

SF Concerts Examiner

A voice for every instrument

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Composer Peter Klatzow (from his Web site)

The final Faculty Chamber Music Concert of the InterHarmony International Music Festival at San Francisco State University offered sonatas for violin, viola, and cello, concluding with a piano trio.

The evening began with violinist David Yonan performing Claude Debussy's 1917 sonata in G minor, accompanied by pianist Leslie Amper. For those who heard Sarah Hong perform Debussy's 1915 cello sonata at the end of last month, Yonan's offering provided a useful complement. If the earlier work may have provided a programmatic opportunity for Debussy to twit Arnold Schoenberg, the target of the later work could well be the very concept of sonata (which, in his essays, probably annoyed Debussy more than Schoenberg did). From a rhetorical point of view, the violin sonata is more like the poetry of Debussy's time, seeking new modes of expression through capabilities of language previously unexplored, than like a sonata. Much of it gives the sense of a free-associating dramatic monologue, almost wandering in and out of different topics. Yonan caught this "monologue spirit:" nicely, while effortlessly taking on Debussy's demands, many of which had more to do with sonorities than with thematic content. Debussy may have been frustrated with the sonata tradition, but he took his work too seriously to make the sonata an object of ridicule. Yonan served as an excellent representative of Debussy's seriousness of purpose.

Festival Director Misha Quint followed Yonan with a performance of Dmitri Shostakovich's 1934 cello sonata in D minor (Opus 40), accompanied by pianist Dmitriy Cogan. While Debussy's sonata was one of his last works, Shostakovich composed this sonata at a time when he had begun to find his voice and was still free to exercise it. By way of context, 1934 was also the year of the first performance of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, completed in 1932, which would lead to his first denunciation by the Soviet government for being both too formalist and too vulgar at the same time. (The Wikipedia entry for Shostakovich suggests that Stalin himself may have been behind this denunciation.) The sonata certainly lacks the opera's vulgarity, but it still reveals Shostakovich's sardonic approach to taking conventional idioms and distorting them into almost embarrassing clichés. While the work begins with what sounds like a

nostalgic longing for the chamber music of Gabriel Fauré (an example of which Quint had performed at his recital to open the Festival), Shostakovich wastes little time in hurling into the sharp contrasts of his present, usually making it clear that he did not see this as a change for the better. However, as he had done with his Fauré performance, Quint let the music speak for itself; and, for all of its sharp edges, it spoke very eloquently indeed.

After the intermission the viola offering was presented by Claudia Lasareff-Mironoff, and the sonata she performed was unaccompanied. It was the United States premiere of a 2008 sonata by the South African composer Peter Klatzow. As had been the case with the Debussy sonata, its three movements were concerned more with setting moods, this time stated explicitly in their titles (Stillness and disruption, Fear, Release and resolution). The sonata was written in memory of the Russian violist Oleg Alexseyev, who had emigrated to South Africa in the nineties and died in a plane crash in 2007. The movement titles suggest a program somewhat in the spirit of Richard Strauss' "Death and Transfiguration;" but the music is more connotative than denotative. Lasareff-Mironoff approached the moods of Klatzow's movements with a clarity of expression, but it is difficult to say much about this sonata on the basis of a single listening. It definitely deserves more performances, and hopefully it will come to the attention of the many excellent violists we have in the Bay Area.

Before the concluding piano trio Yonan treated the audience to a "preemptive" encore in the form of a set of variations on an original theme composed in 1870 by Henryk Wieniawski (his Opus 15). In many ways Wieniawski offered a late nineteenth-century reaction to the technical demands concocted by Niccolò Paganini and the over-the-top embellishments of Franz Liszt. One might almost accuse Yonan of trying to recover the spotlight from Tien Hsieh after her dazzling Liszt performances at the first Faculty Chamber Music Concert. If this was the case, he was hardly mean-spirited about it, simply demonstrating that violinists can jump through flaming hoops as well as pianists without trying to overstate his case. (I almost chose the verb "overplay;" but, to a great extent, overplaying is the name of the game that both Liszt and Wieniawski were engaging!)

The piano trio that concluded the evening was Sergei Rachmaninoff's first effort in this genre. It was composed in 1892, after he had met Piotr Tchaikovsky in Moscow and before Tchaikovsky's death in 1893. The Wikipedia entry for Rachmaninoff describes Tchaikovsky as "an important mentor;" and it is clear that this trio is the work of a faithful student eager to please. Its single G minor movement is very much a reflection on the opening movement of Tchaikovsky's own A minor trio (Opus 50), although Rachmaninoff wastes no time in taking his reflections down paths

Tchaikovsky would not have considered. Yonan and Quint joined with Hsieh to perform this work of a student still finding his voice with both respect and love (whatever Tolstoy may have suggested about the incompatibility of these attitudes in *Anna Karenina*). The composition definitely provides insights into Rachmaninoff's more mature efforts, and there was great value in this ensemble offering historical insight into this work.

As I had suggested after the first Faculty Concert, these recitals were particularly valuable to the Festival students for providing opportunities to learn to listen; and the opportunities offered by this final event in the series were both satisfying and rewarding