

Jan Lisiecki, Keeper of the Flame

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Jan Lisiecki is a great talent, not only because he plays flawlessly. The musical maturity that accompanies his formidable technique is really something to behold; he plays with the consideration and insight of a musician three times his age. The January 21st programme was especially suited to displaying this young performer's remarkably refined emotional intelligence at the keyboard. In a concert that featured some of the headier, more philosophical works of the literature, Lisiecki demonstrated his complete command of both his instrument and the music he'd chosen to present.

Bach's larger scale keyboard works don't feature on concert programs as often as they should, and to some degree this is understandable. Eager young musicians, who are still under the rigid, though bold spell of Glenn Gould's benchmark interpretations, are apt to offer mechanical and unmusical performances, almost more like math than music. To some degree, Bach's keyboard music suffers from overly clinical interpretations that make it inaccessible to non-musical audiences, to whom it must seem that they what they are witnessing is a rather exclusive dialogue between the performer and Bach, rather than Bach communicating to the audience through the performer. This was not the case with Jan Lisiecki's rendition of the BWV. 827 *Partita*. He gave a retelling of the work that was both exciting and visceral, without sacrificing its musical, human qualities in the interest of stylistic sensibility. We onlookers were presented with playing that was measured, controlled and which highlighted a certain seductiveness to this music that I, for one, had not heard teased out of it before so clearly. Lisiecki is a gifted and thoughtful Bach player and his reverence for this hallowed literature was evident not only in his rendition of the Bach suite, but throughout the rest of the programme as well.

Lisiecki's skill as a mediator between the composer and the audience was put to the test in the not-often heard *Vier Klavierstücke* (Op. 32) of Schumann, contrasted afterwards by the famously original B Minor *Scherzo* (Op.20), and Op.48 *Nocturnes* of Chopin. In the case of the Schumann set, the difficult task of bringing off this highly esoteric, awkward music was met with clarity and precision. The music of Schumann, well-known for both its technical challenges as well as its interpretational difficulties, was unpacked artfully and coherently in this young artist's hands — no mean feat considering that this music demands a player of deep emotional sensitivity and understanding as well. Additionally, Lisiecki clearly feels very at home in the music of Chopin, with whom he proudly shares Polish heritage, and rightly so; the composer's

highly original musical dialect is one to which Lisiecki's nimble and smooth playing is well-suited, and his affinity for these Nocturnes is abundantly clear.

Closing the evening was the well-loved Op.142 set *Impromptus* of Schubert. These works (and indeed much of Schubert's output, in general) bear a unique cross in that when played badly, not even the composer's unequalled melodic inventiveness can redeem it; at its worst, it can be repetitive and plodding. Jan Lisiecki gave the audience Schubert at its very best — this unassuming music is filled with prophetic utterances the sort of which, in the hands of a lesser player, might pass unacknowledged; Lisiecki proved himself more than capable of flushing out the truly humbling moments of genius in this material. Both sets of *Impromptus* date from the painful final years of Schubert's tragically short life and bear similarity with the composer's late piano sonatas and chamber works in that they are highly intellectual, philosophical works. In the hands of this performer, these pieces came off as vigorous but not inelegant, lyrical and songlike without becoming worn out. Schubert is a musician's composer, more than a pianist's composer and it is to Jan Lisiecki's credit that he chose to program these works and rose to their musical demands.

Lisiecki is soon to release a recording of Chopin's works for piano and orchestra on the Deutsche Grammophon label and from it, we can expect yet another impressive addition to what is an already remarkable discography. Equally remarkable is that, so early in his career as an artist, he has been able to prove and establish himself as a musician's pianist, both in his repertoire, as well as in his approach to playing it. I think I speak for all in attendance that night when I say that we look forward to having this talented Canadian artist back, performing in our grateful city, before too long.

(The appreciative audience would also like to extend its congratulations and commendation to Gabrielle Gagnon-Picard, the 2017 ECMS Scholarship recipient who gave an inspired pre-concert recital that admirably featured the music of Canadian composer Alexina Louie. Gagnon-Picard presented the music of both Louie and of Liszt insightfully and passionately. We wish her well as she continues her development as an artist.)