Dranoff goes to the theater with Chipak and Kushnir

By Lawrence Budmen

The Chipak-Kushnir Piano Duo performed Friday night in the Dranoff Foundation concert series. Despite the persistent rain that engulfed South Florida for much of the week, a nearly full and wildly enthusiastic audience turned out for the opening program of the Dranoff Concert Series Friday night at Coral Gables Congregational Church. Olha Chipak and Oleksiy Kushnir, 2nd prize winners of the 2003 Dranoff International Two Piano Competition, played a series of arrangements of music originally conceived for the opera, ballet and Broadway stage.

Chipak and Kushnir’s competition-winning prowess was immediately evident in Abram Chasins’ Carmen Fantasy. Adding spicy dissonance to fragments of themes from the opera, Chasins’ score sounds like a Stravinsky rewrite of Bizet. The duo’s steely power and sensitive coloration was just the right fit for Chasins’ maze of melodic extracts.

Argentinean pianist Sergio Calligaris’ Paraphrase on a Waltz by Tchaikovsky is a straightforward adaptation for four hands of familiar music from Swan Lake. As one pianist played the melodies, the other added filigree and ornaments, spotlighting the duo’s coordination and rhythmic acuity. The players also gave a boldly accentuated traversal of Adolf Gottlieb’s arrangement for two pianos of Liszt’s Paraphrase on Themes from Rigoletto. Superimposed trills and pyrotechnics on the melody of the quartet from the third act of Verdi’s opera displayed the Ukrainian duo’s rock-solid technique.

Chipak and Kushnir brought tonal gleam and aristocratic phrasing to the surging melodic lines of Ravel’s own transcription of La Valse but, as the music spun out of control, their strength and speed showed impressively in the explosive conclusion. Holding their powerful energy in reserve for the climactic moments of three movements from Stravinsky’s Petrouchka in Victor Babin’s arrangement, the duo’s light touch illuminated the puppet’s loneliness. They played the fair scenes at top speed without missing notes, the inner lines cleanly articulated. Babin outdid Stravinsky’s own solo piano version of the ballet, adding bravura challenges and keyboard spanning runs that Chipak and Kushnir ventured with pinpoint accuracy.

John Musto’s transcription of the Symphonic Dances from Leonard Bernstein’s West Side Story captures much of the tonal coloration and subtleties of the original orchestration. The pianists attacked the score with the flair of born jazz players, breezing through the Latin dance episodes with spirit and a pliant touch. The driving rhythms extended beyond the keyboard with the players snapping their fingers and tapping out percussive effects.

The one exception to the program of transcriptions, Ned Rorem’s arresting Four Dialogues is the American master’s own mini-opus of musical theater. Semi-staged by Tony Boutté, the four-song cycle is a tale of lovers’ meeting, courtship, quarreling and sadness at being parted and separated across two continents.

Rorem’s scores evokes 1950s Broadway, spanning jazz, boogie-woogie, big-band dance and lyricism in the manner of Bernstein’s musicals. Frank O’Hara’s frequently witty texts are matched by the verve of Rorem’s surprising melodic curves.

Wearing a top hat and tennis racket, Boutté was the quintessential charmer and the tenor’s lovely timbre and supple word coloring were a constant delight. The bell-like high tones of Jennifer Voigt’s appealing lyric soprano resounded through her surprisingly tough portrayal of this pre-feminist heroine. Both singers spun Rorem’s strophes with the natural aplomb of music theater veterans. Chipak and Kushnir excelled in the often arpeggiated and rhapsodic piano writing.

For encores the duo pianists ventured fast, wild rides through Rimsky-Korsakov’s Flight of the Bumble Bee and Khachaturian’s Sabre Dance. The Dranoff Concert Series continues with Susan and Sarah Wang playing works by Bach, Liszt, Tchaikovsky and Joshua Rosenblum 5 p.m. December 21 at Aventura Cultural Center. dranoff2piano.org; 305-572-9900.

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