

André Laplante

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Concert review: Pianist André Laplante enchants in Toronto Summer Music Festival opener

By John Terauds — July 17, 2012

To describe pianist André Laplante at the piano requires as many words for the sounds of hammers striking strings as the Innu people have for different types of snowflakes. That was the overwhelming feeling that came with listening to him in the solo recital that opened the 2012 Toronto Summer Music Festival at Koerner Hall on Tuesday night.

There were three distinct parts to this concert, each revealing a different facet of a complete artist: someone with an absolute mastery of technique as well as a keenly developed sense of how to shape sound itself.

Laplante opened in utter simplicity, with Ferruccio Busoni's pianistic translation of the Adagio movement that usually acts as an interlude between J.S. Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue* in C minor, for pipe organ. This led, practically without a break, into one of Mozart's early *Sonatas*, K. 282, in E-flat Major.

The unaffected presentation of these pieces was a way for the audience as well as the performer to focus keenly on what was to come: resplendent studies in two very

different approaches to piano music.



The first main course was French, showcasing the many colours and timbres that the 88 keys on a piano are capable of producing. The first two, chewy bites came from Quebec composer François Morel's *Deux études de sonorité*, which date from the early 1950s.

Abstract, brash and colourful, and delivered with élan by Laplante, these studies declared the piano to be a veritable orchestra on three legs.

But the real gems from the programme's first half came from the pen of Maurice Ravel: "Oiseaux tristes" and "Vallée des cloches" from his *Miroirs*, followed by the

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popular *Sonatine*.

This is music where time and normal narrative lie suspended, replaced by rainbows of colour in repeating and shifting patterns. They are abstract depictions of something like birds and bells that rely on a light touch — not only literally, but in the shaping of the music itself.

Laplante, in absolute control, knew exactly how to time each movement of his fingers, allowing the generous acoustics of Koerner Hall as well as the sparkling German-made Steinway piano to act as two invaluable assistants in making the music bloom, glow and decay with grace.

It was like finding oneself gently turning inside a giant musical kaleidoscope.

The pianist's velvet-gloved interpretations were so entrancing, that this could easily have been enough to take home and treasure for the rest of the summer. But Laplante returned with something very different to make sure we were sated by his abundant artistry.

In sitting down to play Liszt, Laplante replaced his velvet gloves with soft leather, camouflaging the huge technical demands of four of the Hungarian composer's Swiss installment of the *Années de pèlerinage* in elegant melodies, which sang out like exquisitely wrought arias from some forgotten opera.

There was further musical magic in Liszt's *Petrarch Sonnet No. 104*, filled with the same rare and engrossing mix of muscle and delicacy.

Bringing the musical excursion to a modest, affecting close was a brilliantly paced, deceptively simple reading of Robert Schumann's "Of Foreign Lands and Peoples," from *Kinderszenen*.

There are hundreds of excellent pianists in the world, all able to present fantastic recitals. But very, very few possess that special, extra dose of magic that, one imagines, can only come from decades of experience and hundreds of hours of careful work in a lonely studio somewhere.

Laplante is one of these rare masters, and Toronto is lucky to have had another chance to experience the magic.

John Terauds

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