

REVIEW: piano recital

Plano's concert brims with skill, musicality, gusto

By Peter Jacobi H-T Reviewer Jun 24, 2019

Roberto Plano (Courtesy photo)

Outside of Auer Hall Sunday evening, following a recital by pianist Roberto Plano, I met a friend who, too, had attended the concert.

"This guy has chops," he said. I had been telling myself the same and shared the sentiment with him, adding, "He is terrific, not only for his astounding technique but for his musicality." Roberto Plano is blessed to have both in magnitude, and that signifies he is an artist of note. Add the fact that he's here in Bloomington now, not just as teacher in the Indiana University Summer Piano Academy but as member of the Jacobs School faculty. His appointment in 2018 assures exposure over time, a more permanent status than before, and that should prove to become a blessing, for both his IU students and for us, the public.

For Sunday's concert, Plano put together an interesting mix of music, built on gratitude. As he told me in a recent interview, his program was "conceived as a tribute to Italy and America, respectively my homeland and my adopted country." Blended in were pieces by Franz Liszt, a favorite composer for the challenges his music poses for even the most gifted keyboard technicians, and by a pair of 20th century Latin Americans, Brazil's Heitor Villa-Lobos and Argentina's Alberto Ginastera.

But let's focus first on a pair of pieces with which he ended, these representing the United States. "The Last Hope" was written in 1854 by Louis Moreau Gottschalk, who lived but four decades and is not so well remembered. "Rhapsody in Blue" was written, of course, by George Gershwin in 1924, a talent who lived just short of four decades and remains well remembered not only for the rhapsody but for pop tunes, musicals and orchestral pieces that masterfully blend the classics and jazz.

The Gottschalk contains music of ennobling and understated nature meant to calm a listener with its gentle flow of radiant sound, sound generated magically by Plano. Gershwin's immensely popular "Rhapsody in Blue" is all excitement, a flood of melodies and rhythmic explosions that Plano tore into with glorious energy and amazing zest. He personalized it, too, with an interpretation markedly different from the reading left us on records by the American Gershwin himself and yet just as honest to the music, despite an approach of unlike colors and rhythmic impulses provided by the Italian Plano. Plano makes the music he performs his own while not getting in the way of composer intent.

Such was the case with earlier items on the program. For each, there was a combined goal of faithfulness and creative response. Though playing a modern grand rather than an 18th century instrument, he stayed true to a bright, Haydn/Mozart atmosphere in a movement labeled "L'Harmonique" from Andrea Lucchesi's 1772 Sonata in C Major, Opus 1, Number 5, clean cut and lovely. Twentieth century harmonies invaded a moonstruck item, "Notturmo," one of Ottorino Respighi's "Sei pezzi," written in the first decade of the 20th century, as was the haunting "Berceuse-reverie" of Giovanni Sgambati.

From Liszt, Plano took "Sposalizio," a portion of the "Annees de pelerinage" devoted to Italy; "Vexilla regis prodeunt," built from a liturgical hymn by the 6th century poet Venantius Fortunatus, and a dramatic paraphrase on the "Miserere" from Verdi's "Il Trovatore."

Latin gusto was celebrated in an impression from "Ciclo brasileiro" by Heitor Villa-Lobos, one of Alberto Ginastera's "Dos canciones" and that composer's "Suite de danzas criollas."

Such variety was given, and the whole of all the parts was staggering. Roberto Plano has the chops, indeed.