

Amid the poetry and beats, don't forget the two pianists

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Knight Arts



Tonight at the Knight Concert Hall, pianists, poets, dancers and a DJ will get together for Piano Slam 3, an intriguing mix of literary talent show and music that will also feature the work of piano duo Stephanie Ho and Saar Ahuvia.

I don't know exactly how this will turn out (though there is good video evidence from earlier slams), but I do know that in addition to young verse, the spotlight will fall on the two-piano medium. Miami, after all, is the home of the world's leading two-piano competition in the person of the Dranoff Foundation, which is helping sponsor the Piano Slam.

The two-piano repertoire isn't huge, but there are plenty of good pieces out there if you know where to look. Wandering over to the Stephanie and Saar site, we can watch videos of them doing György Kurtág's takes on Bach at Le Poisson Rouge, playing the Franco-Bulgarian composer Andre Boucourechliev's "Archipel I" with the New World Symphony's percussion ensemble last October and performing a nifty little toccata by a Long Island-based composer named Jay Anthony Gach.

Some of this isn't even two-piano music, but one piano, four-hands music, which is nice and cozy if you happen to like the person you're playing with, kind of uncomfortable if you don't — sort of like sitting next to someone odious on an airplane. There's no doubt that many a courtship took place on a piano bench back in the middle of the 19th century when pianos were in everyone's home and musical culture was a way of making both genders more attractive as potential mates.

Judging by their work on this website, this is a talented pair of musicians who have adventurous tastes in repertoire. If we listen to the Gach "Toccatina," for instance, we hear fine finger control and a good match with the music's impishness.

The Kurtag-Bach transcriptions (beginning with the sonatina from the cantata "Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit," BWV 106) are expertly played, and the Boucourechliev (at least the first version of this aleatoric piece) shows their command of the far reaches of 20th-century modernism.

Having played two-piano music a few times (my most memorable work was doing the Primo part in Rachmaninov's "Italian Polka" back in high school), I can say that it's oddly like playing in a band or orchestra, odd as that might sound. There's the same feeling of a big sound you're sending up into the rafters, a sound that might get away from you if you aren't on top of your game. It's exciting, really, especially if you're both playing large instruments and you can't actually see the other person well.

Tonight's free concert at the Arsht won't focus entirely on two-piano music, of course, but the two will be playing Bach, Gershwin and John Adams, music of wide variety and different approaches, and it provides another opportunity to hear this duo up close. I've mentioned before the desirability of having a venue like Le Poisson Rouge here to host musicians like this, and here's hoping that day arrives sooner rather than later.

The concert begins tonight, Wednesday, May 4 at 7:30 p.m. at the Knight Concert Hall, 1301 Biscayne Blvd., Miami. Admission is free. DJ Brimstone 127 and the Thomas Armour Ballet will also be featured. For more information, call 305-949-6722.