



September 26, 2008

Jade Simmons kicks off President's Piano Series

Pianist Jade Simmons displays charm, radiance and jaw-dropping talent in the season-opening concert of the University of Washington's President's Piano Series.

By Sumi Hahn

"Obviously, I'm not going to be playing Mozart right now."

With that comment — and a flash of her irresistible dimples — pianist Jade Simmons prepared the audience at Meany Hall on Thursday night for the third and most daring piece so far on her program, Russell Pinkston's "TaleSpin for Piano and Tape." Simmons played while accompanied by almost 15 minutes of processed and arranged electronic noise: ripples, whistles and wailing, punctuated by various percussive chirps, crashes and snares.

Let me interrupt with a confession. When it comes to classical music, I'm a hopeless Romantic. I like to be able to hum along. I'm a sucker for tonal music with a tune.

In spite of myself, I loved it.

Or did I love *her*? Performers as charming and radiant as Simmons inspire love almost incidentally. She is an utterly beguiling stage presence, moving from stupendous keyboard virtuosity to personable program commentary in one agile step. She read 10-year-old Samuel Barber's letter to his mother to introduce his sonata and launched the second piece on her program, John Corigliano's fiendishly difficult "Étude Fantasy," by noting that her self-designed dress — a single-shouldered column of flame-colored flares — was inspired by it. (By the way, both were stunners.)

However, there [was] a noticeable absence of 20- and 30-somethings. A pity, since Simmons has an uncanny ability to connect classical music with the sounds of today.

That was evidenced by her showstopper, Daniel Bernard Roumain's "Hip Hop Studies and Études for Solo Piano." Simmons kicked off her heels to push the special loop pedal this piece required, a device that repeated sampled sections that she had just played moments before. The effect was like listening to avatars of Simmons play in succession and simultaneously. Mesmerizing, lovely stuff.

Should Simmons play more traditional repertoire — such as the Gershwin Preludes she opened with or the lovely Rachmaninoff étude she curtain-called with — she would probably have a fanatical fan base. But this woman obviously does not choose to do things the easy way. Her final piece was Barber's knuckle-buster of a Piano Sonata. She didn't even break a sweat as she played that brutal obstacle course. It was the first time I actually liked that piece. I leapt out of my seat to give her a standing ovation.