

Interview with Chia Chou

Jury Member in the category Piano Trio and member of the Executive Committee of the FS&MM competition

Interviewer: Jennifer Ronyak, Senior Scientist at *Institute 14: Aesthetics of Music*

JR: Thank you for coming to this interview today. Now that the competition is concluded, could you reflect on what you found most interesting about this year's competition?

CC: I think what was fascinating this year was to see how certain ensembles changed their presentation from the first round, to the second round, to the third. It was as if with each successive round, they were trying to impress us more, which is a natural thing. But this, I think, caused certain problems because this forceful approach was in many cases – in quite a few cases – counterproductive.

JR: That's an interesting thing, and it raises a larger question concerning what is different about the competition performance scenario that one might not find in a concert situation. Are there some things that actually improve in the competition scenario?

CC: I've never given that so much thought. I think young people play the way they play. I mean, there is of course a certain stress involved. It is not a normal concert because you know that every little mistake is going to be recorded – recorded not in the sense of digitally, but recorded by a juror who is going to make a note of it – and this certainly causes a fair amount of stress, which I can understand. I personally don't have a problem if something goes wrong – if the intonation is not quite perfect, or the pianist is sloppy with a run. These things don't bother me. But there are ensembles, where you feel there is a great amount of stress, and they are not taking any risks. They are going the safe route. It is rather like "Microsoft Secure Mode...."

JR: Yes.

CC: It doesn't start with all the background programs running, but just the basic mode. And sometimes we heard this. There is the absolute minimum amount of features, and they take the most minimum amount of risk. This is an unfortunate aspect of the competition atmosphere.

JR: I can imagine that this would be the case. I have memories of my own earlier days as a piano student, and I'm always thrilled to see how people can thrive in that situation.

CC: I've experienced that myself in my own concert days. The fascinating and at the same time frightening thing about this is that you can't escape this [secure mode]. It takes only one person in the group to start this sort of secure mode, and it's like a dark hole. It just pulls you in. And you fight and you fight. You say to yourself: "This is not going to happen." But then the second person catches it, and then you are all in it. It's unbelievable.

JR: Yes, like a virus!

CC: Yes! It just takes over; it's frightening. I haven't experienced it very much in my career – maybe twice – but I remember this incredible feeling of disbelief. This is not happening, come on! Why can't I fight this? And you can't; it's just too strong.

JR: That is a really interesting way of putting it. To bring up another subject: what do you feel the competition brings to Graz as a community? What does Graz bring to this particular competition?

CC: First of all, what I think is really unique about this competition is the fact that it is incredibly well organized. The team around Britta Reininghaus, they've left no details to chance. Everything has been thought through; it is just unbelievable. This is the comment I get from practically every juror and most of the candidates I get to speak with. I know that all of our international jurors go back to their respective homes and their institutions and say: "Wow, we had just an incredible competition in Graz." The public image is certainly very, very good. And all of the jury members want to come back! They say: "Hey, think about me again in three years," and that is a very good thing.

JR: Yes.

CC: And for my personal specialty, piano trio, this competition is one of the two most important international competitions for piano trio, the other one being in Melbourne. The ARD Piano Trio competition in Munich is also very important, but it doesn't come on a regular basis.

JR: Thank you. You are also faculty in chamber music at the Kunstuniversität Graz. What factors make a chamber music program strong, and how do you prepare students here for a competition and for a career?

CC: In my specific case, I'm obsessed with ensemble sound production. Very many of my students come to me, and they are concentrated on playing together – vertically in time together. This is one important factor. But they have very little regard that the whole time the music is shifting – there are strong points and weak points. Especially with string players, with bowing techniques....this may sound absurd, but string playing has a certain naturalness as opposed to the piano.

JR: I can see what you mean.

CC: A string player plays a cantilena, and within this legato line they are doing micro-crescendos, strettos, rubato. I am pretty sure that in ninety percent of the cases they don't know they are doing this, but that is how they play. The pianist has to first of all hear this, and then he has to adapt. This is the thing that we've heard also here. This is the main criticism, I would say, that most ensembles here ran into. They are not aware of these micro changes, happening within a single bar, and they are not compensating.

JR: I see.

CC: I have this ridiculous saying: musicians “spielen gleichzeitig, aber nicht zusammen.” I don’t know how you would translate that.

JR: Perhaps that they play “at the same time” but not truly “together.”

CC: Yes.

JR: And a very specific meaning of “together.”

CC: And this awareness for “together” is the most difficult thing to learn. It is the most difficult thing to understand, and it is the most difficult thing to teach. But without it there is no high class chamber music.

JR: Yes, very interesting. Could you speak a bit more about the role of the pianist in a chamber ensemble, especially a pianist who plays with strings? How is playing the piano in this situation unique?

CC: It is definitely completely different than solo playing. I have pianists come to me as chamber music students, who are already quite prolific as solo pianists – they have won international competitions for example. They are really fabulous pianists. It is interesting to see how difficult it is for them to adapt to playing with strings. Because that is a completely different way of playing. It has to do with reaction time – how a pianist hits a key. For a pianist, the sound is there immediately. For strings – because of bowing – there is a microsecond delay before the sound is fully there. And to compensate for this takes a long time.

JR: I’m struck also by the fact that the pianist is the one always playing from full score. They are in this conductor’s seat by the basic fact of this tradition of playing from full score.

CC: Yes, exactly. I couldn’t possibly play a piano trio with just my part in front of me. I couldn’t do it – I would die! It is a very secure thing for me to have the full score. I had never given it much thought, though, that this might mean that the piano has more responsibility. Perhaps.

JR: Perhaps it is making too strong a claim, but there seems to be something there. Do you feel there is a definable Austrian or Austro-German school of trio playing? Or not?

CC: That is a tricky question. If you watch the international scene of chamber music competitions, you see that the field has been dominated especially by trios from Germany. These are young trios that are dominating the scene. They are all from the German-speaking area. I’m not sure what is behind that. Perhaps there is a school of thought here. I have always wondered about that. In comparison, I can’t tell you who is dominating the scene out of America. It is interesting.

JR: That is strange. Coming from the United States, I associate a lot of chamber music with ensembles focused on new music primarily. Speaking of newer music, could you name a few piano trios composed in the twentieth century or more recently that you find especially exciting?

CC: There is a piece that was played yesterday by a Latvian composer, Peteris Vasks. It is a very successful work; it has been played a lot. But it is not *avant garde* in the typical sense; he does not use many extended techniques. I would say that many of the works that are composed and have been played a great deal are also conservatively written. No screws attached to strings, no special effects. I think composers in general have a problem with that. Perhaps that is why more new works are written for string quartet.

JR: Perhaps the piano trio is viewed as a nineteenth-century ensemble. I think we have come to the end of our time. Thank you.