

Gilead Mishory

Claude Debussy – Préludes

Does a pianist play differently when he is also a composer? Gilead Mishory says yes: since he has been composing, the way he views piano playing has changed. Composing, above all, is an art of translating what the composer hears internally, translating it into notes so that the result corresponds to what he has imagined. Interpretation – meaning “translation” in the broadest sense – is the reverse procedure for Mishory: finding the sonic conception in the other person’s writing.

Gilead Mishory’s way as a composer began in 1994 with works for the piano. But the voice was soon added to the piano, initially the pianist’s own voice in the melodrama *Den Mond begraben* (To Bury the Moon) of 1997. Soon thereafter, also to texts by the Yiddish poet Abraham Sutzkever, Gilead Mishory wrote his hour-long cycle *Lider-Togbuch* (Song Diary), again “for piano and the pianist’s voice”. Music and language belong together for Gilead Mishory, as in *Fugitive Pieces* for piano solo based on the novel by Anne Michaels. They received their premiere in 2005 on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, performed at the Southwest German Broadcasting Company (SWR) in Baden-Baden. Together with the two Psalms for string quartet and for violoncello and piano, they appeared on a CD issued by NEOS in 2011 (NEOS 11022).

Whether with biblical subjects, Virgil, Gogol or Celan – Gilead Mishory has consistently come to terms with the relationship between language and music, as in the large-scale cycle of *Hebräische Balladen* (Hebraic Ballads) based on Else Lasker-Schüler for soprano and piano (“now and then with pianist’s voice”), the *Wasserpsalm* (Water Psalm) for chamber choir and the Chagall setting *My Distant Home* for tenor and orchestra of 2007. It is hardly surprising that an opera is the culmination of this development: *Isaac’s Youth* for eight soloists and chamber orchestra of 2010.

The piano piece entitled *Cloches de joie et l’armes de rire* (Bells of Joy and Tears of Laughter) was composed in 2006 – as if it were another prelude of Messiaen, or even Claude Debussy... Debussy left the titles of his preludes almost hidden by placing them in very small print after three periods at the end of each piece – one thinks of ...*Danseuses de Delphes* or ...*Brouillards*, for example. It is, as if the player should only subsequently find out what the piece could actually mean. Perhaps, too, this is done so that one will not be led astray and be tempted to take so-called “liberties”, as Gilead Mishory says (almost in the tone of a warning).

For him as an interpreter, especially with Debussy, discipline is the supreme requirement. A well-known danger is to lose oneself in the ecstasy of colours. At the very outset, one must therefore keep the overall structure in view, bearing in mind all the questions concerning what is important and unimportant, the whole and the details, construction and nuance, colour and sound, tempo and line. The most difficult piece for Mishory, as regards the relationship between tempo and line, is the *Prélude ...Des pas sur la neige* (Footsteps in the Snow) from the first volume.

Where does a rubato belong and where is it out of place? How do correlations arise through pulsation? Above all, there is also the rhythmic structure. It must definitely

not be made "foggy", especially not in the Prélude ...Brouillards (Fog) which opens the second volume. "Impressionism" – wrongly understood – can easily become a caricature. Mishory makes no difference between a Beethoven Sonata and the Préludes of Debussy, for both composers are equally precise in their notation of music and performance instructions. Mishory must feel like an author before a blank piece of paper when he describes his work on the Préludes with these words: "I sit down and start with the first note". All interpretative decisions serve Gilead Mishory as an "experienced reality".

And at this point we have returned to the subject of language. For this pianist has such a plastic conception of the individual Préludes that one could actually paint them precisely according to his words. He also discovered some "genetic similarities", such as those between the preludes ...La fille aux cheveux de lin (The Girl with the Flaxen Hair) from the first volume and ...Bruyères (Heather) from the second volume with their similar sonic processes and shared associations with the world of the shepherd.

Each individual Prélude signifies an entire world to Mishory. He regards each one as if it were in a kaleidoscope, scattering its sonic, rhythmic and emotional layers until he even sees ...La cathédrale engloutie (The Sunken Cathedral) standing upside down before him. He loves Debussy's sharp contrariness and his almost grotesque depiction of the male protagonists (...General Lavine (eccentric), ...Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C) and, at the same time, his warm, soft, discrete musical language in the landscape depictions and the fairylike women's portraits.

And he admires Debussy's ability to construct a stage within a minute, as in the Spanish- inspired Prélude ...La sérénade interrompue (The Interrupted Serenade); for Mishory, this piece is primarily about human weakness. He then tells how a knight tunes his guitar and starts singing underneath the balcony of his beloved, and how irritated this Donna is. Instead of a smile, she throws down a flowerpot. Then, suddenly – in a foreign key – another admirer with a serenade approaches from another street... He finally deduces, full of compassion that "the knight is badly off".

Gilead Mishory's recording communicates to us, in each note, that it is always about people in Debussy's Préludes: how they see, hear, smell, taste, love, dance, walk and finally mount a grandiose spectacle of fireworks. What's more: Mishory gives the imaginary protagonists in Debussy's cycle a voice: he allows them to speak, to tell their stories. In this way, they themselves become Gilead Mishory's "pianist's voice".

Excerpt from the Interview with Lotte Thaler, SWR2

Translation from the German by David Babcock