

A CONVERSATION ABOUT RECORDING ARNOLD VAN WYK'S PIANO MUSIC

With Stephanus Muller

Daniel-Ben Pienaar first performed *Night Music* on 2 August 2014 in the Endler Hall in Stellenbosch, South Africa. The occasion was the launch of Stephanus Muller's book *Nagmusiek* (the Afrikaans word for *Night Music*), published by Fourthwall Books, Johannesburg. Pienaar would perform the work again at a second book launch in Pretoria at the Brooklyn Theatre on 9 August, in the T.S. Eliot Theatre, Merton College, Oxford on 17 November and finally at the Royal Academy of Music – where Pienaar teaches and where Van Wyk was a student – on 19 November.

When Muller's *Nagmusiek* was awarded the Eugène Marais Prize by the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns in 2016, Muller used the prize money to establish the Arnold van Wyk Centenary Fund (2016 was the centenary of Van Wyk's birth), dedicated to the performance and recording of Van Wyk's music. The Rupert Music Foundation generously contributed to the fund in support of its first recording project, this complete rendition of Van Wyk's mature piano music, the first time all these works were brought together in one project.

Muller attended the recording sessions, referred to in this interview. Pienaar subsequently edited the recording during the course of 2018, and this interview was conducted via e-mail at various times during and after that process, from February 2018 to March 2019.

Stephanus Muller: In preparing for the Van Wyk recording, you were adamant that you needed to hear all previously recorded versions of the music that I could send on. I was somewhat perplexed by this, as, to my mind, Van Wyk's music doesn't have a 'recording history' that has in itself become a text that informs the works. You disagreed. Can you elaborate on your thinking about this, and also about those recordings which you did find useful in preparing for your own readings of Van Wyk?

Daniel-Ben Pienaar: My simple impulse was one of 'due process'. I had seen in your biography that there were some interesting recordings from Van Wyk's time-frame and personal milieu that would be good to hear.

And so it was to an extent. (We still have not heard or gotten hold of John Ogdon's performance of *Night Music*, which is tantalizing.) This is not to say that I was in any way interested in 'copying' what Laura Searle and Christie Feros were doing in the live performances of theirs I heard, merely that hearing these recordings inevitably would evoke something of Van Wyk's world. Even the recent past may be a foreign country though – and so these recordings from some 35 years ago already have a veneer of the 'gone' about them which of course makes one feel certain elements of nostalgia – and which immediately renders the experience 'inauthentic'. So the hearing of early recordings can only partly tell us something about historically authentic practice, and that's fine. I believe that any music worth doing will, as time passes, become not just different, but often more than what the composer could have imagined.

It is not so much that we are constantly 'reading' new things into the music, more that the composer's own craft, if it is resilient and intricate and complex, will render it fertile for use by craftsmen in other fields – in this case that other field being the craft of the performer, the piano player. Think, by analogy (maybe not a clean one I admit), how much of the greatest violin music was written after many of the great violins were made. Or a closer idea: how Mozart's unprecedented, touching personification of the soloist in his piano concertos is not served well by conducting from the keyboard, since the soloist has to change persona the whole time – an example of where the performance practice of the time, in my opinion, is inadequate to the new music. Or perhaps another idea: the way Bach's cello suites changed the way people play the cello – not because Bach set out to change the way people play the cello, but simply because his craft itself (both compositionally and in terms of references and subversion of references) forms a web of abundant possibilities in whatever medium he is going to turn to. Different from say, Chopin, whose ideas spring from a particularly intimate relationship with the instrument – but then his music is resilient enough to have withstood its successful transfer to large concert grands in halls that seat thousands of people, an aesthetic he certainly did not have in mind himself, but was effected by brilliant performers from the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries. These would be cases of

where performers invent something new in response to the music, or to the needs of where and for whom it is played, but it is the *performers* themselves who invent it through their own craft.

In that way I believe that, with more readings and more exposure, Van Wyk's music will also accrue, as you rightly say, other texts around it – which in time may become part of a web of things we think of as Van Wyk, but which is in fact a kind of collaborate effort!

