

Russian Romanticism at its Warmest : A delicious program of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff

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Santa Barbara's Unitarian Society Concert Series is a gem among many in this town. The venue is comfortable and the amenities, including a decent resident piano, are ideal for chamber music. Two of Santa Barbara's raft of superb professional musicians, Geoffrey Rutkowski, principal cellist of the Santa Barbara Symphony, and UCSB faculty pianist Natasha Kislenko, who is also a faculty pianist at the Music Academy of the West, treated a large and festive audience on Sunday afternoon to a program that consisted of only two works, but which nevertheless steeped the audience in Russia's musical heartland: Tchaikovsky's complete "Seasons" for solo piano and Rachmaninoff's seldom-heard but gloriously melodic Cello Sonata.

Tchaikovsky was a busy guy in 1875. The draft of his First Piano Concerto was being tried out (he revised the concerto a couple of times between 1875 and 1888) and he was finishing up his magnum opus, "Swan Lake." He was in a tuneful mood and accepted an offer from the music magazine "Nouvelist" to create a series of short piano pieces, one for each month, to be offered serially for that publication. Once upon a time, folks gathered around the piano for entertainment, and these pieces were intended to boost monthly sales of the St. Petersburg tabloid, while providing technically accessible music that amateurs might be able to sit down and play - with a little practice.

When it comes to genius, simple ditties more often than not contain the DNA of a future masterpiece, and "The Seasons," especially when played in its entirety, is one of those glorious incipencies. Ms. Kislenko has the genes, and her performance of the set was a revelation of refinement and style. Playing from memory, she has found the inner voice of this music, not just technically, but emotionally. The opening "January - By the Fireplace" explored not just the obvious suspensions, but subtle, even sub-basement nuances of harmonic tension and release. "March - Song of the Lark" exuded lush Russian Romanticism, as intended on the written page, but was also shimmered delicately by Ms. Kislenko, plumbing the composer's melancholic nature. Another beautifully revealing example of Tchaikovsky's deep introspection, "May - White Nights" found Ms. Kislenko in a nuanced reverie of beautiful music-making. "September - Hunt" is ballet music, and Ms. Kislenko correctly divined the link to "Swan Lake," giving the piece's middle section theatrical mystery and anticipation. One could imagine the dramatic entry and exeunt of members of the corps.

The last, "December - Christmas Time" is a waltz. Ms. Kislenko successfully whisked us to the Winter Palace for an Imperial ball. To enjoy the set of 12, en suite, was a gift - to hear a Russian play this repertory, an inspiration.

Rachmaninoff completed his Cello Sonata in 1901. Nicholas II had been Czar for eight years, but trouble was just around the corner - the first Russian Revolution of 1905. Rachmaninoff might have been one of the first composers to recognize the collaborative equality of sonatas, and presciently preferred the full title: Sonata in G Minor for Cello and Piano. G minor is a tonality choice of significance in the history of music, and Rachmaninoff reveled in its provenance - the piece is mysterious and reflective -

apprehension hides within its loveliness. The work is seldom performed, for a simple reason; it's bloody difficult for both piano and cello.

Cellist Geoffrey Rutkowski has been making music in Santa Barbara since this critic was in junior high - at least. He is a cherished fixture in the life of the musical community, and it is always a pleasure to hear him in recital. The Rachmaninoff sonata requires enormous stamina for both collaborators, and it was gratifying to see and hear Mr. Rutkowski and Ms. Kislenco take to the challenge. The opening bars of the first movement are almost French in nature - one hears the influence of César Franck. Immediately, Rachmaninoff throws tacks in the road, with writing that places the cello in high registration convolutions of difficulty. Despite an initial intonation and pitch glitch or two, Mr. Rutkowski soon found his Rach-legs, and plunged effectively into the body of the work, his 1689 Mateo Goefriller resonant in the sometimes problematic acoustic of the Unitarian sanctuary. Ms. Kislenco, her hands flying over the keyboard in what has to be a concerto of accompaniment, ably supported her colleague. Highlights: the sublime third movement, and the unforgettably lush tune, which makes the last movement hummable for hours afterward.