

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



Rabotkina captures the beauty of etudes

By Josef Woodard
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It comes with the territory of Santa Barbara's classical music season that summertime traditionally belongs to the Music Academy of the West. It is also a given that the musicians involved – faculty and students – are necessarily transient stars, who move on to other locales and situations.

In a pleasurable exception to that rule, the Unitarian Society Concert Series hosted the impressive young pianist Daria Rabotkina in recital on Sunday afternoon. Many will remember her dynamic performance in the Lobero Theatre last summer as the most impressive young star in the annual "Concerto Night." On that night, the Russian-born pianist memorably owned the flashy landscape of Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 1 in D-flat.

At her Sunday recital, Rabotkina offered an enticingly broad-minded and diverse program. She covered bases of standard repertoire in a set of etudes by Debussy, Chopin, Liszt and, again, Prokofiev – the shameless showpiece Etude in C Minor, Opus 2/3, penned when he was only 18. For the shorter, deeper second half of the recital, the pianist addressed the last of Beethoven's 32 sonatas, Opus 111 (coincidentally, also heard last week at the Lobero, played by Stephen Hough).

More interestingly, though, Rabotkina wisely included more modern points on the history solo piano repertoire, including a piece by Gyorgy Ligeti, Etude No. 10 "Der Zauberlehrling," and Bela Bartok's gripping "Out of Doors." The sum effect was to lend a broader picture of the evolution of piano music during the past 200 years, in the compressed space of a well-designed recital program.

Significantly, it was with Bartok that the pianist launched her performance, the brute power of which seemed to gain atmospheric strength through the unusual setting of a reverberant church with a stained glass window overhead. Bartok's music still has the ability to shake up and seduce us.

In this five-movement piece, like much of his music, the composer dug into the soil of his native folk music culture, while also tapping the fragile zeitgeist of the first half of the 20th century. Rabotkina navigated the implied contradictions of the music beautifully, bringing to it both a requisite ferocity and tenderness, with mystery on the side.

With her suite of etudes, many of which were short showpieces requiring gymnastic technical aplomb, the pianist continued to blend bedazzlement and musicality. Liszt's "Chasse neige (Snow birds)" is a sonic interpretation of a snowstorm's gathering fury, in pianistic terms full of Lisztian virtuosity and bombastic – but fun – excess. Ligeti's Etude, by contrast, seemed elegant. A revisiting and modernization of Debussy's inspirational source, the 1994 Ligeti piece exemplifies the composer's knack of interpreting – and altering – older music through a respectful contemporary prism.

Following the set of etudes, Rabotkina played Scriabin's Sonata No. 4, Opus 30, from the end of the composer's romantic period, before he went cosmic. That led naturally into Beethoven's landmark sonata. Though well known and loved, Opus 111 is a strange beauty of a late-period work. Feverish in spirit, in the first of its two movements, it ultimately resolves with an air of unsentimental tranquility. Along the path, in the second movement, the gentle hymn-like melody gives way to an oddly loping, swinging rhythm, seemingly prophetic of jazz.

This masterwork takes both unflinching technical command and emotional musical maturity to reach the essence of the music. Rabotkina, a bold and matured 25-year-old musician, showed ample portions of both qualities. We may be seeing and hearing her again soon, in a venue beyond the Music Academy.