



Quebec pianist on the cutting edge

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CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

Only still flirting with turning 30, Montreal-based David Jalbert is proving to be a comer. In short order, he should be able to join the elect group of Canadian piano stars such as Marc-André Hamelin and Angela Hewitt on the international scene.

He was at the Jane Mallett Theatre last night to present an intense and eclectic program of works that showed off a wide-ranging musical imagination, phenomenal technique and an unerring lightness of being.

Getting slotted in Music Toronto's "contemporary classics" recital series gave Jalbert wide latitude in choosing what he was going to play.

What we got was at once cutting edge musically and a throwback to the 19th century, when pianists would program according to their mood and heartstrings rather than an intellectual argument.

The cutting edge came from the world premiere of *Colour Study in Rupak Taal*, written especially for Jalbert by Sri Lankan-born Dinuk Wijeratne, his Juilliard schoolmate and now resident conductor of Symphony Nova Scotia.

Colour Study was so appropriate to 21st-century urban Canada, where cultures collide, as classical Indian music met the Western concert stage. The bulk of the piece is, in Western terms, a seamless series of variations on a seven-note ground bass, topped by a (hopefully) ironic nod to the cliché virtuoso-firework concert ending.

The pianist paired this piece with piano fireworks by that master of 19th-century Romantic cheese, Franz Liszt. Flitting overtop the bucketfuls of notes in *Spanish Rhapsody*, Jalbert, a lanky, limber-wristed player, tossed the piece off with seeming ease.

Judging from the other main pieces on the bill, the Quebecer has an affinity for making light of technical challenges, shaping piles of black dots on each page of a score into easy-to-grasp musical shapes.

It all began with veteran American composer John Corigliano's *Étude Fantasy* from 1976 – a series of five technical exercises that leave most interpreters drenched in sweat. For Jalbert, it appeared to be more of a light warm-up, and rarely has the piece sounded so lyrical.

The same was true for the *Sonata No. 5* by Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915). Like Hamelin, who has been an eloquent champion of early 20th-century works by people such as Nikolai Medtner, Jalbert made sense of the composer's turgid twitches in and out of tonal reverie.

There were also beautiful interpretations of two *Nocturnes* by Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924), in a nod to Jalbert's latest CD.

But why was a little Mozart *Rondo* (in F Major, K. 494) on such a program? It certainly wasn't a moment of respite for Jalbert because, faced with simple melodic lines

and straightforward articulated chords, he tensed up. His posture became rigid, his fingers stiff.

He clearly should have stuck to the tough stuff.