

Liner notes for *Raindrop: Improvisations with Chopin*

When Deanna Witkowski first announced this project, she gave it a descriptive title: “This is NOT ‘jazzy Chopin.’” Smart move: for while many jazz artists have found resonance in Chopin’s music, with some even attempting to find common ground, the track record is not promising. But from her initial description, Witkowski made clear her intent to distance herself from less inspired predecessors - the ones that think it sufficient, say, to append a swing beat to a note-perfect version of Chopin’s “Funeral March” (his Prelude No. 20 in C Minor) and call it “jazz.”

As it turns out, the Prelude in C Minor does appear on this album, in an arrangement that surreptitiously introduces another melody and artfully blurs the line between idioms. And by the time Witkowski has finished - having fused the Prelude with Antonio Carlos Jobim’s “Olha Maria” - something entirely new has emerged: part Chopin, part Jobim, part Witkowski. “I was trying to find something that would fit the same mood,” she says to explain her choice of “Olha Maria” (“Look, Maria”). “It’s not really related at all, except that a lot of Jobim’s harmony moves chromatically - which is similar to Chopin.”

Importing a song from Brazil comes naturally to Witkowski, who has studied Brazilian music extensively; more importantly, it also befits the material. In the 60s, Jobim’s bossa nova found a model in Chopin. In the most obvious example, “Insensatez” (known in English as “How Insensitive”), Jobim built a new melody directly upon the harmonic foundation of Chopin’s Prelude No. 4 in E minor, and made no bones about it. Since then, it has become something of a cliché to play the songs together, either as a small medley or even superimposing one above the other. But Witkowski didn’t want it “to feel like, ‘Here’s the classical thing, here’s the jazz thing, here’s the Brazilian thing.’” Instead, she manages to find a middle ground among these two compositions and three idioms, weaving them into one seamless fabric.

As if to prove her deep immersion in Chopin’s ethos, Witkowski has peppered the program with several pieces of her own, which nestle comfortably among those of the iconic 19th-century Romanticist. But proving her fidelity to the jazz aesthetic, she freely improvised these pieces on the spot. She had not planned to record them. However, moved by a motif in the closing measures of the Nocturne in E-Flat Major (and encouraged by the response of the piano she was playing) she spontaneously decided to create these short originals, which add variety without veering into mere eclecticism.

Throughout this album, Witkowski treats Chopin's work with respect but not reverence, adding harmonic extensions to the original chords and improvised passages where none previously existed. It begs the question: What would Chopin himself have thought of all this? Unlike composers such as Bach and Beethoven, Chopin is not known to have improvised in public. How might he react to this project?

Witkowski can't really say, but she'll hazard an informed guess. "I've read a bunch of his letters, and they contain some conflicting things. There's some stuff about how he actually improvised a lot; but I know he didn't like playing in huge halls. On the other hand, I've read how he would work on a line for hours and hours before he finally wrote it down; and some of his pieces almost seem to me like they were written as improvisations."

That helps explain the subtitle of this album, *Improvisations With Chopin*. But from my perspective, this music chronicles a conversation, across continents and centuries, between simpatico musical souls. You may come to share that perspective as well.

-NEIL TESSER, 2013 GRAMMY Award winner for liner-note writing