My idea with music that is as finely made as this, with such compositional finish and so rich in its literary sensibility and in its awareness of the world of gesture and diction and enunciation and sound colour, and that, as yet, does not have a tradition of recordings or performances of different kinds to go alongside it, is to play a game where I *imagine* such traditions might exist and what they would be – based on my experience of what performers do in the repertoire that I normally play. And since Van Wyk is a composer who uses a 'traditional' set of techniques to write, and that his music is to an extent made in the image of the nineteenth- and early twentieth century works that he loved, it is quite possible to think of the different ways in which Chopin, Brahms and Ravel are played, of the different pianistic and personality types that emerge across a range of performances of these composers, and to bring some of those possibilities to his music; to refer to them, combine them, or reject some of them.

We have at least one very clear real example of that in the contrast between Van Wyk's own recording of *Night Music* and the live recording of Van Cliburn winner Steven De Groote playing it in 1984. Essentially these versions present us with two aesthetic extremes, models from which a set of means – both technical and expressive – can be derived as part of the 'toolbox' or, more generally, as part of a kind of repository of inspirations and influences to be confronted, through which one can respond to the music now.

So these 'early' recordings are of interest not as examples to be directly emulated, but rather as part of a gathering of techniques and ideas.

Muller: Could you be specific about what in the Searle and Feros live recordings evoked Van Wyk's world for you upon listening to them 35 years later? And also what you mean about the aesthetic extremes you hear between Van Wyk's own *Night Music* studio recording that dates from 1963, and the live recording of the De Groote at Cheltenham in 1984?

Pienaar: To my ear both Searle and Feros have an unassuming directness, a 'daily bread' quality in their playing, which is to say that they do not default to cosmetic pianistic treatment of the material. That means that real passages of beauty stand out as such. I liked the emphasis on clear diction and lines, out of which emerges interesting sonorities. This is an almost 'composerly' attitude to the clarity and musical 'logic' of Van Wyk's writing. I also found many lovely bits of timing, some delicate corners, in the Feros performance of *Ricordanza*, a difficult piece to shape convincingly.

The contrast between the De Groote and Van Wyk renditions of *Night Music* has been much discussed by those who have heard them. It is clear that De Groote's pianistic poise and 'production' values of accuracy and consistently honed, 'good' sound production are at an 'international' level, and yet, in spite of Van Wyk's obvious lapses and flaws he deploys a vastly greater range of expression, pianistic tricks of touch and pedalling, types of emphasis, variety in the phrasing and gesture, as well as some very interesting tempo changes within phrases and paragraphs. Van Wyk also, fascinatingly, does not obey many of his own dynamic and tempo instructions to the letter – but the effectiveness of this performance gives us a valuable extra layer of text, revealing essential poetic values. In the faster playing we also have a level of abandon and temperament (born out of recklessness or a kind of desperate melancholy perhaps?) which De Groote's 'discipline' does not allow. De Groote ostensibly obeys Van Wyk's written instructions, but there are many details of enunciation and inflection implied by Van Wyk's carefully produced score which get lost in the more generalised lushness of the performance. And yet the De Groote is in its own way captivating and accomplished. But, as Feros and Searle and Van Wyk's own playing

show, it is cardinal to be able to differentiate between things that are meant to be warm or generous or gorgeous or sensual and things that are plain, quotidian, everyday, dry or speech-like. And also of course to be able to enjoy the simplicity and 'kindness' in some of the everyday things. To be able to take flight when needed, to lose control, but also to be able to moderate.

This type of variety and detail is something that the demands of modern pianism conspire against with its emphasis on the presentation of an easily defined 'product'. And the modern recording studio, with its 'cleanness' of sound, the abundance of 'information' and resolution, renders it a particular challenge at times to step away from openness and opulence (while embracing them at others) and sometimes an easy solution is not at hand.

