

The Magic of Romanticism in Piano Masterpieces

Michał Drewnowski's Concerts in Corpus Christi and Harlingen, Texas

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Michał Drewnowski during a concert in Corpus Christi, November 29, 2024, photo by Jacek Gwizdka

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Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka (*Austin, Texas*)

The excitement from Marek Drewnowski's October concert in Austin had barely settled when audiences in Texas had the opportunity to admire another outstanding pianist. On November 29 and 30, 2024, Michał Drewnowski, son of Marek Drewnowski and a representative of the younger generation of Polish pianists, performed in Corpus Christi and Harlingen. Educated in Poland and Italy, Michał continues his father's musical legacy while forging his own unique artistic path.

- „Michał is the best of my students,” emphasizes Marek Drewnowski with pride at every opportunity.

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Chopin and Liszt

Michał Drewnowski's concert in Corpus Christi took place in the majestic interior of St. Pius X Church, while in Harlingen, the artist performed at the Cultural Arts Center. I had the pleasure of attending the first of these events. The vast space of the church initially raised my concerns—would the sound of the piano be overwhelmed in such an expansive setting? Fortunately, Michał Drewnowski handled it brilliantly, and his expressive playing enchanted the audience, perfectly filling the space with music.

The first part of the concert was dedicated to the music of Fryderyk Chopin, with Michał Drewnowski's interpretations bringing freshness and new expression. Although these pieces are well-known and often heard, the artist managed to capture the audience's attention and immerse them in a mood filled with emotion.

The evening began with two *Nocturnes, Op. 9*, in B-flat minor and E-flat minor—some of Chopin's earliest works. These lyrical and contemplative pieces were performed with great sensitivity, as Michał Drewnowski brought out their emotions, painting musical pictures full of delicacy and reflection.

Next came *Introduction and Rondo in E-flat Major, Op. 16*, a piece requiring both virtuosity and narrative freedom from the performer. The pianist effortlessly

combined technical perfection with musical energy, showcasing both the finesse of the composer and his own interpretative mastery.

In the *Mazurkas Op. 33* performed by the pianist, one could hear the characteristic rhythm and references to Polish folklore. The mazurkas in G-sharp minor, D major, C major, and B minor resounded like a kaleidoscope of emotions—from joyful lightness to melancholic reflection.

The first part of the concert concluded with the monumental *Scherzo in C-sharp Minor, Op. 39*—a work full of drama. The artist led the audience through intense contrasts—from quiet, mysterious whispers to powerful, almost symphonic sounds that took their breath away.

After the intermission, Michał Drewnowski presented a piano transcription of *Isolde's Liebestod* from Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, arranged by Franz Liszt. In this piece, the artist conveyed both the tragedy and the love of Isolde. The performance was filled with drama, a challenging feat when relying on the sound of a single instrument rather than the broad palette of means available in a stage production.

The evening's climax was the monumental *Sonata in B Minor* by Franz Liszt—a masterpiece combining philosophical depth, virtuosic challenges, and profound narrative. The pianist masterfully guided the audience through shifting moods, from intimate confessions to tempestuous explosions and a triumphant conclusion.

During the performance of this sonata, it was impossible to tear oneself away from the music. I closed my eyes, barely daring to breathe, afraid of missing even a single note. The hall was enveloped in absolute silence. I will long remember the sound of this sonata in Michał Drewnowski's virtuosic rendition.

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Michał Drewnowski, photo by Jacek Gwizdka



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An artist of international renown

Michał Drewnowski is a mature pianist who has achieved success on the international music stage. His artistic achievements include performances in numerous European countries such as Italy, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Bulgaria, England, Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, Denmark, and Finland. The artist has performed in prestigious concert halls such as Wigmore Hall in London and Palau de la Música Catalana in Barcelona. His participation in renowned music festivals, including the Chopin Festival in Geneva and the Bolzano Piano Festival, has cemented his position as one of the most compelling pianists of his generation.

