



Delicate beauty

Finnish pianist and artist **Jasmin Fors** introduces her debut album of masterworks by Chopin and Liszt, delving deep into the Romantic ideas that inspired their creativity

The starting point for my debut album was Liszt's B minor Sonata, a piece that has always haunted me. The Sonata became the nucleus around which other elements began to form. Once I had added Chopin's Ballades in G and F minor, a musical concept began to emerge that for me is full of meaning: I believe these composers were drawing musical self-portraits with their highly expressive pencil marks on the piano staff.

The title of my album merges the English words 'autobiography' and 'graphite', which gave me the idea of drawing a self-portrait in pencil for the cover to complement my overall concept. As I am interested in writing about artistic creativity, two small stories about the composers also began to take shape and were eventually included in the album booklet.

One could say this album is my love song to music and playing the piano. It's a love that has not always been obvious to me, but built up to become an outburst of musical expression after a long silence. During this silence, my focus shifted toward the fine arts and portrait painting in particular, as well as to writing. As a result, I tend to explore the work and language of composers as if from the perspective of a portrait painter and artist. I begin each musical interpretation the same way, with a 'blank canvas', my goal being to create an independent yet complementary work of art.

Jasmin Fors: 'My main goal throughout this project has been to get the music out of myself, and to bring it to life as sincerely as possible'

In painting, every brushstroke has a meaning, and it can often feel like you're in danger of losing the most immediate and vibrant moments of inspiration as they become smudged under layers of paint. George Orwell once wrote in the *Tribune*, "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle." I think this applies to everything, including art and music. It is a lifelong path of learning that involves fighting off all sorts of useless and distracting things which come between you and art, be they fears, beliefs, blindness, impatience or general lack of concentration. When you find that famous and precious 'flow', where you are completely awake to the reality a work of art offers, it is a moment of deep fulfilment.

Alfred Cortot is one of the pianists I loved most when I was a young student. His thoughts about music were very perceptive. Take his observation that Liszt's B minor Sonata unfolds like 'an illustration of Goethe's *Faust*', which is especially illuminating.

The *Faust* theme is startlingly universal, providing an inspiration to many composers and artists – a testament to its enduring ability to address existential challenges that every human faces. Goethe's *Faust* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with their epic scale and autobiographical foundations, certainly inspired Liszt: the idea of Faust haunted him, inviting him to deep introspection.

Goethe's play was widely known in the 19th century, and the idea that the world and Man could be changed

through imagination and creativity was a core belief of every Romantic artist. It even continues to influence today's thinking, perhaps more than we realise. For example, Thoreau wrote: 'I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life'. In our own times, we find an echo of this sentiment in the poetry of Robert Frost: 'Two roads diverged in the wood, and I – I took the one less travelled'.

Even before psychology became a scientific discipline, the Romantics had begun to explore the deeper chambers of the human mind. Reason and emotion had hitherto been considered entirely separate. Man's journey to achieve balance and harmony between reason and emotion is still ongoing and requires constant work. To me, this narrative seems deliciously receptive to Liszt's powerful musical rhetoric, which in turn is very important to my interpretation of the Sonata.

It is possible that Liszt also had a more universal attitude to the development of his innermost self and the life of Man. Whenever an artist is involved in the act of creation, elements of the personal and universal merge with each other. Indeed, this particular Sonata has been a battlefield and canvas for my own spiritual struggles – and the need to express life – so I have found it easy to identify and empathise strongly with Liszt's music.

All the works on my new album are peaks of their Composers' mastery. A high level of skill meets spiritual maturity in these deep-water pearls of their creative power.

It is a huge challenge and achievement – requiring extreme sensitivity, honesty and power – for an artist to break through the protective certainties of his ego and reach something pure, beautiful and true. When this happens, its universality touches us all deep in our hearts. It is no wonder than with such power the composer's heart literally becomes a treasure – as in the case of Chopin!

Chopin's music, at its subtlest, reminds me of a downy feather that reacts to the most delicate touch, or movement of the mind, and can only be handled correctly with love. This love for musical expression, its language and words, must be cherished with patience and soul-searching honesty.

This poses great interpretative challenges. Even the slightest loss of attention, or lack of sensitivity in timing or touch, makes the music slip away. At the first hint of acting, exaggerated underlining of the tempo, impressive roaring or grandiose gestures, Chopin turns his back, leaving you without saying goodbye!

In his *Trois nouvelles études*, Chopin offers pianists the opportunity to dive after musical pearls. One must be alive to the sensitivity of nuance, touch, phrasing and shaping in order to achieve a balance between technique and musical expression, mind and imagination. As such, I regard these *études* as a valuable lesson in Chopin's devotion to musical expression.

Liszt's Sonata, meanwhile, depicts the long journey he took to break through his training and technique in order

to reach deeper layers of his personality and artistry. In facing the fear of this new path, he also had to shed the gnawing stigma of superficiality he carried from his youthful *glanz* period.

I feel Liszt's struggle to achieve self-honesty when I play the Sonata. I believe he longed for delicate beauty in his intense and deeply touching art. This work has made me melt with its passion, depth and incomprehensibly rich musical palette. Liszt – what a profound artist!

My main goal throughout this project has been to get the music out of myself, and to bring it to life as sincerely as possible. My interpretive solutions are primarily based on the notation and the music – from the images it evokes in me. The story I have written for the booklet, titled 'Reaching for the Graal of Art and Life', is born from my observations of the music, combined with my own experience of growing as an artist and human being. This may not be the absolute truth about Liszt and his Sonata, but I think all creative minds are ultimately the same, so I am confident in my own 'colour palette', giving me strength to express and stand behind my interpretations.

I was also the album's producer, which involved selecting from hundreds of takes to finalise my interpretations. I found it a remarkable experience to explore the laws of music so deeply. Never before had I given so much consideration to the subtleties of timing and pulse or the importance of pauses and emphasis in narrative music. This also meant that I had to develop a hierarchy between myself as an artist and producer, making demands like an uncompromising conductor, whose orders I humbly tried to implement.

I now understand that the art of expression is as deep as the ocean, and you never reach the seabed. The act of crafting my interpretations through practising, performing, recording and producing has been a very long journey. The resulting album is dedicated to my soulmate Lauri Toivio, whose recording, editing and graphic design skills were vital to its realisation. **IP**



Fors with soulmate
Lauri Toivio



Jasmin Fors' *Drawn with Autobiographite* (Villa Jasmin VJCD2101) is now available from Finnish distributor fuga.fi and the artist's own website. villajasmin.fi