

## Arts Scholars Outcome Report

Due May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015

By George Schwartz

Last Spring, I was fortunate enough to receive the 3<sup>rd</sup> year Arts Scholars grant to use on a project of my choosing. I decided to spend the money towards a solo piano performance in Old Cabell Hall, which occurred last April on the 19<sup>th</sup>. Knowing this was my first formal performance in nearly 4 years, I decided to make my program not overly ambitious, going for approximately 50 minutes of music focusing on a composer I was relatively familiar with, Frederic Chopin. I also made the decision to focus on his later works, specifically those near the end of his life, straying away from the typical mainstream pieces that most classical pianists know. When the summer began, my pieces were finalized into the following works:

1. F minor Fantasie Op. 49
2. Chopin Polonaise Op. 53 in A flat "Heroic"
3. Chopin Mazurkas Op. 49; No. 1-3
4. Chopin Nocturnes Op. 52; No. 1-2

My mentor for this project was John Mayhood, my piano teacher of three years at the University and a valuable friend. He helped me select my program and spent countless hours with me, showing me the finer details of these works. A highly accomplished pianist and performer in the music department at UVA, John seemed the most logical choice for my mentor.

As the summer began, I knew I had to start working on my pieces soon, since some of these works may take a year or more to be performance ready. So in June I acquired all the music I would be learning and even got a few background texts to find out a bit about Chopin and his life. Additionally, I found a teacher in Williamsburg, where I was staying over the summer, to assist me in learning some of the more challenging pieces. Specifically, the piece I was most worried about was the Fantasy. A recording is provided of it near the end of this story, but the reader will find that this work is incredibly difficult, most technically and musically, and even after a year, I believe there are elements I could improve on. This being said, those first few months during the summer were quite challenging. As I started learning the Fantasy, I ran into road block after road block. The first three pages especially, although not technically challenging whatsoever, besides the important dotted rhythm, was one of the most musically complex elements I have ever encountered. To enlighten the reader, the Fantasy starts with a soft introduction, similar to a dusky fog before a major play. However, this introduction was written in the form of a march, which given the more lyrical elements that come a minute later is quite striking and bizarre. When discussing this with my teacher over the summer, we thought perhaps the march was simply a tempo suggestion, but not indicative of the style for the introduction. A few months later, when I brought up this issue with John, he suggested something of a somber march, and not as subtle as I had originally thought. The reader may think this is a trivial matter, but for myself, this introduction was something I struggled with up until the day of my performance and even now as I am writing this report, I can not say for certain how I believe this section should be played.

As the summer came to a close, my progress was disappointing. The fantasy which I wished to be completed before the semester started was far from ready, and I felt the pressure slipping up on me. Regardless, I pressed on and picked up two other pieces for the fall, the Op.59 No. 3 Mazurka and the Op. 62 No. 2 Nocturne. Prior to this Mazurka, I have never experienced so much difficulty learning a piece that was only 5 pages long, approximately three minutes. To avoid the reader being bored by details, the Mazurka difficulty lied in its denseness. An analogy I like using is that the Mazurka is similar to a poem, where every line is full of meaning. Like a poem, every new phrase in this Mazurka had a new element, making it tender, exciting, romantic, and challenging. It was only after my teacher John described to me the numerous elements in this piece that I was able to appreciate it and understand the work. As the Fall semester came to a close, I had two pieces nearly completed, the Fantasy and the Mazurka. The nocturne was still in the process of knowing the notes, so musically, it was far from completed. As winter break came around, I was feeling pretty good, feeling the rest of the mazurkas and nocturne should be easy before the concert in April. However, when I played my Fantasy at home, I realized how far it was from completion. I had learned the notes, yes, but the music was not music, it was merely a bunch of notes being played at high speed. I had to reevaluate. I looked into Chopin's history, learned more about him by flipping through biographies, listening to recordings, etc. I learned a great deal, but perhaps the most important aspects I learned were two things. The Chopin pieces all had to be lyrical and the Mazurkas were like his diaries. This is a gross oversimplification, but of the two most important elements I learned can be summarized into these two ideas. Why was this important? Speaking first to the lyricism, the melody had to sing, literally. I had to imagine when I was playing that there was a soprano next to me singing the line, letting it flow and breathe. The other element for the Mazurkas was helpful because it made me understand the personality in each of these tiny pieces. They were like diary entries no one was supposed to read, and by looking into Chopin's past during the time he wrote the Mazurkas, I was able to surmise what each piece meant.

The spring semester turned out to be very stressful, especially the month before the performance. The rest of the works had come very slowly to me, and as a result I perpetually felt underprepared. I spent copious hours in the practice room the month before my performance, practically becoming a music major where my only three priorities were eat, sleep, and music. I also was concerned with the logistical concerns of having my concert run smoothly. Fortunately in the latter regard, I had a good friend helping me out, Devin Rothwell. She assumed all the practical issues regarding the concert while I simply focused on my music. As the date came closer, I became very stressed and concerned if the performance would work out. My memory became a particular issue, one so severe that John recommended I do the small pieces with the music. I agreed to this reluctantly since typically solo performances are completely memorized. In hindsight after the performance, I am so happy I heeded his advice otherwise I would have missed too many elements during the performance.

During the actual performance, I never expected the amount of nerves that would get to me when I started playing. It was terrifying. I had done solo recitals before, but nothing of a similar scale and honestly it got to me at the start. I was shaking, breathing hard, and scared the moment I sat down. But once I started playing, I became more and more confident. I didn't think of it as simply exhibiting everything I had learned, but instead it was a wonderful experience. I enjoyed every moment, treasuring

the sounds I was producing and how everyone in the hall was receiving it. After the concert, the feedback was so reassuring that I knew at once I must do this again. It was with this mindset that I requested another grant for this upcoming year. I am so grateful for the Arts Scholars program for giving me this opportunity and I value it as one of the most important accomplishments I have done at this University.

Attached in the below link is the recording of the performance. I hope you enjoy it. I will be putting on another concert in the Spring, this time focusing on Iberian (Spanish themed music) and hopefully it will be as wonderful an experience as this last Chopin concert was.

<https://soundcloud.com/schwartzs-music>