

Reflections of a confined pianist:

We are currently living through a rather strange period: For many months, as if to respond to the lack of projects, I have been practicing the same ritual, getting up early in the morning, walking for thirty minutes, having breakfast, and then "putting myself at the piano". The physical position of the pianist is moreover quite routine because, unlike other musicians who can move around with their instruments and take them wherever they want, pianists themselves are as if "screwed" to their stool, in a carefully chosen place in the house or apartment, and for years sitting in the same place, therefore in the same constellation of objects, furniture, paintings on the walls, lighting, even as they must try to forget everything and concentrate on sheet music which they repeat every day. This repetition, this "ruminating" one might say is certainly not at all impoverishing, on the contrary, repetition, when it is well done with love and awareness, opens with each new discovered layer new and unexpected perspectives and in fact, we repeat but always differently. Sergiù Celibidache said so well that any repetition, even that of a simple musical note creates a new space. Repetition is the basis of all musical work, first of all necessarily infinitely slow in order to give the brain and the fingers the possibility of assimilating all the details, fixing once and for all the fingerings which depend on so many parameters (the form of the hand of the pianist but also the phrasing, the momentum that will be required and especially the legato), the polyphonic clarity of the voices, the sound

layers, the respect of the contrasts of nuances and the dynamics, the tempo, the sonority and so many other things. And as assimilation happens, as the difficulties fade to allow more freedom, a gradual mental and physical "liberation" takes hold, the musical instinct can be deployed in the piece, the real tempo can emerge and the interpretation begins... this one being like the mirror of the work heard through the prism of the personality, the taste and obviously the talent of the interpreter. Arthur Rubinstein once said that "performers only have talent, composers have genius".

But it sure takes a lot of skill and a lot of experience to play appropriately, with respect for the text and the universal spirit of the works. Sense of style is undoubtedly part of the talent, it is the "tone" that one sets by playing and with the culture, the experience, sensitivity, everything becomes possible. Well, during these long months of solitude due to confinement, and while doing my best, while like every musician worthy of the name I tried to follow this ritual made of discipline, respect and love for music, I write here not without nostalgia or sadness that it is all totally futile, pointless, and all my "good intentions" were sorely lacking what constitutes the lifeblood of the musician's happiness, the presence of an audience and the fixed "deadline" of the concert. How much have I suffered these long weeks of practicing the works without "preparing" for a concert, without

defined dates (even if they sometimes can feel like a scary ultimatum to be ready!), without being able to fear the presence of an audience that judges absolutely everything we do, but even so it is extremely needed. I had wondered many times before if we actually and absolutely need to be listened to by someone, in order to be happy in music. This confinement has confirmed to me once again that the answer is obviously "yes".

And yet, everything that relates to a concert often has nothing to do with the music itself: negotiate with your agent, discuss the trip and the date of departure, the fee, invite a few friends or so-called "important" people, feel the fateful date of the great evening that approaches like a threat to oneself (one has to be a little bit of a masochist to do this job!), the anxieties on the day of the concert, the fear of lack of sleep, finally the famous "feeling in good shape", even down to the pleasure of dressing and getting ready to play, the stage lighting. All that we don't think about consciously during the daily work because it is simply ingrained in the life of a musician. The piano is like floating in these dreams, these questions, these fears, and it travels with us, outside and far from the furniture and decorations of our home. With those dreams, there would hardly be a need for a home! This is why the "after concerts", the next day and the days that follow are so painful, we are emptied, everything has

disappeared and we have the impression of having landed in a desert.

In fact the artist is from nowhere, he lives only in his dreams and confinement, like a formidable vertical force of gravity inexorably brings the musician back to a reality only terrestrial, we could say, where all dreams remain from now on prohibited.

It's not just the virus that can kill, it's also not being able to dream anymore, and being left only with the cold obligation to compensate for this lack by a deepening introspection ever more intense but terribly heavy and trying.

During this "forced resilience" which is the consequence of what I dare call a traumatic experience for a musician, I once imagined playing a "Virtual" (it is the case to say it!) concert at home, for which quite simply I had "begged" a being

of my choice, more or less close, to come and listen to me. I had to give everything in this concert, and no longer any question of gain or fee, sad prerogatives of a profession that

did not exist anymore. I just had to play, play as much as possible like I could make the black and poisoned tentacles of this horrible confinement recede and disappear...

So had I become more "generous", I who had always thought I already was? Unfortunately, shortly after this dreamy moment when I was no longer alone, I found myself like Hans Christian Andersen's Little

Match Girl, who couldn't hold on to the sight of her dear adored grandmother, and who froze to death.

The piano was there, motionless, the score upright, frozen in its severe demands, and despite everything, no choice, we had to continue ...

Boris Cyrulnik brilliantly explained that maybe it is the lack of comfort, of plans, ultimately the poverty which forces us to meet the challenges by creating for ourselves obstacles and all kinds of difficulties through hard work, as if it were necessary to relive, and this time be more useful. It is true that in my work over the past few months, I have felt the need to struggle, to prove something, to challenge myself so as not to fall into a kind of depression.

When my concerts suddenly ended in March of last year, I had

thought, I admit, and I'm not the only one among my colleagues, to say to myself "finally to what end? Why?" And there was the piano, in my living room, and I was alone with it, without a plan for both of us, without travel because even if each concert makes us play on a different piano, it is indeed your own instrument that you carry in your heart.

This confinement and the lack of certainty for the months to come is a test of courage, for the emotional and nervous system of every being and it connects us more than ever to our human condition, of work and quest to access worlds not easily reached.

Hopeful for a release from all this, and again on stage when the concerts resume, I will be able to measure

whether my work and my perseverance in solitude have given me more power to free myself and share the happiness of music with the people who came to hear me. I still don't know today how I will feel on the platform, after so many months of absence and audience deprivation, but I continue to prepare for it with a feeling of hope and simple good will.

And the audience will also have changed, will they listen differently? What a surprise awaits me, perhaps!

I return to the music of Beethoven, which is currently and for a long time my daily bread. What a joy to have Beethoven at such times, sometimes you have the impression that he is watching you and taking you by the hand to help you continue.

In his writing, there is a very frequent dynamic that is one of his characteristics:

This is the "Crescendo-piano".

We find this over and over again in all his works, and yet why

does crescendo lead to a piano? The only possibility of interpretation is to imagine that this crescendo cannot succeed, it leads to an impasse, an impossibility, and it is "A new instrument" which begins, in the piano nuance, a new beginning of sorts, like after an insurmountable limit.

And much in the same way, will this ordeal that we are living not prove to be, beyond all its victims and misfortunes, an obligation for every musician to wipe the slate clean, as a final warning and say something like: Ok, all will be fine, but only "provided that...".

And on top of everything else, after such a heavy and sad

time, we will have to try and come back from it with a certain lightness and good humor ... a bit like "the Return" of the famous Beethoven Sonata "Das Lebewohl", "Les Adieux" which celebrates a renewed Joy.

*Pierre Réach
January 2021*