

Online Friday, July 25, 2008


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Music, poetry, nature merge at Newport Music Festival 

Concert shows off versatility of pair of Russian composers 

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Special to The Daily News



NEWPORT — The aptly named “Vodka and Caviar” Newport Music Festival concert at The Elms on Thursday presented an elegant salon-style feast of romantic Russian piano music, served in fine style by three accomplished pianists.

Only two composers were on the bill for the entire program, but when those composers are Modest Mussorgsky and Alexander Scriabin, no others are needed to fill a late morning with delectable morsels of musical fare.

Both composers are well known for their larger and more epic works — Mussorgsky for his “Pictures at an Exhibition,” the opera “Boris Godunov” and “Night on the Bare Mountain” (often titled “Night on Bald Mountain”), which some of you may associate with wannabe sorcerer Mickey Mouse in Walt Disney’s “Fantasia.” Scriabin holds sway with his “new” music of the early 20th century, such as the electrifying “Poem of Ecstasy,” “Prometheus, The Poem of Fire” and his many sonatas.

What works so beautifully in a recital such as the one at The Elms, is that you have the opportunity to hear lesser-known selections of the artists. The concert’s three sections each were comprised of several short selections, illustrating the range and diversity of the two composers.

The works were like turning the pages of a book to “hear” poetry; the pieces built visuals, created moods and allowed listeners to experience another place and time.

Pianist Daniel del Pino opened with seven works by Mussorgsky, spanning the years from 1857-65. The pieces varied from a bouncy “Scherzo in C Sharp Minor” with lively, almost folk-like passages, to an “Impromptu Passionné” with melodic strains.

“Nyanya I Ya” (Nanny and I) from “Memories of Childhood No. 1” truly

evoked the playful childlike quality befitting its title. It was a good lead-in to a companion piece titled “First Punishment: Nanny Shuts Me in a Dark Room.” The strident and loud beginning of the piece and its subsequent furious keying was evocative of great emotion, clearly mirroring the child’s fear and anger at his predicament. Del Pino’s playing was so compelling that at the conclusion of the short piece, the audience spontaneously erupted into applause even though the program had not finished.

At the conclusion of the works, del Pino, who is listed in the festival program as “one of the most important Spanish concert pianists on the international scene,” was loudly applauded by the Newport scene.

Pianist Grigorios Zamparas opened the Mussorgsky pieces that fell between the years of 1871 and 1880 with a light-hearted Scherzino. Mother Nature also decided to perform as thunder rumbled in the background, daylight dimmed theatrically, and finally the sound of heavy rain contrasted with the soft notes of the selection’s ending.

A sprightly parade-like festive air pervaded “Hopak,” from the Opera “Sorochintsy Fair.” Somehow, the smell of wet grass and earth that wafted into the ornate room complemented the “Fair,” and the dark sky and thunder — appropriate for the romantic Russian selections — became part of the performances themselves.

The “Capriccio” began with march-like and repetitious musical notation, then opened to more melodic strains, softly backgrounded by the march-like air. The piece was a good contrast to what followed — a meditation (“Meditáció”). This gentle reverie paired beautifully with the insistent heavy rain, creating a meld of nature and art to sooth the spirit.

Zamparas’ playing did more than justice to Mussorgsky’s compositions, and the audience responded accordingly.

Scriabin’s “Twenty Four Preludes, Op. 11,” rounded out the morning’s concert. Played by pianist John Lenehan, the initial preludes flowed pleasantly into one another with the barest of pauses separating them. “No. 5 in D Major, Andante Cantabile,” was sweetly serene, contrasting sharply with the passion of “No. 6 in B Minor, Allegro,” which followed.

Succeeding preludes were lulling and pleasant. However, when the “No. 14 in E Flat Minor, Presto,” barged in, it gave a small taste of the forceful, intense and provocative Scriabin who presented a puzzlement to many of his contemporaries. Often reviled in his day for what were considered extraordinary views of both life and music, he was in fact a futurist who wouldn’t even be noticed in today’s world.

“No. 18 in F Minor, Allegro agitato,” was broad and massive, subsiding into a quietude that gave way to sweepingly melodic passages in the following prelude (“No. 19 in E Flat”), which in turn carried the listener into the heart of the patently romantic — but very short — Appassionato (“No. 20 in C Minor”).

Hearing the 24 preludes together gave a sense of Scriabin’s versatility, the variation in his techniques and the range of his artistry. Lenehan’s handling of them was aesthetically satisfying and artful.

Altogether, this was a concert that deserved a hearty Russian toast to all the performers: “Za Vas!” (“To You!”)