Like his father, who portrayed Fryderyk Chopin in Krzysztof Zanussi's film *Chopin's Concerto* (screened during Marek Drewnowski's October concert in Austin), Michał also has acting experience. From 1999 to 2002, he performed at the New Theatre in Warsaw in Adam Hanuszkiewicz's production *Chopin: His Life, His Love, His Music...*, in which he played the role of Fryderyk Chopin. In 2018, Michał portrayed Ignacy Jan Paderewski in the production *Paderewski, the Pianist Who Became Prime Minister*, directed by Jessica Dalle, at Opera Lorraine in Nancy.

The artist also stands out as a promoter of the music of lesser-known Polish composers. A special place in his repertoire is occupied by Tadeusz Majerski, a Polish composer and pianist born in Lviv (1888-1963), who was one of the first Polish dodecaphonists, combining twelve-tone technique with folklore and emotional expression. Majerski became the subject of Michał's doctoral dissertation. Additionally, Drewnowski revives the memory of artists such as Ludwik Grossmann, Jadwiga Sarnecka, and Stefan Kisielewski, promoting their work on the international stage.

Currently, Michał Drewnowski is an assistant professor at the Grażyna and Kiejstut Bacewicz Academy of Music in Łódź. Through the Kosciuszko Foundation's exchange program, he also serves as a visiting professor at the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University.

His concert and teaching activities, along with his dedication to promoting Poland's musical heritage, make him a true ambassador of Polish culture worldwide.

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Michał Drewnowski, photo by Jacek Gwizdka



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Mission of the Fryderyk Chopin Society of Texas

The concerts by Michał Drewnowski in Corpus Christi and Harlingen were part of a concert series organized by the Fryderyk Chopin Society of Texas. Founded in 1989, this organization is dedicated to classical music enthusiasts in South Texas and provides the local audience with performances of the highest quality.

Each year, the Society organizes recitals by outstanding, award-winning pianists who promote the works of Fryderyk Chopin and other piano composers. A significant aspect of the Fryderyk Chopin Society of Texas's activities is its piano competitions

for young artists, which offer opportunities for the development of emerging talents.

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Pianist Nina Drath - The Heart of the Society

The president, founder, and main inspiration behind the Society is Nina Drath, a pianist of international renown. For years, she has passionately dedicated herself to promoting the music of Fryderyk Chopin in Texas, combining her artistic expertise with organizational efforts. Nina Drath is the daughter of Dr. Jan Bogdan Drath (d. 2016), a concert pianist and music professor at Texas A&M University-Kingsville, where he taught generations of students for nearly 40 years. Assisting Nina Drath in organizing cultural events are her husband, Jerzy Nowicki, and their son, Jan Nowicki, a sound engineer working at the School of Music at Texas State University in San Marcos.

The Fryderyk Chopin Society of Texas remains one of the most important institutions promoting classical music in the region, contributing to the development of the local artistic scene and the international promotion of Polish musical culture.

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Michał Drewnowski, photo by Jacek Gwizdka

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Biography:

Michał Drewnowski

Born in 1977, Michał Drewnowski began his piano journey in Italy at the age of eight, under the guidance of his father. Upon returning to Poland, he continued his education at the Karol Szymanowski Secondary School of Music in Warsaw, studying under renowned teachers Bronisława Kawalla and Ewa Pobłocka. In 2001, he graduated with honors from the Academy of Music in Łódź, where he studied piano under his father.

Between 2002 and 2005, he further honed his skills at the Geneva Conservatory of Music, studying with Dominique Merlet and Pascal Devoyon, earning a diploma with distinction. His musical development was enriched by masterclasses with eminent pianists such as Naum Shtarkman, Miłosz Magin, Fou T'song, Rudolf Kehrer, and Eugen Indjic.

Michał Drewnowski is the recipient of numerous prestigious awards, including a special prize at the First International Competition for Musical Individualities in Łódź (1996), First Prize at the 13th Kiejstut Bacewicz Chamber Music Competition in Łódź (1998), and Second Prize at the International Mascia Masin Piano Competition in San Gemini, Italy (2000).

As a pianist, Michał Drewnowski has performed worldwide, collaborating with esteemed orchestras such as the Polish Radio Orchestra, Chopin Philharmonic Orchestra, Shumen Sinfonietta, Odessa Philharmonic Orchestra, Lviv Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. He has played under the baton of distinguished conductors, including Massimiliano Caldi, Emil Tabakov, Emilian Madey, Tadeusz Kozłowski, Monika Wolińska, Stanislav Oushev, and Ruben Silva.

