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Classical Music Guide - Wednesday, July 23, 2014 - Written by Donald Isler

Alexandre Moutouzkine

Beethoven: Sonata No. 13 in E-Flat Major, Op. 27, No. 1
Rachmaninoff: Morceaux de Salon, Op. 10
M. C. Graves: Currency
Chopin: Twelve Etudes, Op. 25

Before this concert started IKIF Founder and Director Jerome Rose came to the stage to give his usual reminder to turn off cellphones and electronics, then added some news the audience was clearly happy to hear: That despite reports to the contrary, it is the intention of the management to hold the Festival again next summer, though the location has not yet been determined. (Mannes College will be moving next year, and apparently will not be able to provide space for the IKIF in the summer of 2015.)

The young Russian-American pianist Alexandre Moutouzkine makes one aware of how inadequate stereotypical expressions are when describing some of the remarkable young musicians before us today. As we have learned not to make assumptions about pianists necessarily having a proclivity for the music of composers of their own ethnicity, so, too, we see more and more that describing pianists such as Mr. Moutouzkine as "serious musicians" versus "virtuosos" makes no sense. Mr. Moutouzkine is a sensitive, thoughtful pianist who never plays a note outside of a musical context. And one hell of a virtuoso, too!

The opening of the Beethoven Sonata had a lovely, natural flow, and the dynamic contrasts in the second movement were well displayed. Most impressive, for me, was that I heard the second and fourth movements with a clarity I hadn't heard before because of the pianist's astute gauging of fast, but not excessively fast tempi, minimal pedaling and, of course, those wonderful fingers of his.

The Morceaux de Salon are not Rachmaninoff's best pieces. Only one or two of them were familiar to me. But I enjoyed these performances, which were given with a consummate understanding of the composer's idiom. The ruminative Nocturne, the Barcarolle, which had a shimmering accompaniment to a theme which seemed to express longing, the nostalgic Melodie and the smoldering Romance contrasted with the frothy Waltz, the controlled wildness of the Humoresque and the high spirited Mazurka.

The pianist addressed the audience before playing Currency, by his friend, Michael Christopher Graves, who was present, but said he would not reveal exactly what the piece represented. This mystery will be revealed, it seems, when he plays it again at his upcoming recital at Merkin Hall. If I heard clearly, it seems to be based on a motif of four notes, all within the distance of a major third, which is then turned around, played against itself in another voice, and later develops further with very brilliant passagework. Mr. Moutouzkine performed this enormously complicated work from memory, and played with remarkable clarity while pummeling the instrument.

Chopin expanded the technical horizons of the piano as well as the repertoire with his etudes. But an audience is not interested to hear the struggle of the obstacles the performer faces. It wants to hear the obstacles overcome with grace, ideas, imagination and artistry. Which Mr. Moutouzkine did. With apparent ease.

Among the highlights:

The sotto voce playing of the fourth (A Minor) etude, with several original touches.

The more serious approach to the fifth (E Minor) Etude than the "happy frog jumping about" Rubinstein interpretation (though I liked that, too), and with a particularly gorgeous playing of the melody in the middle section.

The ease with which Mr. Moutouzkine played the thirds etude, allowing him to do lovely things with the accompaniment despite the great speed.

The speed with which he played the 10th Etude (faster than Lhevinne), his bringing out (as he also did in other etudes) of interesting middle voices, and the increasing intensity with which he approached the end of the series. One item which might have been a bit more effectively gauged was that he was already playing so loudly in the last etude it was impossible to get any louder in the final C Major section.

If I had to pick one etude which impressed me the most it would probably be not one of those already mentioned, but the seventh, in C-Sharp Minor. Mr. Moutouzkine wrung all possible expressivity out of it with a huge range of dynamics and sometimes extreme, but always effective rubato. A high point of the concert, indeed.

The recital concluded with Lecuona's delightful and exuberant Mazurka Glissando.

This is an pianist I'd like to hear again!

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