

San Diego Arts

Garrick Ohlsson Plays Scriabin in La Jolla

By Kenneth Herman

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Garrick Ohlsson's recital of Russian piano music Friday (May 16) brought the La Jolla Music Society's current chamber music season to a flashy conclusion, but sometimes it seemed more like a university graduate music seminar. Delivering copious verbal program notes, especially about the recital's featured composer Alexander Scriabin, Prof. Ohlsson might have called his course, "Russian Music at the Turn of the 20th Century."

Balancing his heavy dose of Scriabin with a spikey, neo-classical piano sonata by Prokofiev and a later--but much more stylistically conservative--variation cycle by Sergei Rachmaninoff looked judicious and nicely balanced on paper, but turned out tamer and even a tad monochromatic in the flesh. Not that there was anything monochromatic about Ohlsson's piano technique, which is replete with subtle gradations of color and deftly shaded phrasing. The program settled into a dark, introspective mood that made a long program seem even longer. Or perhaps given the repertory selected for the recital, this is the equivalent of complaining that a Chekov play is not cheerful enough.

Certainly it is a treat to hear so much Scriabin played by an accomplished musician who is so devoted to the style. The Piano Sonata No. 2 in G Minor, called the "Sonata-Fantasy," spends most of its time in a sunny major mode and exhibits the wandering, episodic quality that warrants the subtitle "Fantasy." Although not as windy as the Robert Schumann fantasies, this two-movement Sonata-Fantasy traverses a number of contrasting ideas and moods that called the great German composer to mind. Ohlsson gave the several first-movement right-hand melodies the graceful arc of an opera aria, but he supplied ample power and grit to the more tempestuous figuration of the second movement.

In Scriabin's F-sharp Major "Poeme," Op. 32, No. 1, Ohlsson conjured a more mystical ethos--or perhaps this mode is Scriabin's own brand of Impressionism--picking out evanescent themes that flitted like the glow of fire-flies on a mid-Western summer evening. Later in the program, Ohlsson offered the composer's last Sonata, No. 10, Op. 70, another dark, inconclusive essay full of twittering motifs which Scriabin himself identified as "insect sounds."

Although Rachmaninoff was a year younger than Scriabin, he had none of his compatriot's experimental daring, and he simply expanded upon and polished the musical traditions he

inherited. His "Variations on a Theme of Corelli," like the better-known "Variations on a Theme of Paganini" for piano and orchestra, unfolds a rich tapestry of harmonic invention and gorgeous, sinuous melodies that most Western composers were too embarrassed to put to paper in 1931, the year of the "Corelli Variations." Ohlsson gave this cycle a burnished and more rhythmically grounded presentation that most of his Scriabin examples, which came as a relief after so much impetuous rushing and questionable fluctuation.

Although I was set to enjoy Prokofiev's Sonata No. 2 in D Minor, Op. 14, Ohlsson made it sound much more hard-hearted and heavy-handed than is necessary. The young Prokofiev (he was all of 21 when he wrote this piece) was tweaking the establishment with his sardonic themes and biting harmonies, but I couldn't find much humor or irony in Ohlsson's account of the sonata. During the high tide of Soviet musicology, the music commissars always upheld the work of Prokofiev and Shostakovich (at least when they were minding their P's and Q's) as the solid, "objective" people's music that was the antidote to Scriabin's subjective, emotionally-sensitive ramblings. Perhaps Ohlsson was trying to even the score for poor Scriabin by giving Prokofiev the short end of the stick.

For encores Ohlsson favored the Sherwood Hall audience with two familiar Chopin works, the E Major Etude, Op. 10, and the Waltz in C-sharp Minor. Since he won the 1970 international Chopin Competition, Chopin has been Ohlsson's calling card, and the warmth, fluidity, and unaffected rubato of these works were the most compelling part of the evening.

Dates	:	May 16, 2008
Organization	:	La Jolla Music Society
Phone	:	(858) 459-3728
Production Type	:	Concert
Region	:	La Jolla
URL	:	www.lajollamusicociety.org
Venue	:	Sherwood Hall, 700 Prospect St., San Diego

***About the author:** Kenneth Herman began his writing career as a music critic for the San Diego Union-Tribune and covered classical music for the San Diego Edition of the Los Angeles Times (1982-1992). He wrote "A History of the Spreckels Organ." and is currently Music Director/Organist for the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego and conducts the 60-voice San Diego Youth Choir.*

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