But I think these sometimes competing demands give us some tools with which to question and complicate or, indeed, obfuscate. This last element I did not encounter much in any of the recordings I heard, but it is clearly part of the task of an inquiring musician when playing 'old' music now – and as I say, I think of Van Wyk as 'old music'.

Muller: I am struck by your pejorative view of the terms 'production values' and 'easily defined product' to refer to 'modern pianism' or 'international level' pianism. There is something in your palpable distaste with these concepts that echoes a Marxist suspicion of first 'pianism' as fetish, and then the 'product' as fetish, and then the consumption of the product as fetish. Would you say that your idea of 'lateness' of pianistic practice is somehow related to a diagnosis of the performance industry as a kind of hell that entails the enslavement of creative impulses? A situation that can only be mitigated by thinking through and implementing creative work as a critique of capitalist means of production without the possibility to escape it?

Pienaar: It is a little bit funny and perhaps rather extreme the way you put it! Maybe one should slow down on seeing too much of a conspiracy in all this. But of course, yes, it is true that when one has a certain level

of facility at doing something, choosing how you do it inevitably betrays a lot about your system of values in a larger sense. Deeply questioning our relationship with institutional structures and 'market forces' may well leave us ill at ease. It can be like staring into the abyss at times – but the key thing for me is to not allow that to become completely debilitating, but a spur to still try to *make* something, to make the unease part of the questing for substance in one's work.

As you indicate, contradictions abound: it is hard not to feel distaste at the way 'classical music' is sometimes commodified, at what it is in it that is being commodified, and how pandering to that whitewashes so many possibilities of feeling and thought and technique; how that engenders a critical framework which only operates within the orthodoxy of the day. Rejecting that through *the way* one plays – through looking acutely critically at how expressive means are deployed, not simply receiving conventions of classical music-making as given – in spite of potentially alienating the bread-and-butter classical audience and critics – is, in a small way I guess, a political statement, and a necessary one if it is still going to be worth playing Bach, Beethoven etc. for some time to come. At the same time it would be crass simply to dismiss the experience of people who do go to listen within the 'bourgeois' framework, who are often well-informed and who are innately very well-equipped to appreciate sophisticated aesthetic distinctions. In my experience some of these very people are very eager to escape the 'matrix' of conventional thinking, and it only takes a little guidance and a little comparing of 'like with like' (maybe in the form of listening to different historical recordings of the same work) for them to come to reject some of the current norms and refine their taste. But, talking about uncomfortable contradictions: consider the characterful playing, fieriness of technique and fine sensibilities some of those great musicians, those of the so-called Golden Era before/around/just after the Second World War, and the confidence in a notion of high culture on which their playing rests. While one might today feel increasingly uncomfortable with the trappings of such a notion, it would be disastrous to reject the kinds of expressivity and talent manifested in those historical recordings.

When thinking about how a 'classical music' performer might either conform or critique given norms, it can be interesting to make a playful comparison between where we are in relation to the past of our art-form, and where a novelist at perhaps the end of the nineteenth century found him/herself. I draw the analogy in the sense that we are at a point in our discipline where no matter 'how good' a performer might be playing their instrument, it is not enough anymore simply to work unthinkingly from a set of given practices or to see oneself as located in a lineage of traditions from which one proceeds by intuition, and hopes to do so fruitfully. To question some of the basic assumptions about why and how we do what we do is now a big part of the work itself. But then, even so, I would never propogate a rejection of tradition per se. Retaining a real literacy of the (pianistic) achievements of the past remains key, in fact – i.e. it would be facile to simply throw the baby out with the bathwater, thinking that starting afresh from first principles is still possible at such a late stage.

Relating to this last point, what is touching about Van Wyk is that, as a composer, he did something similar – still trusting to the complexity, malleability and fecundity of the old (compositional and instrumental) techniques while not falling into the trap of being a mere reactionary, keeping fresh the belief that there might still be something distinctive to be said.

Muller: Could you explain what you mean when you invoke the 'Chopin' sound that you wanted to achieve in the Van Wyk recordings, and how it is achieved in collaboration with Phil Hobbs (the engineer of this recording)?

