

## Uzbek Sensation Behzod Abduraimov plays Convocation Hall

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By Morgan Luethe

Behzod Abduraimov's September 23<sup>rd</sup> recital furnished the Edmonton Chamber Music Society with a memorable opening to its 2017/18 concert season. Though a relative newcomer to the impressive international cohort of young super-virtuosos that includes the likes of Yuja Wang, Daniil Trifonov and Lang Lang, Abduraimov has already enjoyed a steady rise to prominence over the last half-decade. With two recordings to his credit (issued on the Decca label in 2012 and 2014, respectively), along with a relentless schedule of international engagements, Abduraimov, 27, is well on his way to securing for himself a global reputation as a pianist of ironclad technique and musical talent, whose concerts verge on the spectacular.

The works chosen for this recital, whether intended or not, reminded the audience that there are *two* sides, one technical and one musical, to the art of the virtuoso pianist. Opening the evening's program was the formidable Busoni transcription of J.S. Bach's well-known *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor*. A mimicry of sonorities takes place here as Busoni admirably attempts to reproduce the kaleidoscopic registers and symphonic power of the organ on the piano in the form of demanding passages which prominently feature widely-spread chordal figurations and exhausting octaves. In Abduraimov's hands, the work came off brilliantly; the considerable difficulties of the music seemed to be easily overcome by his supreme command of the keyboard while, musically speaking, it was apparent that this performer understood the crucial demand of the work to be that the piano not be treated as a purely percussive instrument (which it is), but as a wind instrument *like* the organ for which this music was originally intended.

Following this was an astounding performance of the *Piano Sonata in B Minor* of Liszt, a work beloved by pianists and dissected by music-theorists alike, since its publication in 1853. Again, Behzod Abduraimov proved to the audience that there is no technical obstacle too great for his fingers to overcome. The Liszt *Sonata* is, however, as intellectually demanding of the performer as it is technically, as well. For nearly an unbroken half-hour, Abduraimov unfurled a thoughtful and musically unified vision of this vast and intricate work – a feat made all the more astounding when I was told afterwards that his work on learning and memorizing this piece had begun only three days prior to his playing it here in Edmonton.

Following this weighty fare were two relatively light, contrasting works. The second of Schubert's charming *Moments Musicaux* provided an uncomplicated, unhurried respite from the technical and musical gymnastics of the Busoni and Liszt works played just previously. Schubert is not a particularly *pianistic* composer; he was not a great keyboard virtuoso like Beethoven or Mozart had been and, though at times difficult, his now revered piano music was long overlooked because of those same subdued and unassuming qualities for which has become so beloved today. Abduraimov's sensitive interpretation of this superb material showed that he too understands (importantly) that Schubert is first and foremost a *musician's* composer, and pianist's composer second.

The next item maintained a connection to Schubert through Liszt, who would become one of the older master's greatest posthumous champions. During his long career, Liszt transcribed many of Schubert's then still-unknown lieder, orchestrated some of his piano music (in a largely misguided attempt to

“increase” its popular appeal), and even went so far as to expand upon or “improve” existing works. The *Valse-Caprice* is just such a dubious venture and though it retains the Viennese sweetness of Schubert’s original dance, the resulting composition seems only to hitch treacly and gratuitous virtuoso decoration to music that could have easily spoken for itself well enough in the first place. But this is not the pianist’s fault. For all his musical and pianistic genius, Liszt was not immune to moments of musical arrogance and vulgarity; though Behzod Abduraimov gave an unsurprisingly flawless, appropriately flirtatious rendition of this work, the composition itself is comparatively weak, and comes across a little like too much whipped cream on an originally perfect piece of cake.

The most demanding music of the night came at the end, Prokofiev’s A Major Piano Sonata. Abduraimov recorded this powerful work for Decca in 2012 and it has long held an important place in his heart. His playing reflects a deep understanding of this difficult music; to those unfamiliar with it, this sonata can come across as deliberately jarring and harsh with little of the melody or straightforwardness of the night’s previous music. However, Abduraimov should be recognized for his decision to save the most difficult listening for last; Prokofiev’s work is a realistic depiction of its time and place, an aural snapshot of Russia in 1940, when the engines of war were rumbling in the not-too-far-off distance. The point of this music is to disturb the listener and it was clear from his performance that Abduraimov understands it this way too. Beside the technical mastery the audience had by now come to expect, the real, complex emotions of this work were transmitted through this pianist’s evidently deep love for this music throughout his performance.

Behzod Abduraimov showed his Edmonton audience the both the supreme technical mastery and keen musicianship that contribute to his displays of virtuosity at the keyboard. His program featured music that made demands on both the intellectual and physical sides of the pianist’s coin, and he readily met them. If his performance in Convocation Hall is any indication of his focus and devotion his instrument and the music he plays, then audiences can continue to expect great things from him in the future.