

Jay Harvey Upstage



Monday, November 4, 2013

Alexander Schimpf puts a new piece in the middle of a Schubert, Brahms and Beethoven recital

Alexander Schimpf, a 32-year-old German pianist whose ascending career received a big boost with his victory in the 2011 Cleveland International Piano Competition, played a recital for the American Pianists Association Sunday afternoon, launching its "Grand Encounters" series in the Eidson-Duckwall Recital Hall at Butler University.

His program focused on composers central to his cultural homeland's legacy — Brahms, Schubert and Beethoven — with the refreshing exception of a world premiere: "Lepesben" (Strides), five marches for piano by Andras Hamary, a Hungarian composer born in 1950.



Alexander Schimpf opened "Grand Encounters" Sunday.

From the opening work, Schubert's Sonata in A minor, D. 784, Schimpf's special qualities were clear. He has the patience needed for Schubert, a feeling for the music's extenuated interior drama, its startling contrasts of tone and dynamics. His instinct for momentary silences was unfailingly apt. Abrupt shifts of color and texture characteristic of the composer's great sonatas seemed logical and cunningly well-prepared in Schimpf's hands.

Late Brahms brought the recital up to intermission. Piano Pieces, op. 119, had a breadth of feeling in Schimpf's interpretation, putting the three

intermezzi and the Rhapsody in E-flat major each in its distinctive world. I was particularly taken with the restless lyricism of the Intermezzo in E minor, which had an authentically Lieder-like quality of expression, and the concluding Rhapsody, which Schimpf made buoyant and vigorous throughout, somehow letting plenty of air into the music's dense texture.

Hamary's new piece puts the march concept through a remarkable series of 21st-century paces. Schimpf's oral program notes contributed immeasurably to an informed reception of the work. Of course, the proof in this pudding is what happens musically: Hamary's work is richly inspired, broadly balanced between parodistic and dead-serious. On first hearing, it took the listener through vivid evocations of war's violence, the association of marches with death (both the funeral-march tradition and the use of marches to exhilarate future cannon fodder and their kin) and the form's invitation to humor and high spirits.

The "Tin Soldiers" movement challenged Schimpf to move two strains of march music in and out of synchronization, which he did with clarity and wit. The wide registral leaps of "Parade" and its slowly decaying chords (produced by the selective resonance of the middle pedal) ventured into less playful humor — something darkly post-Shostakovichian. The set concluded by juxtaposing the odd allure of marches in their entertaining and brutal aspects alike. Heavy-metal thunder and boogie-woogie were brought into play in the

Blog Archive

▼ 2013 (129)

▼ November (8)

[Remembering John Tavener, without tears: Does the ...](#)

[Di Wu returns to the Carmel Symphony Orchestra for...](#)

[Northminster Presbyterian Church brings choral blo...](#)

[James Galway brings his puckish Irish charm to the...](#)

[A French painter's artistic breadth drives the col...](#)

[Alexander Schimpf puts a new piece in the middle o...](#)

[Owl Music Group presents a concert showcase of its...](#)

[Mario Venzago's much-anticipated return to the ISO...](#)

► October (21)

► September (18)

► August (13)

► July (20)

► June (22)

► May (27)

About Me



[S+](#) Jay Harvey

I worked in newspapers for nearly 42 years, leaving the Indianapolis Star in May 2013. For most of that time,

I was involved in arts coverage, which I continue to do as an independent blogger.

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course of Schimpf's assured performance of "Double-Quick," with polish and abandon adroitly blended.

The recital concluded with **Beethoven's Sonata in C minor, op. 111, in a breathtaking performance** that elicited a poised encore, a sober yet piquantly harmonized transcription of Bach's "Sheep May Safely Graze."

So lofty is the reputation of late Beethoven that a prominent early-20th-century American music critic put Opus 111 on a higher plane than mere piano music. Henry E. Krehbiel wrote that Beethoven's last sonata "discourses music rather than the charms of pianoforte sound." (Krehbiel, by the way, was an incredibly capable, if arrogant, figure: One of his more unusual accomplishments — of particular interest to Hoosiers — was helping Benjamin Harrison locate the missing corpse of the future president's father in the dissecting room of a Cincinnati medical school.)

One hesitates to dissent from a Krehbiel opinion even slightly; certainly his contemporaries dared it at their peril. But Schimpf indicated Sunday that the instrument's characteristic charms can indeed play a significant role in putting across this rarefied music. Beethoven's unusual handling of theme-and-variations form holds the attention in the "Arietta" movement. In this performance, however, it was the shimmering intensity, the enveloping sonority, the evenness of touch (with those persistent trills) that enthralled the audience on the way to the hushed final bars.

Fluent in German, the pontificating Krehbiel is likely to have resisted the obvious pun that can be made on the recitalist's name. As a lesser critic, I will hazard it, but only in praise: When Schimpf plays as well as he did here Sunday afternoon, *kein Schimpfwort gilt* (no scornful word applies).