Pienaar: You are referring to my discussion with engineer Philip Hobbs when he was setting up microphones at the beginning of the sessions. In July 2017 I had recorded the Chopin Ballades and Third Sonata in the same hall (Potton Hall in Sussex) and on the same piano, and we had had some interesting discussions about what to do with the mastering of the sound of that recording. In the end I was in some ways quite pleased

with aspects of the outcome and wanted to keep that in mind as a reference point for the Van Wyk, even though, naturally, the music is quite different in character and attack. When thinking about recorded sound I keep in mind that when one plays in a hall there are many truths that can be captured by the microphones. Think for example how different the same performance can sound from different parts in a hall, or if you have your back turned, even; or of how it feels from where one is sitting playing. So it is an important part of every project to consider which of these truths are closest to one's aesthetic intention for a particular project. What space does one want to evoke for the listener? I do not particularly enjoy recordings where an empty hall is evoked, so I am always keen to move away from the 'default' glamorousness that seems to be a production standard these days. To think more in terms of a decent-sized salon with nice wooden floors, maybe even some wooden side panels, something like that. Phil is a really gifted engineer, but also musically and culturally wonderfully literate, so that it is possible to have a discussion with him along such lines.

Muller: I cannot agree more about Phil; it was a real pleasure to see him work with you, and also clear that the recording benefited from a relationship and understanding you have developed with him over time. I was struck by his discernment in treating conscious interpretive decisions (about tempo, alignment, pedalling) as just that, and not to intervene, simply asking for greater clarity, consistency, delineation or shaping at certain places according to how things came across in the control room. How important is this relationship between artist and engineer, and how important is it that he be, as you put it, so musically and culturally literate?

Pienaar: Having someone on the other side of the microphones that has an understanding and sympathy for one's peculiar aims in a project, and also for the quirks of one's way of working, saves so much time and also minimises any possible struggles for control of the process that may always remain a subtext in recording sessions. Phil knows the level of preparedness I bring to sessions, he also knows what the types of things are that I am very fanatical about getting right, what my priorities are in

general. He knows the ways in which, in some senses, I work against the grain of some of the current commercial expectations (the discussions about sound are an example); and he knows that I edit my own work and that I have an awareness of strategising that in the studio. I don't think we always agree or have the same tastes, but I think where we don't we have a well-functioning *modus operandi*! I have also worked with other engineers and producers and every one of these relationships is somewhat different from the rest.

Muller: Let's talk a little bit more about the music. With regard to *Ricordanza*, how important is flexible tempo, timing and the alignment of sonorities in managing the difficult transitions of the piece (you mention Feros's timing in your first answer). Here I am thinking in particular of the role tempo plays in shaping the introduction (the first ten bars) *as* introduction, something that is particularly difficult as it unfolds so slowly. But I also think of the passage from bar 30 onwards (*stringendo*) and that leads to the V/D chord in bar 34, or even more difficult the bars 45-47 transition or the B major section starting in bar 48.

Pienaar: I think it will always be difficult to make the first page sound like a genuine introduction – there are so many things there that already have potency in themselves – and to boot at a very slow tempo; and the 'pre-echoes' on that page of what happens later already feels to me entangled in it in a way which I would not want to totally clarify. Likewise, as you mention, there are some awkward transition passages. This is not only the case in *Ricordanza* – it is a feature in almost all the pieces. I do not think that that is necessarily because Van Wyk had 'difficulty' with transition passages – there are some fine examples to the contrary. More that there are moments when it almost feels that he is not concerned with that, does not mind a quick switch or flip or cut; maybe in a cinematic way, but also perhaps sometimes in a 'we have had enough of this, no niceties needed, you know and I know it is the right moment for something else's sense; at others it almost feels like an emotional necessity for him not to polish the edges, at it were; at times as if it would be too painful to do that, too fearful to even imagine that everything could be so connected and integrated and fulsome and

resolved. So while I think these are moments where the performer has to strain somewhat to make sense of them, he/she also has to enjoy that there are these somewhat 'untidy' places. Because there is so much finesse elsewhere, these slightly crude bars can be quite provocative.

