

Jay Harvey Upstage

Tuesday, March 21, 2017

Double silver: Two competition medalists share an IVCI Laureate Series concert



Tessa Lark and Peter Klimo won major international awards in 2014

Two substantial sonatas for violin and piano occupied conspicuous positions at either end of a recital presented Tuesday night by Tessa Lark and Peter Klimo. Richard Strauss' youthful E-flat major sonata, op. 18, brought the event at the Indiana History Center to a rousing conclusion. Sergei Prokofiev's Sonata No. 2 in D major, op. 94a, opened the concert, presented under the auspices of the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis.

As accomplished as the Strauss sonata is for a composer who had so many great works ahead of him, the music bursts at the seams. It's no surprise that, at 23, the future master of opera and the symphonic poem wrote no more chamber music after this sonata. In their performance, Lark and Klimo forged a strong partnership that acknowledged the score's superheroic reach, reveling in the variety of expression and musical material. The unusually titled slow movement, "Improvisation," displayed the right atmosphere of spontaneity and even capriciousness. The finale, with its vaulting rondo theme, surged and subsided in turn and put a seal on the partnership of silver medalists in two 2014 competitions: Klimo won his prize in the Franz Liszt in Utrecht; Lark, in that year's IVCI.

My impression of the Prokofiev performance was somewhat less favorable. Nothing failed the violinist technically (except for some smeary ascending figures in the Scherzo); indeed, the wide intervals in the slow movement's melody were managed smoothly and with keenly felt lyricism. But her intensity seemed somewhat unidiomatic. Though Lark and Klimo worked together well, it sounded as if the pianist had a more appropriate light touch.

Prokofiev's romanticized modernism is not always in sync with artists of unabashed romantic temperament; there's a touch of irony about him, a holding of emotion at arm's length. Temperamentally romantic is the kind of violinist Lark seems to be. Her encore, an arrangement of a Mendelssohn "Song Without Words" offered in tribute to Josef Gingold, whose Stradivarius is on loan to her through IVCI, was sufficient indication of that. And that confirmed the flair she exhibited for Fritz Kreisler's "Viennese Rhapsodic Fantasetta," where she captivated with gorgeous low-lying melodies at the outset.

Back to the Prokofiev sonata: It's salutary to remember that the work was originally for flute and piano. I'm allowing for the possibility that Lark knows that version. I'm just saying that as a listener the temporal priority of the flute version is not irrelevant. The floating, buoyant sound of the flute leaves an imprint on a work that of course is fully acceptable in the latter version. Admittedly it's an open question: Should violists working on Brahms' two sonatas for their instrument with piano know the clarinet-piano original? Should cellists understandably attracted to the version Jules Delsart made of Cesar Franck's violin sonata have the sound of the original somewhere in their heads? I think the answer is "yes," even though the three examples I cite were either penned by the composers and/or approved by them for publication. Thus, they don't need to stand in the

shadow of the originals, but the originals must somehow be part of the interpretive process that (in order) violinists, violists, and cellists undertake.

As for the rest of the concert, Lark showed she's by no means hemmed in by romanticism in her performance of Telemann's compact unaccompanied Fantasia No. 4 in D major. Both that Baroque work and the Kreisler are on a forthcoming CD spotlighting fantasias, a program likely to display the attractive breadth of Lark's playing.

Klimo offered two unaccompanied pieces. One of them, Liszt's "Benediction de Dieu dans la solitude," put forward expansively his prizewinning affinity for the Hungarian composer. The work requires a patient sojourn through the mystical side of Liszt, whose life and music encompasses so much of both heavenly and hellish perspectives. There's a wealth of delicate figuration that has to be brought forth with as much significance as the broad theme that prefigures the kind of "endless melody" for which his son-in-law, Richard Wagner, was famous. A luminous devotion to Liszt-at-prayer seemed complete in Klimo's performance.

The other piece was Marc-Andre Hamelin's sly, effusive tribute to Domenico Scarlatti's binary keyboard sonatas, Etude No. 6 in D minor. Sharing a birth year with Tuesday's birthday boy, J.S. Bach, Scarlatti poured out freshly designed masterpieces by the dozen while serving the Spanish court. Hamelin's witty replication of his model's style, spiced with dissonance (including tone clusters) and repetitive figures, was boldly yet tidily stated in Klimo's performance. Besides its usefulness as a complex etude, the piece seems to comment on the intricacy of serving royalty successfully during its European heyday.