal of Chopin in the early days of his international career. I talked to him the morning after he had given a beautifully rounded performance of the First Concerto with the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra and Lawrence Foster in the sumptuous acoustic of Bucharest's Athenaeum.

Now 23, Nehring is tall and good-looking and strolls along with quiet but certain self-confidence. He is not overly concerned about what the world thinks of him. At the Rubinstein competition he swept the board, winning the useful \$40,000 and gold medal, plus the under-22 and audience prizes. That must have been popular with the others, I suggest. He shrugs and grins: 'They all hated me anyway.'

He is not a man unconsumed by ambition. He decided only five years ago, at the age of 18, to be serious about a concert career. 'That was when I started working. My main goal was being interested in music, not necessarily being a concert pianist. My early teacher, Olga Lazarska, taught me how to enjoy the music. She gave me my interest in colours and the outlook that not everything is explicable. I had to learn the rules later. But I have found I enjoy playing in public, so it seems like the right decision.'

Once the decision was taken, Nehring's progress was swift. He started in 2014 by winning his first Rubinstein prize – the 'Arthur Rubinstein in memoriam' International Competition for Young Pianists – in Bydgoszcz, where he was studying at the Music Academy. A year later he was awarded a Krystian Zimerman Scholarship and won a collection of minor prizes at the Chopin Competition in Warsaw. In the autumn of 2017, he went to Yale to study with Boris Berman who, he admits, made him work hard. He was due to return to the US to study in New York during 2019 but decided against it, feeling that he was being edged in the wrong direction.

Those successes have led, Nehring says, 'to getting a chance to play with some really good orchestras', including the Israel Philharmonic and the Zurich Tonhalle. They have also brought about debuts in the Wigmore and Carnegie Halls. Now his repertoire is widening as the opportunities increase. He is looking to perform more Rachmaninov in his recitals. He says there are recordings of Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* D784 and Prokofiev's Second Sonata waiting to be released; one of Krzysztof Penderecki's *Resurrection Concerto* with the composer points to an influence that is coming to mean a lot to him.

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Two of his three albums released so far were produced by the Chopin Institute and a third, devoted to Chopin's chamber music (with Marcin Zdunik, cello, and Ryszard Groblewski, viola) is on the way. He made his debut recording in the European Music Centre that Penderecki founded in the Silesian village of Lusławice. Now he is represented by the Beethoven Association in Warsaw, led by Penderecki's wife, Elżbieta. He will give a recital at next April's edition of the annual Beethoven Easter Festival, run by the Association, but he opens the Beethoven anniversary year with performances of the 'Emperor' Concerto with the Warsaw Philharmonic and the Munich Chamber Orchestra in Munich's Prince Regent Theatre.

Nehring made his Munich recital debut last June, and at the end of January he makes his Berlin recital debut, performing Chopin, Szymanowski and Prokofiev in the Philharmonie's chamber hall as part of German Radio's young artists series. A few days earlier he is due to give the same programme in Paris' Salle Cortot.

If Nehring is relaxed about the prospects of fame and fortune, he is clearly a proud man and is aware that he needs to live up to the reputation he has been acquiring. In the last year he has been careful not to crowd his schedule. The period following his Rubinstein Competition triumph was fiercely intense and he pulled



WOJCIECH GRZEBIŃSKI

back from continuing in the same way. Instead, he has been taking time to think about his future direction and adding to his repertoire. 'It's hard to maintain the quality at every concert but that is what I have to do now. If you really play below your level everyone will hear. I feel it is my responsibility to play well for each audience. I don't want to waste their time – or mine.' **IP**

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