

Why Do We Have A Chopin Festival?

“Now and then it’s good to pause in our pursuit of happiness and just be happy.”

- Guillaume Apollinaire, poet

As we begin our fifteenth Northwest Chopin Festival I think it might be a good idea for us to pause and reflect on just why we continue to present such an event. After all, the music we showcase in these festivals is nearly two centuries old, old enough to have been put to bed and forgotten long ago. The instrument upon which it’s performed has over the past few decades lost much of its once nearly universal popularity, and the extraordinary skill required to play this complicated machine has become increasingly rare. Ask many young people today about Frédéric Chopin and the response from most might be a blank stare or a shrug of indifference. Faced with such common unfamiliarity why would we persist in this effort?

First is our acknowledgement of the brilliance of Chopin’s music. We wish to recognize that his music is nearly universally acclaimed for its beauty, its accomplishment and refinement, and for how it demonstrates Chopin’s single-minded pursuit of the mastery of one particular instrument. We also wish to highlight how the appreciation and understanding of his art can serve to emphasize some of our highest shared human values. His music exemplifies some of the best of our feelings – love, tenderness, understanding, and hope. Its nobility is awe-inspiring and its spirituality can connect us to our common humanity. As the author, Roy T. Bennett once wrote, “Be the light that helps others see; it is what gives life its deepest significance.”

By celebrating our event we also wish to express our profound admiration for the mastery of teaching. We believe that imparting into the next generation a love for music and specifically, a love for the mastery of Chopin’s works is of prime importance. Our lives would not be possible without the inherently moral endeavor of those who spend their lives committed to the responsible educational development of children. We wish to honor those who encourage everyone to make the best of their capacities. The methods used by our teachers, however, can be of paramount consequence. Benjamin Franklin, a learned man if there ever was one, once wrote, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.” Going beyond teaching mere technique and introducing students to the world of musical discovery can represent the best in us and can confer a long-lasting gift to the next generation, one that pays many dividends to society as a whole.

We also wish to shine our spotlight on learning, and specifically, on the learning of music. Our festivals reveal to our community what’s possible for our young people.

Although we understand that there may be a rather narrow window of opportunity in life for those who wish to master the piano, we also acknowledge that learning, gaining insight into, and understanding music are all part of a life-long process that can be engaged at any age. It may be the reason an elderly Pablo Picasso once remarked, "It takes a long time to become young." Our organization's commitment is to promote the best artistic and academic activity among the young people of our community because we believe that a truly profound musical education can help refute inelegance and arrogance and foster more humility and understanding.

Not to be overlooked in our celebration is our endorsement of the wonderful commitment demonstrated by the parents of these students. Without their parents' sacrifice and dedication to the cause of developing musical skills among those in their families, our students could never succeed. We are reminded of the fact that Frédéric Chopin remained extraordinarily close to his family for his entire life and felt forever grateful for the support he received from them as a child. Our admiration for Chopin is partly an acknowledgement of his devotion to his family.

Just at the time Chopin was emerging into the wider world of music he began to understand his life would probably be shortened by his chronic disease. He had witnessed firsthand his youngest sister's tragic death. Faced with his unrelenting cough and weakened disposition he truly believed he wouldn't live long enough to see his musical ambitions fulfilled. That he persevered and succeeded despite his illness is one the most inspiring stories in music history. His example of smiling amid tears, embracing hope despite adversity, and his tenacity for life can give strength to us all.

These are simply some of the reasons we will continue to celebrate our talented students, their dedicated teachers, and the phenomenal music of Frédéric Chopin. Enjoy!

Steven Lagerberg