

Prof. Krzysztof Jabłoński on the 19th Chopin Competition

****[00:00:00] Interviewer:**** Professor Krzysztof Jabłoński, excellent juror of the 19th Chopin Competition, good morning.

****Jabłoński:**** Good morning.

****Interviewer:**** We meet near the end of the second stage of the competition. It is actually the halfway point of this event. How is your form?

****Jabłoński:**** I think I am not exaggerating if I say that our form is not at its best, but we are managing. In our daily work over the years, we often work many hours a day, so it is a challenge, of course, because this is a different kind of work. Here, the greatest difficulty is maintaining concentration and freshness of mind through all these hours, which is not simple. We all succumb to fatigue and a moment of crisis comes that one must deal with. And there is also the huge responsibility; we remember, of course, how important and responsible the work of the jurors at the competition is.

****[00:01:07] Interviewer:**** I asked this question about form because this second stage seems exceptionally demanding. It is difficult for the performers, for the audience, and for you. Indeed, some participants spend about 50 minutes on stage; that is a lot. What do the participants struggle with the most in this stage?

****Jabłoński:**** That is a very difficult question because I could say a lot about the first stage, and they struggled with various things there too. I think that here, especially those who play the complete set of Preludes, have difficulties in connecting these miniatures. These are not pieces written separately; it is a whole cycle. And we had examples of treating this cycle like a collection of random pieces that do not lead from one to another.

****[00:02:05] Interviewer:**** In your opinion, is it a good decision by those participants who decide to play the whole cycle? In other words, is it not a bit too much—24 Preludes?

****Jabłoński:**** I don't know if one can say good or not good. Everyone plays what they feel they can handle, and what comes out of it on stage later, well, we hear it.

****[00:02:20] Interviewer:**** Polonaises are also a very important element of the second stage program. How is it with these pieces?

****Jabłoński:**** Regarding the Polonaise, I actually haven't heard a truly real one yet. That is probably not good, considering it is a very important form for Chopin's output. Maybe there were one or two moments where it reminded one of a Polonaise, indeed, yes. But it is a situation that worsens, actually, from edition to edition of the competition. And this is not only a problem of the competition but of music education in general and everything that is happening in the world of classical music today. It happens during masterclasses or lessons that I ask a pianist if they have ever seen how a Polonaise is danced. The answer is "no." Do they know what the step of the Polonaise is, what the character of the dance is? "No." There is no reaction.

****[00:03:31] Jabłoński:**** It is probably getting worse with this education because we have a "guru" in musical matters, which is the internet and YouTube. Young people go there and copy certain patterns about which they have no idea. They don't study music, they don't read, they don't analyze, they don't learn enough. They want to be famous very quickly, to achieve everything through shortcuts, so they also repeat someone else's mistakes.

****[00:04:43] Jabłoński:**** With the Waltzes in the first stage, was it equally bad in your opinion? With the Waltzes, it is also fatal. Besides, one of the big problems is that we do not play according to the text. We are moving further and further away from the text. Everything is based on "impressions," everything is for the public, everything is about making the greatest possible impression for applause, for presenting oneself. The exploding ego that we see very often on stage, the lack of modesty, the lack of knowledge leads to degenerations, to distortions. And often it is the case that those productions which are relatively the worst receive the greatest applause from the audience, because a person focused on making an impression often succeeds. Except that this applause is not the result of the quality of the playing, but of external elements of stage presence. We observe flying legs, stomping on the pedal, loud breathing, singing,

making various faces... all this has no connection with music. If someone truly feels something, their body will tell us; however, many pianists today practice these things and practice “theater” at the instrument. I close my eyes, I hear nothing; I open my eyes, I see a great deal.

****[00:06:59] Interviewer:**** Garrick Ohlsson said that he himself is surprised by the list of people qualified for the second stage. Is this list not entirely satisfying for you either?

****Jabłoński:**** I don’t know if I would say that. At every competition and in every evaluation, it is a kind of average. If we replaced the whole jury, the result would be different. This results from the fact that, especially in the case of people playing mediocrally—representing perhaps a high level of playing but still mediocre—each of us will be annoyed by different things. Each of us places emphasis in teaching, in pedagogy, in our own art on different things. Therefore, there will not be full agreement. We somehow agree in the case of the best and the worst; we have no problem with that.

****[00:08:27] Interviewer:**** A lot of returns this year to the Chopin Competition. Do you understand those participants who decide to fight for prizes again?

****Jabłoński:**** Personally, no. But it is an individual decision for everyone. There is never a guarantee that one will achieve a similar result or even find themselves in the final, because we never know who will come and what the overall level will be. There might be 10 people better than that person who decided to come again, and then there is a problem. A significant risk.

****[00:09:57] Interviewer:**** The third stage... Mazurkas will probably be such a test for the pianists?

****Jabłoński:**** Well, probably yes, like the Waltzes and Polonaises. It is the same kind of test. Mazurkas are considered the most difficult test. I expect there will be problems here because, similarly to the Waltzes or Polonaises: non-compliance with the text, weirdness, degeneration, trying to find something that no one has done before, trying to please the audience... these are great temptations that lead to distortions. There is no better recipe for winning a prize for Mazurkas than simply reading the composer’s text carefully and, above all, playing what is written in the notes. With this, it is really at its worst. This is the subject of my concern, something that keeps me awake at night. But “dinosaurs” like me will soon have nothing more to say. All these things I believe in, that I learned, are slowly disappearing and being replaced by shortcuts.

****[00:11:06] Interviewer:**** Professor, if I understood correctly, you are not looking for “personality” at the competition?

****Jabłoński:**** But what is personality? I always ask, what is personality? Someone who does weird things and looks for non-standard solutions while violating the composer’s text and the basic rules of music—is that a great personality? For me, no.

****[00:11:44] Interviewer:**** What to wish you now for this second part of the competition?

****Jabłoński:**** I don’t know. Strength, above all strength and concentration, freshness of mind, and still joy in what I do. We cannot succumb to emotions. It happens that someone plays in an annoying way, it happens that someone plays very beautifully—then of course we are emotional, but we must set our emotions aside. I personally have a rule that whether I like it or not has nothing to do with the grade, because the evaluation must be honest and professional. The fact that I would not play it that way does not mean I won’t appreciate that participant. Subjectivism is a very dangerous path in judging others.