

Pianist Anton Kuerti *at the Chopin Society in Minneapolis*

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Kuerti plumbs depths of Beethoven

By Rob Hubbard Special to the Pioneer Press
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Ludwig van Beethoven didn't think small. Although the composer's intimate works for solo piano may seem sonic worlds apart from his stormy symphonies, they often sound like they're tackling similar big issues — the nature of life, love, God and the universe — but on a micro rather than macro level.

It's debatable whether any visiting pianist in the Chopin Society's 26-year history has ever taken an audience so deeply into the mind and heart of Beethoven as Anton Kuerti did on Sunday afternoon at St. Paul's Janet Wallace Fine Arts Center. Performing the first all-Beethoven recital in the organization's history, the 72-year-old Canadian offered interpretations filled with passion, skill, reverence and affection.

Kuerti invited the audience on this journey to the inner recesses of Beethoven's genius through the portal of two of his most popular piano works. The "Les Adieux" Sonata introduced the kind of rapidly shifting emotional contrasts that would be emphasized throughout the concert, moments of contemplation interrupted by explosions, calm giving way to frenzy.

The "Appassionata" might be the composer's most familiar sonata (save the "Moonlight"), but rarely do Twin Cities audiences get the opportunity to hear it played by as expert a pianist as Kuerti. It was thrilling to experience him summoning up all of its beauty with a gentle touch, then urgently conveying the conflicts that roiled inside the composer.

While that sonata has some very difficult demands (all handled impressively by Kuerti), the most treacherous terrain lay ahead after intermission. Composed late in his life, Beethoven's "Diabelli" Variations are like a complex and fascinating musical kaleidoscope. Trained on one small snatch of a theme, they explore it from 33 different perspectives, offering a deeply rewarding yet almost overpowering immersion in the composer's imagination.

Each of Kuerti's interpretive choices seemed a wise one. Nods to Bach's intricate counterpoint and Mozart's melodic gifts emerged, as well as crashing chords that would pave the way for Liszt and a small pseudo-nocturne that sounded as if it made Chopin possible. The pianist often gave voice to Beethoven's internal disputes by making his hands sound as if they were arguing with one another. By the end of the concert's 2 1/2 hours, the audience seemed grateful to have such a gifted guide for this memorable excursion.

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