

The 2017 Summer Solstice Music Festival

For the 10th year running, ECMS presented its week-long Summer Solstice Music Festival to grateful audiences in venues throughout Edmonton. This year's edition of the festival brought a diverse roster of international performers to our city for a series of concerts populated with equally diverse musical offerings. Over the course of events, audiences were treated to world-class performances set an eclectic and interesting range of performance-spaces that included the University of Alberta's Convocation Hall, downtown's Yellowhead Brewery, CBC Edmonton's Centre Stage at City Centre Mall, and the Art Gallery of Alberta.

Krzysztof Jablonski (June 21)

by Morgan Luethe

Polish pianist Krzysztof Jablonski opened this year's festival with an impressive programme of French and Russian works. First offered, was Jablonski's reading of Debussy's well-known *Children's Corner* suite (1908), a set of short, descriptive character pieces allegedly inspired by the toys in the nursery of the composer's daughter. While by no means the most prophetic or brilliant of Debussy's keyboard oeuvre, *Children's Corner* gives listeners who might be unfamiliar with the sound-world of this composer an accessible view into his playful and oft-sarcastic musical aesthetic. Jablonski gave a straightforward, professional reading of this work that, at times, verged on being overly-serious, although his interpretations of both *Jimbo's Lullaby* and *Golligwogg's Cake-walk* were appropriately quieting and exuberant, respectively.

Following *Children's Corner* were works by Ravel, his *Gaspard de la Nuit* (1908) prefaced by the playful aquatic-miniature *Jeux d'eau* (1901). As a composer for the piano, few match Ravel's genius for texture and subtle tone-painting. Jablonski's reading of *Gaspard*, while conveying the general atmosphere of the Bertrand poems from which inspiration for the suite is drawn, was characterized by a frankness of playing that at times seemed to anchor the music firmly to the ground rather than let it float alongside the literary imagery it is meant to depict. The ethereal, shimmering water-world of the nymphs in *Ondine* opened the work, and was followed by the grim depiction of a distant gallows illuminated by a desert horizon in *Le Gibet*. Closing the suite was Ravel's homage to the world of the rabid, 19th century keyboard virtuoso. While the difficulty of *Scarbo* is apparent (Ravel once remarked that he himself could barely get through it), it is no empty showpiece; it is as a musical portrait of the poem's Rumpelstiltskin-like titular character that the piece succeeds. Its infamous technical demands were impressively overcome by Jablonski's formidable command of the instrument and, while his rendition of *Gaspard* might have been more literal than *literary*, his performance was immensely gratifying, pianistically.

The second half of Krzysztof Jablonski's recital featured music that had a profound stylistic and formal influence on the music of both Ravel and Debussy. Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* had a powerful influence on the French composers of the early 20th century, both in terms of its effective depiction of a wholly visual experience (that of taking in an art exhibition), as well as the expressive power of its harmonic language. Through these aspects of his art, Mussorgsky lays claim to being a forefather of the Impressionist musical aesthetic so perfected by the French composers of later decades.

Of the entire programme, *Pictures at an Exhibition* was played with the most narrative enthusiasm, and the most exuberance. Especially well-articulated were the dramatic, evolving variations through which the opening familiar *Promenade* theme is put through as the work progresses. While listeners often prefer Ravel's reverent, full orchestration of the piece in comparison to Mussorgsky's original, Jablonski's interpretation of *Pictures* laid bare the structure of the work and lighted upon the composer's unique approach to writing for the piano.