Muller: To what extent does the fact that *Ricordanza* has not had an extensive recorded history, oblige you to follow a fairly conventional tracing of the melodic lines throughout the piece? In other words, if the work were well known, would that typically allow you to under-emphasize the melodic Gestalt and disrupt it through the intrusion of some of the accompanying material?

Pienaar: So much is invested and gained simply from repeated listening, or indeed repeated contact (in unknown works as well as famous ones; but also by re-listening to certain players). Repeated listening to a performance where some of the more obvious things are obfuscated can bring its own familiarity and acceptance of it as a given thing. That does not mean that all 'unclear' or unintelligible performances hide wonderful secrets though! An outstanding player will be able to create hierarchies of tension and release, will be making use of rhetorical devices to make a musical argument, and will have in his arsenal the ability to characterise and create mood – in other words, take recourse to means of expression that are readily understood, maybe not universally, but certainly in a wider context than simply that of the piece itself. How he marshalls these means may, however, not always (or by everyone) be perceived as beautiful or as making immediate sense, and may require the risk on the part of the listener to spend the time to delve deeper, not knowing if he will find something rewarding. I remember that, when first encountering Samuil Feinberg's Well-Tempered Clavier Book 2 recording (before I had learnt the works myself), I found many things there verging on the chaotic, but all I hear in these recordings nowadays now that I know both the Preludes and Fugues and Feinberg's playing, are an immense clarity of purpose and projection, and a poetic imagination that leaves all of the celebrated Bach players of today far behind. So I think the listener has some work to do as well.

Regarding *Ricordanza*, I do not think that one has to 'dumb' down the performance: no need for the interesting and, and in some cases unresolved, elements in the piece to collapse into simple melodic lines or gestures. But what tends to happen with this piece is that, because it is written on three staves, with lots of beautiful details of 'texture' and register, and some tricky moments for controlling the quiet dynamics, it is often seen as a 'study' in sonority; when in fact that is just part of the picture. Making use of the full range of expressive devices of etching line, putting certain notes in relief, experimenting with 'interventions' of timing and tempo can reveal a pained and haunting 'voice' in the piece far more present and immediate than what the idea of a nostalgic evocation of atmosphere suggests. In other words the piece is not a modernist excursion into territory where one aspect (sonority) overrides others to the point where it in itself becomes the subject of the discourse (to put it crudely, but you get the point).

Muller: I want us to consider an issue relating to Van Wyk's Romantic sound world in *Ricordanza*, a question that has to do with tempo, the spacing out of material over wide registers, the prominence of melodic material that borders on sentimental, the sparse (not dense) harmonic language often spun out in figurations. In your treatment of the piece, tempo is highly flexible, melody clearly enunciated rather than understated, harmonic colour recognized mostly in rhythmic inflections/bending, registeral writing treated as colour. The result is something that is almost Proustian in its evocation of things past: harmony as it used to be, melody as it might have sounded in a world where the culture of suspicion has not taken root, tempo as an ebb and flow that is not quite supported by a harmonic structure of hyper-tenuated tension and release. Is *Ricordanza* something in itself, or is it a piece of things remembered, something of a memory not quite recalled, a supreme musical gesture of signification towards different signifieds. And do you think your performance engages with these things to an extent?

Pienaar: Your description captures well what is so special about this piece, even though it remained, to a degree, unfinished and troublesome

for Van Wyk. It felt to me that the writing on one hand exerts great pressure on the pianist to 'sing' – at the same time not providing the necessary mechanisms that piano composers often employ to make it *easy* to do so. He makes it physically awkward either by having melodic material in uncomfortable parts of the hand or by engineering quick movements of the left hand to play subsidiary material both underneath and above the melodic right hand, making a sustained supporting bass hard to obtain. Also, much of the singing matter moves in the alto or mezzo register, or rather high up, almost shrill; in other words not often where the piano would most easily and readily bloom into sweet cantabile. And then there are those awkward discontinuities, an introduction that can never feel like a simple setting of the scene, climaxes that do not quite materialise, and an ending that feels almost like a forced homecoming. At the same time almost everything is bathed in those magical soft sonorities. It feels as if it *should* be easy for it to be sung, *should* be easy to be told as a story or evoked as a scene, but it never is.