Michał's discography includes recordings for renowned labels such as GEGA NEW, DUX, and PRO ART, featuring works for two pianos and percussion, compositions by American and Latin American composers, as well as contemporary Swiss composers.

He is a co-founder of the New Art Radio Philharmonic, where he has served as Artistic Director since 2009. Since 2008, Michał Drewnowski has been an assistant professor at the Grażyna and Kiejstut Bacewicz Academy of Music in Łódź.

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Nina Drath

Nina Drath is a Polish pianist renowned for her exceptional interpretations of Fryderyk Chopin's works. She began her musical education at the age of four in Katowice under the guidance of Wanda Chmielowska, quickly demonstrating extraordinary talent. By the age of eleven, she was performing internationally,

including in Czechoslovakia, where she made her first radio recordings.

She continued her studies at the Fryderyk Chopin University of Music in Warsaw under the tutelage of the distinguished pianist Regina Smendzianka, earning a Master's degree in piano performance. In 1980, she completed the Virtuoso Studies Program, refining her skills and developing a distinctive interpretative style.

From 1975 to 1980, Nina Drath performed with renowned symphony orchestras in Frankfurt and Leipzig, earning acclaim from both audiences and critics. During this period, she also participated in international piano competitions, achieving significant success. She won prizes at the Paloma O'Shea Piano Competition in Spain (1976) and the International Piano Competition in Senigallia, Italy (1979). In 1979, she triumphed in the Polish Piano Competition in Słupsk.

Her discography includes recordings of works by Fryderyk Chopin, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and contemporary composers such as Peter Petroff from San Antonio.

Nina Drath maintained an active concert career worldwide. Between 1994 and 1996, she performed at prestigious festivals, including the Piano Festival in Venice, and led masterclasses at the Academia Ducale in Genoa, as well as in Poland, the Netherlands, and the United States.

In 2006, as a cultural ambassador, she performed with the Lebanese National Symphony Orchestra in Beirut, playing Leonard Bernstein's *The Age of Anxiety*. The following year, she continued her European tours, with concerts in Italy and Belgium.

Nina Drath's work encompasses solo and chamber music performances, as well as leading masterclasses, making her a prominent figure in the world of classical music. Her dedication to promoting Chopin's legacy and her pedagogical efforts have contributed to the development of many young talents and the global appreciation of Polish music.

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Dr. Jan Bogdan Drath

Dr. Jan Bogdan Drath was a distinguished concert pianist and professor of music at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. His artistic and pedagogical career left a significant mark on the world of classical music, both in the United States and internationally.

He graduated from the Academy of Music in Katowice, earning an artistic diploma and a master's degree. He then pursued doctoral studies at the Academies of Music in Kraków and Warsaw, where he obtained the title of docent. He further solidified his credentials by earning a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from North Texas State University, establishing himself as an exceptional artist and scholar.

At the age of sixteen, he made his debut performing Franz Liszt's *Piano Concerto*, marking the beginning of a rich concert career. Dr. Drath performed across Europe, Asia, the United States, and Mexico, offering solo recitals, concerts with orchestras, and participating in radio and television programs.

Dr. Drath was also a respected music editor. In 1980, he published two significant works at Texas A&I University: *Waltzes of Fryderyk Chopin: Sources, Vol. 1* and *Waltzes Published during Chopin's Lifetime*. These contributions were pivotal in advancing research on Chopin's works and early keyboard music.

In 1980, he founded the Annual Chopin Workshop at Texas A&M University-Kingsville, which he directed for many years. This initiative became an important center for education and the promotion of Fryderyk Chopin's works in the United States.

As an educator, Dr. Jan Bogdan Drath profoundly influenced the lives of many young musicians, including both his students and music teachers across the country. He was not only a mentor but also an inspiration for generations of artists who benefited from his knowledge, passion, and experience.

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Sources:

Fryderyk Chopin Society of Texas

fryderykchopinsocietyoftexas.org

Amuz Lodz

Piano Forte Chicago

CKIS Kalisz

Map of Composers

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See also:

The Wisdom of a Great Master

Masterful Recital by Marek Drewnowski in Austin