

An immense sonic achievement in a not-so immense space

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MUSIC AT SHARON

ANTON KUERTI, PIANO

At the Sharon Temple in Sharon, Ont., on Sunday

Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of pianist Anton Kuerti is his unabating growth as an artist. I've been listening to him play, whenever I can, for more than 40 years and he just seems to get steadily better. At 70, he shows no loss of intellectual freshness, emotional dimension, musical sophistication or technical panache. His Sunday recital for Music at Sharon, the summer festival at the historic temple of the Children of Peace, north of Toronto, found him at the peak of his powers.

The temple, aside from its great numen and architectural charm, is not the ideal venue for a big recital on a nine-foot concert grand, and Kuerti soon realized that if everything was not to sound raucous and clattery, he'd have to modify his customary large-hall brio in this smaller, more intimate space. It took the dramatic, contrast-filled first movement of his Haydn *Sonata in E-flat, Hob. XVI No. 52* (Haydn's last sonata) to complete such adjustments as he could make in this acoustic circumstance, and to shed a certain unease. The second movement - adagio - was sonically easier to contain and came off eloquently, and the finale was a glittering cascade of Haydn's finely calibrated developmental surprises.

The Mendelssohn F-sharp minor *Fantaisie* (known as the "Scottish") followed the Haydn in a typical Kuerti reading: minutely particular and detailed, deeply and affectionately thought through, full of imagination and fire. Ernest Hutcheson, one of the last century's piano gurus, said that "were it not for a rather insignificant middle movement," this work would rank high among Mendelssohn's piano music. Well, Kuerti has news for the respected Hutcheson. One of the beauties of Kuerti's performance is his clear, mobile demonstration that the middle movement is by no means insignificant, but in fact an elegant, humorous utterance of real charm. As for the final movement, marked presto, Kuerti practically levitated in it, especially when he took the marvellous redevelopment of the octave bass pattern into high gear. The effect was electrifying.

Hot from this triumph, Kuerti gave us an unaccustomed encore: a touching, then dazzling account of the *Andante and Rondo capriccioso*, also of Mendelssohn.

Beethoven's *33 Variations on a Waltz* by Anton Diabelli were the intense occupation of Kuerti and his Sharon audience after intermission. This late, crowning achievement of Beethoven's piano works goes well beyond the reach of mere piano playing, just as his last string quartets transcend



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the practical norms of quartet playing. It is among those supreme works of music that are better than they can be played.

Last year, in a more accommodating venue, I heard Kuerti play these variations on the theme that Beethoven contemptuously described as "a cobbler's patch" before he exploded it into the most sophisticated and complex sets of transformations ever penned. Kuerti's performance was awesome then, and even more so on Sunday. The two fugues - *No. 24* and *No. 32*, and the seven ravishing variations between them - were especially compelling, and the final *Tempo di Minuetto* - *No. 33* - with its exquisite sense of release and its unique, buoyant sweetness, was heartbreakingly lovely. Kuerti is one of the few pianists alive who can bring us this immense music at this level. One or two split-second lapses in his concentration across its huge sonic canvas could not detract from the enormity of his achievement.