

Pianist Anton Kuerti in Nova Scotia

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By STEPHEN PEDERSEN | Concert Review Sat. Nov 28 - 4:46 AM

While Canadian pianist Anton Kuerti stole the Symphony Nova Scotia spotlight with his performance of Mozart's early piano concerto (No. 9, KV 271) Thursday night in the Cohn, the entire program fitted together with the intricate finesse of a digital space telescope.

Conductor and music director Bernhard Gueller introduced Kuerti's deft delicacy with a very pretty modern work written in 1998 by Russian-born composer Nikolai S. Korndorf in tribute to Nova Scotia folk artist Maud Lewis. After the Mozart and an intermission, the orchestra played Schumann's exuberant overture, scherzo and finale and ended the program with probably the most brilliant performance of Stravinsky's Pulcinella Suite that I have ever heard.

Win, win, win, win.

Kuerti has long been at the stage of effortless mastery. The notes pour from his fingers with the immediacy of sunlight. With a soft, almost buttery sound, he magicked the percussive mechanism of the piano into endless song.

The Piano Concerto No. 9 is an extraordinary work of musical imagination. Mozart was only 21 at the time he wrote it. But the mature inventiveness of his melody, and the seamless complexity of his harmony and counter-melodies, as well as the inspired voice-leading that is fundamental to the Mozart style of combining notes, left no room in the listener's mind for thought.

We were awash in mystery, awed by unimaginable beauty, stopped short by the intensely poetic and dramatic artistry of Kuerti, Gueller and the SNS musicians. The slow movement was made all the more exquisite by its acute tinge of melancholy.

Korndorf's The Smile of Maud Lewis at the top of the show I found utterly charming, though some lobby chatter spoke of boredom. The work begins with a few strings playing a melody

of only four or five notes, a minimalist melody that twists and turns and dances with extraordinary inventiveness.

It evokes Nova Scotia fiddle music in an entirely non-representational, non-imitative way, gaining sweet resonance, breadth and hushed acoustic spaciousness by single, spaced out notes on the celesta.

The first instrument in after the violins and celesta is the piccolo, playing in its middle register with quicksilver agility. Other instrumental voices layer in, including an audible recorder, which gives you an idea of the sensitivity of the open sound and balance of the ensemble.

The Schumann began its triptych with a light, buoyant, wonderfully melodic overture, followed by a scherzo in the jolting rhythm of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, which maintained the dancing lightness of the mood of the first movement.

The finale lost its innocence, failing to escape the lugubrious shadows that make Schumann's later symphonic style an academic trial for player and listener alike.

Stravinsky's Pulcinella suite is based on melodies attributed to 18th century composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi. But his treatment of these agreeable tunes and their even more agreeable dance forms — sinfonie, serenata, tarantella, toccata, gavotta and minuetto — inspired Stravinsky to turn this ballet score into a series of brilliant, virtuosic studies on baroque dances.

Bringing this sort of music off requires the utmost in alertness from the musicians who have to change rhythms and styles on the turn of a dime.

It also gained from the insights into baroque style which the SNS players have developed over the years playing with Jeanne Lamon, even though Stravinsky's treatment is quintessentially 20th century.

It was a masterly performance. My only regret is that it was not recorded.

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