

Chopin at the University of Virginia

Dr. Robert Geraci



Frederic Chopin, portrait,
Eugene Delacroix, 1838

On September 16-19, 2010, the University of Virginia hosted a bicentennial celebration of the life and music of Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849). The event was organized by the Department of Music and the Center for Russian and East European Studies, with financial support primarily from the Page-Barbour Fund of the University of Virginia and the Fund established by the American Institute of Polish Culture for the Polish Lecture Series.

The highlights of the festival were two evening recitals of Chopin's piano music performed in the University's New Cabell Auditorium to audiences of several hundred members of the University and Charlottesville communities. On September 17, the American pianist Andrew Willis, professor of music at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro and a specialist in period instruments, performed on a piano from Chopin's day, an 1848 Pleyel grand. The program included the rarely-played *Bolero*, op. 19, and concluded with *Fantasy* in F minor, op. 49. After the performance, the audience was invited to the stage to try out the Pleyel for themselves.

The following evening, September 18, the performer was Roberto Poli, an Italian-born pianist who teaches at the Rivers School Conservatory in Weston, Massachusetts, and the New England Conservatory of Music. Poli reproduced the format of Chopin's final recital on February 16, 1848, using the day's convention of improvising links between the various pieces. The program included *Scherzo* in B-flat minor, op. 31, and *Ballade* in F minor, op. 52.

The scholarly portion of the conference featured several of the

world's most prominent Chopin experts. On September 17, Jeffrey Kallberg of the University of Pennsylvania delivered a keynote address on "Chopin's Time." A morning panel on September 18, "Chopin in Cultural-Historical Context," featured three speakers. Zofia Chechlinska, professor emerita of musicology at the Jagiellonian University, Krakow, spoke on "The Warsaw Music Scene and the Development of Chopin's Individuality." Jim Samson, professor of music at Royal Holloway, University of London, discussed "Chopin's Musical Education," and James Parakilas, professor of music at Bates College, delivered a talk called "Hearing Chopin as a Pole, Hearing Chopin as a Parisian," which explored the reception of Chopin's music in the context of national identities. Robert Geraci, associate professor of history and director of the Center for Russian and East European Studies, moderated.

On the afternoon of September 18, the discussion turned to issues facing pianists in performing Chopin. The panelists included the performers Andrew Willis and Roberto Poli, along with Mimi Tung, senior instructor in piano at the University of Virginia. Michael Puri, associate professor of music at the University of Virginia, moderated. The highlight of the panel was Roberto Poli's presentation of a ground-breaking interpretation of Chopin's dynamic and phrase markings, giving a preview of his book *The Secret Life of Musical Notation: Defying Interpretive Traditions* (Amadeus Press).

The festival also included a screening of the biographical film *Impromptu* (James Lapine, 1991) and analysis of various films about Chopin, by UVa professor of media studies Andrea Press. ☺