Muller: Did you take a conscious decision to make *Tristia* into less of a Romantic statement than *Ricordanza*? The 'Rondo Desolato' is very clearly pedaled, chords mostly precisely aligned, the characteristic fourth intervals articulated in x-rayed clarity, tempo rubato very sparingly applied. Even the 'Ostinato' seems very contained, and the 'Berceuse' is, to my ears, gesturing towards the ironic. A neo-classical statement, almost, as opposed to your indulging of the explicit Romantic world of *Ricordanza*. Do you think these two works show different sides of Van Wyk, or did you wish to show how different approaches to his art could complicate understandings of him as a neo-Romantic?

Pienaar: It pleases me no end that that distinction comes across, although I am not sure I was thinking in 'neo-classical' terms per se for *Tristia*. One of the things that bringing all Van Wyk's piano music together in one project has given me occasion to do, was to feel my way more closely through how the five works all traverse very different terrain, both physically and in terms of sensibility. Certainly it became clear that *Ricordanza*, the 'Rondo Desolato' and the 'Berceuse' can each do

distinctive things. You and I have on some occasions talked about Van Wyk's melancholy and the different forms this takes in his music; and in your book there are some thought-provoking pages about grief. The 'Rondo Desolato' (in my opinion a staggering bit of piano writing) speaks to me of an insurmountable kind of sadness, something that is beyond overt ways of expressing it; or maybe of a kind of fixed point from which one yearns to move, but to which one is always dragged back. For me the way to make that real at the piano was to think of the *desire* to move, the desire to communicate through statements that naturally ebb and flow, and then to *not allow it*, as it were – constantly straining against the tyranny of a measured pulse, only sometimes briefly winning out.

And you are right, there can be something ironic, not quite to be believed, about the Berceuse. I would say that that is certainly not the only way to see it, but in the context of the set of three pieces it feels to me that its easy, undulating rhythm, and its rather obvious lushness are almost too good to be true – as if the way the 'Ostinato' quietens down on its final page were no more than a trick of stage craft. The 'easy-going' aspect of it is, however, partly due to my deciding on a faster tempo than Van Wyk's metronome marking. A slow tempo perhaps would have forced one back into the rather lugubrious, still world of the 'Rondo Desolato', which I thought would be less interesting than giving it an at-face-value natural flow – and unlike in *Ricordanza*, here we have a clear introduction, and melodic lines supported in a conventional way (even though, like some of Chopin's or Rachmaninov's most affecting melodic lines, that melodic line gets somewhat 'stuck' around certain notes).

So one ends up, with *Ricordanza*, the 'Rondo Desolato' and the 'Berceuse' representing very different ways of singing or trying to sing, and of slow movement. To that one can add the 'Romanze' of the Four Piano Pieces where I opted for a defined style of diction with conspicuous ways of stretching and emphasising certain notes and note values, and with an harmonic tension-and-release that navigate perhaps in the least complicated, or better put, least troubled way of these four lyrical pieces.

Muller: I am interested in the notion of tempo flexibility in the Four Piano Pieces. Particular examples are the gradual acceleration in the Allegro non troppo part of the 'Dumka', or the early ritardando in the Coda of the 'Dumka', the degree of freedom in the 'Romanza' (I don't think it really applies to the 'Scherzino') or the ratcheting up of the tempo in the 'Toccata'. Do you think there is something about Van Wyk's style that aspires to a wildness, an unharnessed exuberance, a dedication to feeling/character rather than notions of precision that could be connected to planning or form, and that this can be enhanced by locating the performance thereof in the relativized idea of tempo informed by affect (rather than the strictures of processional time governed by the time signature)?

