

The Royal Gazette

Masterful playing at Piano Festival

Michael Jones, Review

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Outstanding entertainment: the audience at Masterworks enjoys the Bermuda Piano Festival (Photograph supplied by Antoine Hunt)

Bermuda Piano Festival, Concert 1
Alex Tuchman, artistic director
Masterwork Museum of Bermuda Art

June 18, 2024

This concert was dedicated by Alex Tuchman to the memory of the late Norman Brown, much loved local musician and teacher. The music consisted of four contrasting pieces.

First was Gabriel Faure's *Dolly Suite*, dedicated to his daughter, Regina-Helene Bardac. It was played four hands style by Eteri Andjaparidze and Alex Tuchman.

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The first movement, *Berceuse*, gave me a strong jolt of Proustian involuntary memory. The tune was used by the BBC from 1950 as an intro for the children's programme *Listen with Mother* and it took me straight back to my own childhood, even down to the furniture in my nursery and the radio I listened to.

There was in fact something childlike about the whole suite; a charming clumsiness and a lovingly observed off-tempo-ness like a toddler's first steps.

Debussy's *Estampes* were next played by Inga Kashakashvili with technical perfection and deep emotional rapport. *Pagodes* and *Soiree dans Grenade* were beautiful impressions of far -Eastern architecture and Moorish/Christian culture.

But the third piece, *Jardins Sous La Pluie*, took us beyond impressionism and into what could only be musical pointillisme. Debussy seemed to be accounting for the trajectory of every single raindrop in this overwhelming deluge, masterfully controlled by Kashakashvili.

Francis Poulenc's 1962 *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* was performed by Pavel Vinnitsky and Vladimir Rumyantsev and was in itself somehow self-contradictory, and all the more interesting because of this.

Clarinet and piano started off squaring off and almost trying to out-do each other. This changed rapidly into a jaunty, witty series of dialogues with a rather hauntingly sad side to them. In the slow middle movement I was reminded of early Jacques Brel ballads. The up-tempo Allegro had a witty, humorous, almost fairground sound to it, a bit like a Fellini film finale.

Vinnitsky and Rumyantsev gave a masterful and technically perfect performance of this difficult work that I don't think has ever been played in Bermuda.

Ravel's 1908 trilogy *Gaspard de la Nuit*, played on solo piano by Vladimir Rumyantsev completed the evening. The three pieces were thematically disjointed but all contrived to convey different senses of nightmarish foreboding and morbid activity.

In the first, a scantily dressed water nymph, Ondine, tried to lure us into joining her in her domain beneath the waves by brushing raindrops on our window pane and calling to us. The music consists of a series of continual overlapping Debussy-style water ripples.

Le Gibet was a revisitation of Villon's 1489 Ballade des Pendus. A hanging corpse in the setting sun's rays and a tolling funeral bell formed a sinister pair of images designed to create a sense of dread.

The final movement, Scarbo, described the frenetic activities of a demon flickering in and out of existence who sowed fear and doubt, sometimes performing demented dances or carrying out poltergeist type tricks to unnerve us.

Full of false endings and played at preternatural speed, Scarbo must be one of the most challenging pieces in the repertory. Rumyantsev played magnificently and brought the evening to a brilliant close.

Concert 2

Alex Tuchman, artistic director
Masterworks Museum of Bermuda Art

June 20, 2024

Tuchman played Prokofiev's Ten Pieces Op 12 with perfect expression and technique. The pieces were composed between 1906 and 1910 so we were listening to the output of the Ukrainian prodigy turned teenager.

The composition looked like a baroque chamber suite by Bach or Weiss with the usual dance movements (March, Gavotte, Rigaudon, Mazurka, Allemande). But the composer used a jokey zaniness which stretched these old forms almost beyond recognition. The March was laughably, discordantly pompous. The Allemande was both discordant and burlesque. The Mazurka was like a syncopated rag.

Further on, Prokofiev changed style again. Movement six (Legend) was a deadly serious, Schumann-like mystical narrative. Folk melodies rang out like anthems through movements eight and nine and the final Scherzo was an impossible Prisiadki dance.

We next heard a world premiere. George Oakley introduced his own 2024 composition, Elements. Each movement was meant to reflect an elemental aspect of Bermuda's physical presence allied to the composer's own musical heritage, from Georgia, Russia.

The work was played by Alex Tuchman. First, Earth. This was a series of chords over a walking type bass which resembled a Gershwin melody. A violent bass riff introduced a series of treble cascades.

Ocean, explained Oakley, reflected Bermuda's oceanic beauty and also evoked Asian geology and Georgian mountain folk music, called Tushuri.

