

Chopin marathon bypasses fatigue

By Avigdor Zoromp
special writer

The Lyric Chamber Ensemble reached another milestone with its second annual Piano Festival. It featured some of the best Michigan pianists to a full audience at Orchestra Hall.

Finding the Michigan pianists was easy — several could hold their own in the company of their distinguished, professional colleagues. Coordinating and organizing the event was, of course, a far greater challenge. The ultimate achievement, the event itself, consisting of two successive afternoon programs, was dedicated almost exclusively to the music of Chopin.



Avigdor Zoromp

Four hours of Chopin — that's something that even diehard Chopin fans might consider an overdose. This was my initial reaction, especially since Chopin wrote for only one instrument.

This event effectively demonstrated such concerns were unfounded. For one thing, there were seven pianists participating, in addition to smaller roles by musicians on other instruments. The approaches were almost as varied as the participating musicians — with all of them being valid artistic interpretations.

The participating pianists were Fedora Horowitz, who is also the artistic director of the series, Joseph

and Michael Gurt (father and son), Miska Kotler, Plavin Varani, Louis Nagel and Karen Walwin.

Other instrumentalists were flutist Shaul Ben-Meir, cellist Marcy Chanteaux, soprano Ernestine Nimmons, and physician-pianist Dood Lee in the final simultaneous exhibition by all eight pianists.

While four hours of Chopin may seem like a lot, only a small fraction of his music was represented. His four scherzi, were presented in the first program by Joseph Gurt, Varani, Horowitz and Michael Gurt, in that order. Scherzo No. 2, which is the probably the most often played, was presented with a more penetrating approach here by Varani than many other performances of it that I

heard (and this comparison applies only to such other performances — not to participants of this event).

Another impressive performance of an oft-played selection was that of the Barcarolle, in which Fedora Horowitz was successful in achieving a sense of dynamic variety. Kotler, who at the age of 91 is considered a living legend, inspired the audience with a nocturne, an impromptu and ballade (No. 3) in the first program. He received a standing ovation following the challenging Fantasy in F minor in the second program.

Among the rare Chopin works on this program were the virtuosic variations for the flute on Rossini's theme from "La Cenerentola," the

Polonaise Brillante for Cello and Piano and two Polish songs, sung in English by Nimmons with another song in French.

While fatigue can be expected as such a challenging program progresses, the opposite happened. The level of excitement and energy kept increasing, culminating in an exhibition of unabashed fun in the arrangement of Chopin's famous "Military" polonaise for four pianos, 16 hands.

This inspired arrangement, by Michael Gurt, borrowed some other Chopin themes and ideas from elsewhere for good measure. An encore presentation of "Stars and Stripes Forever," again with the full group, concluded this most exciting event.

Lafayette Quartet soars to great heights

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special writer

What makes some artists superior to others? If we knew the answer to that, many of us could become accomplished artists by simply learning and sticking by some basic rules.

Among these would be correct technique, few if any wrong notes and hopefully going through the motions of some dynamic and stylistic conventions.

While these are important ingredients in the art of performance, the elevated form of art is far above these elementary considerations. The Lafayette String Quartet is one of the few groups of its kind that has

attained a level far above these objectives. This was demonstrated again at Varter Hall, Oakland University, last Sunday.

An unconventional work on this program was by Ruth Crawford (1901-1953), an Ohio native who composed her short string quartet in 1931. Being admittedly prejudiced against many 20th century works, especially those by unfamiliar composers, I was anticipating another experiment in ugly dissonances and noises that pass for music. However, I was pleasantly surprised.

FOLLOWING An introduction from the stage explaining the work's structure, the performance made far more sense than most 20th century

review

works that are forcibly shoved into the ears of reluctant listeners. Few are the artists who would admit, however, that on some occasions the spoken word is, indeed, helpful in establishing artistic communication.

The other two more established works on this program were quartets by Haydn and Schubert. Of these, Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" is the better known. Haydn's Quartet Op. 33 No. 2 is nicknamed "The Joke," due to its unexpected pauses

between fragments of the theme in the final movement.

It was in these works that one could feel the sense of elevation. The Lafayette has performed this Haydn Quartet in the past. Given the fact that Haydn wrote more than 80 quartets, much of this material is unknown to most listeners and critics. This performance was different than many others of a Haydn Quartet, which one tends to hear, enjoy and forget.

It was one of the few occasions in which this music assumed a definitive identity, as opposed to a random faceless object picked from a large file. This sense of identity was a tribute to the artistic, penetrating approach, rather than just a consequence of some familiarity of the themes.

AMONG THE MANY performances of Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" Quartet that I have heard, few had an impact as intense as in this performance. While it is possible to reproduce some of the drama in this music by producing some pre-calculated sound effects — placing the accents in the right spots and

knowing when a crescendo is due — such an effect wouldn't approach the impact of an artistically inspired performance.

To be sure, the members of the Lafayette Quartet are technically proficient and well disciplined, which enables them to produce string chords that are clean and impressively coordinated. But it is their deep perception of the music that makes the difference between this and a routine performance.

The Lafayette Quartet, recently returned from a debut in New York, received a critical acclaim in the New York Times. This group may not need my reviews anymore, but I am looking forward to their next performance.

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