Pienaar: I think that Van Wyk is often read as a melancholy composer, and at heart he is that, but, as with all stereotypes about composers that encompass wide fields of experience, such labels often start to govern how we hear the music, and become a terrible restriction on what we allow ourselves to experiment with when we learn the works. It is clear that Van Wyk is a highly 'technical' composer in the way he is able to pare down his means to essentials and where details are never just 'filler' material. He is also very technical in the way he can build lines and sustain musical 'arguments' (think of the storm section in *Night Music*, or the build-up at the end of the 'Toccata'). And technical in the way he can absorb hackneyed references and formal conventions from 'old' music and make them do new things – even as late as the 1970s. I think his concentration and specificity of thought are ill-served by tarring everything with the brush of self-absorbed melancholy or slowness. And we have in his own performance of *Night Music* (which he was pleased with) a clear example of some the temperamental abandon that is possible in certain kinds of his music. (This is why it should be easy to come to his music for pianists steeped in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, because nothing could be further from his music than that sense of the modernist divorce between traditional means and poetic ends.) As for unharnessed exuberance, I guess the extremes one chooses to test will depend on one's own inclinations as much as perceived

meanings in the music. But this 'bringing of the self' to excellent music, the desire to 'make it one's own' is an essential part of advocacy – even though, through time, it inevitably gives rise to misreadings. But great music has to be able to absorb misreadings, otherwise how can one call it great?

With the 'Scherzo' and 'Toccatà' of the Four Piano Pieces, one might even argue that my performances here are already misreadings of a kind. In the former I can't help toying with a kind of strutting gait with something a little unstable to it (maybe reminiscent of Beethoven's ironic use of marches in some of his late works), in the process over-burdening this relatively simple piece (I remember it was originally intended as part of a graded examination syllabus). With the fast tempo of the 'Toccatà' a hurtling climax becomes possible towards the end, verging on collapse. But even at the beginning a faster tempo allows a lightness which renders accented notes and the chromaticism as piquant detailing, and gestures feeling lively and buoyant, avoiding a kind of pointillist, or even mechanistic impression. Others might insist that toccatas need a mechanistic element; I like this one feeling a bit vertiginous from the outset.

Muller: To which degree do you think the *Pastorale e Capriccio* is a kind of dress-rehearsal for *Night Music*, and *Night Music* a kind of continued gravitational influence in especially *Ricordanza* and *Tristia*? In a way I am asking you to what extent *Night Music* defines this oeuvre of piano music, both prospectively and retrospectively. Related to this question, a second one: You first encountered and learnt *Night Music* before you embarked on the project of recording the other piano music. To what extent has your knowledge of *Night Music* informed your approach to the rest of the piano music? In other words, to what extent did *Night Music* define this recording of all the piano music retrospectively?

Pienaar: Yes, of course *Night Music* will colour and to an extent shadow, or even overshadow, what comes before and after it, even if only in our minds (i.e. reading it retrospectively into the *Pastorale e Capriccio*)! I was almost hoping we would not talk about *Night Music* here in any specific

way; I would love for it to just 'speak for itself', even though that is such a cliché. I know that in some ways it is not an 'easy' work to get to know; but when it does enter one's memory and imagination it is not just the sounds of it that reverberate – it has a way of becoming a kind of a subject of thought as a thing-in-itself, sometimes in a nagging sort of way, something you carry around with you. It is difficult not to hear the later works on some level as a fallout of that, and what went before it as some kind of preparation for it, although perhaps one has to look beyond the piano music for a more complete picture of what leads up to *Night Music*. I think of the *Pastorale e Capriccio* just as a really effective concert piece by a relatively young composer who has a voice, and who knows how to write well for the instrument. But it is quite a leap from there to *Night Music*.

Muller: How important do you think the body, or notions of the body moving, is for Van Wyk? I am referring to the middle section of the 'Pastorale' (the 7/8 section), the 'Berceuse' even, with its lilting 3/8, that stylized 7/8 of the Dumka, the march-like Scherzino, the Ritmo di tre battute in *Night Music* (again, a 3/8) and even that rather unlikely Pochissimo più mosso, spettrale section in *Night Music* from bar 315? There is a sense of the body in the music – and I would also argue in your interpretations, which never take the score at face value – that suggests music as something corporeal rather than abstract or ethereal. Do you agree?