The Bermuda equivalent folk music was maybe popular music such as rock and roll. Mystical chords with folksong melodies morphed into piano riffs like Jerry-Lee Lewis's or the early Richard Penniman's, all played with superb technique by Tuchman.

Air explored the composer's most intimate soul with a Wittgenstein proviso: "Whereof we cannot speak, one must be silent."

Accordingly, there were patches of strategic silence written into the composition, giving us the sense of a narrator unveiling his most intimate thoughts and then suddenly, inexplicably, breaking off in mid-sentence.

Finally, Flame. Oakley explained that the piece embodied contrary processes: Flames consume but also portend the infinite. Accordingly the piece started off with a sprite-like dancing flame which ignited its surroundings and gradually built to a shattering fortissimo climax.

The evening finished with Beethoven's three-movement Gassenhauer (Pop song)' Trio in B-flat Major for Clarinet, Cello and Piano, Op.11 played by Pavel Vinnitsky (clarinet), Sumire Kudo (cello) and Tuchman (piano).

In this music we met young, emerging Beethoven at his most jovial, exuberant and playful. His trio was a strict democracy with each instrument sharing solo and supporting time. In the Allegro the atmosphere was Viennese, elegant and cheeky. It captured the atmosphere of Haydn's early string trios with conventional yet unexpected phrases.

In the Adagio, Kudo opened with a beautiful melody gradually changing to the relative minor. The final movement was series of variations on the song Pria ch'io l'impegno (Before I go to work), a hugely popular song of the day and a guaranteed audience draw for the young composer.

Beethoven used this movement to show off his prodigious keyboard technique and facility, ending on what sounded like a march in prestissimo triple time.

Piano Festival ends in style

Mike Jones, Review

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Musical marvel: the Bermuda Piano Festival featured some stellar performances (Photograph supplied)

Concert 3

Alex Tuchman, artistic director
Masterworks Museum of Bermuda Art

June 22, 2024

My knowledge of the works of avant-garde Hungarian composer Gyorgy Ligeti (1923-2006) was limited to music in Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey and his free-form composition Atmospheres, which was beautifully constructed white noise.

This concert opened with his very different Five Pieces for Piano four hands played by Vladimir Rumyantsev and Eteri Andjaparidze.

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The March began conventionally enough with slightly tongue in cheek martial triumphalism but then just faded out. The Polyphonic Etude was a study in counterpoint which ended suddenly with a bang. Three Wedding Dances consisted of two wonderful Brueghelian knees-ups, framing a rather sad ballad-like tune.

The Sonatina and Allegro both finished with unexpected endings, a bit like an opera singer laboriously drawing breath then walking offstage. Rumyantsev and Andjaparidze were the perfect team for this tricky and thoroughly enjoyable music.

Andjaparidze was then joined by her student Svetlana Egorova in the fittingly chosen Haydn's *Il maestro e lo scolare* (Teacher and student). The work was a series of exercises in the form of variations; the teacher played each phrase on the bass and the student copied it in the upper register. Each eight-bar section was different and presented increasing challenges. Haydn was a master of this form and his sense of fun shone through these delightful exercises, all of which Egorova played perfectly.

Schumann's 1851 *Five Pieces in Folk Style* played by Inga Kashakasvili with Sumire Kudo on cello represented another contrast in the programme. Kudo's cello played multiple roles. In the first piece (*Vanity of Vanities*) it sounded like a slightly drunken voice overheard in a public bar, butting in and cutting off other conversations. In the second (*Slowly*) it took on a singing voice in an intensely lyrical, romantic melody which could pass for ballet music. In the third and fourth (*Not Too Fast and Strongly Marked*) Kudo played folk ballad melodies, ending with dramatic, percussive bass.

Italian composer Nino Rota's 1973 *Trio for Clarinet, Cello and Piano* was played by Pavel Vinnitsky (clarinet), Sumire Kudo (cello), and Alex Tuchman (piano).

Rota's music is best known for its part in Fellini's films. It is public parade music and this trio started with *Allegro*, a marching oompah piano bass under Vinnitsky' brilliant, insouciant melody, soon joined by Kudo's cello.

The energetic pace continued into the *Andante* with a more flighty, lyrical clarinet over cello shimmer. The final *Allegro* picked up the melody and then moved the whole trio slowly up tempo, ending with all instruments performing at impossible speed.

Tuchman and his team are to be congratulated, not only for bringing us this wonderful music gratis, but also for their work (also gratis) to help students with master classes and private lessons at the Bermuda School of Music.

• *Donations to the Bermuda Piano Festival can be made via the Masterworks Foundation*