Pienaar: Absolutely – groups of notes always coalesce on some level as gestures – or shapes, movements, or as things we throw, or drop, or place, or yield into. And one must always endeavour to find more words that both describe physical actions or motion, and carry emotive or expressive associations. This kinetic and emotionally excitable way of thinking of the rhythm and piano technique is a personal preoccupation of mine, but the sense of the body you mention is key to finding a gateway to the ethereal elements too – even hypnotic rhythm or the suspension or denial of gesture must be felt in the body. When it comes to Van Wyk exploiting signatures like 5/8, 7/8 or 11/4 they so often require careful treatment. I think repeated rhythms in such key

signatures, when divested of specificity of character interest, of some form of cultured artifice, can easily feel banal. Knowing what we do of Van Wyk –the refined way he wrote and spoke, his literary interests, the fineness of feelings we gather from his letters – thinking of those rhythms in that context urges one to look for subtleties and detailing and also for larger sweeping motion across bar lines. And it is useful in these passages to pay some close attention to his articulation markings, dynamics etc. – often he seems at pains to ensure the inclusion of extra layers of interest and 'imbalance' – seldom allowing a simplistic repetition of the basic rhythm.

Muller: There seems to be an interesting tension in your approach to engaging with repertoire: a conceptually circumscribed project that lends itself to artistic exploration precisely because of the limited comparative framework of the selection, and an ecumenical artistic sensibility that migrates without stylistic strictures between centuries. How is your recording of Van Wyk's piano music informed by other recording projects (you have recorded several cycles of central German repertoire but also Chopin and seventeenth-century music)?

Pienaar: The tug-of-war you describe is necessary when one holds to the conviction that the starting point for engaging with a repertoire must never be a set of externally imposed strictures and limitations, stylistic conventions and 'performance practices' – or even reception stereotypes to do with the composer. So often those things deliver no more than a generic pianism and generalised musicality, however well-honed. A soloist has the luxury in his workshop of starting without preconceptions about the expressive and technical means that he 'should' be taking in a given repertoire. Perhaps it is a bit of an overstatement to put it so, but I think it is more life-giving, more fun and also a much greater challenge to start from the notion that 'nothing is off the table'. Of course this does not mean that doing just anything is going to be acceptable or that one's playing of all repertoire is going to strive to include the whole gamut of pianism and feeling. But it does mean that the restrictions that are imposed and the choice of means that are exploited, or the conceptual games relevant to any given work – that all

these things are themselves the domain of artistic volition. In other words, reading the score is never a painting-by-numbers-with-some-personality-added. The 'restrictions' I mention, or call them resistances, if you want – these are an essential part of expressivity of course; but they can come from many places. We can harness things in relation to one another to give each an individual profile; we can use the idea of a certain idiom or of a mode of expression or style of diction to which things must conform, even while character differences are still delineated; we could play with notions of taste, and of register of utterance; we could indulge in aesthetic games by deliberately limiting a palette of sound or articulation or gesture; and yes, cultural and historical references and reception stock-in-trades in the repertoire itself remain immensely important, at times indispensable to inflect choices. But choices are never a simple reaction to the text; rather something that results as a synergy between what the performer actively brings and what he perceives in the score and its contexts.

As you imply, the cycle at times demarcates its own limits as the different works in it dialogue with, and play off, against each other. This is more acutely felt with works conceived or put together as a set by the composer (something like, say, Bach's Partitas or a book of Chopin Etudes), and with canonical or 'standard' repertoire one is naturally more inclined to think of a whole world of possibilities traversed, of universality. But even with Van Wyk's small piano output the quality of the craftsmanship and his startling range of ideas urge us to assume, as we do (sometimes wrongly!) with the best composers, that he does not repeat himself, and that therefore the pianist is obliged to find specific meaningfulness in all he does.

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