

Genova & Dimitrov Duo bring purity and depth to Dranoff 2Piano recital

By Dave Rosenbaum



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The Genova & Dimitrov Duo performed Thursday night for Dranoff 2Piano at Coral Gables Congregational Church. Photo: Victor Victorov

The piano duo of Aglika Genova and Liuben Dimitrov avoided showiness and ostentatious bombast in their concert Thursday night for the Dranoff 2 Piano Foundation at Coral Gables Congregational Church. The purity of their technique was matched consistently by the purity of their tone.

Even the way the Bulgarian pianists presented themselves is austere, eschewing interaction with the audience and not speaking a word—even refraining from introducing the encore. They seem to be saying, “Here it is. This is how the notes are written on the pages. It will have to be enough.” And, remarkably, it was.

Despite (or perhaps because of) this spartan philosophy, Genova and Dimitrov, winners of the 1997 Dranoff 2 Piano Competition, have the ability to make music that can be heartbreakingly beautiful one moment and fraught with high energy and tension the next. It is no great feat to find the soul of Dmitri Shostakovich’s Suite for Two Pianos in F-sharp Minor. The 15-year-old Shostakovich wore his emotions on his sleeve in this memorial to his father, who had died a month earlier.

It is yet another thing to expose the mind of the composer, to allow the audience to explore his thoughts, to see him wrestling with conflicting emotions of anguish and love, fear and respect. In Genova and Dimitrov’s portrayal, we see a young Shostakovich who is grief-stricken but doesn’t want his admiration for his father to be overshadowed by musical melodrama. But, at times, he can’t restrain the depths of his sorrow.

Genova and Dimitrov’s barebones approach to the four-movement work laid bare and heightened all of these emotions, from the severity and gravity of the opening pages to the sweet, airy passages that suddenly segue back into vicious, persistent expressions of anguish. In the second movement, “Fantastic Dance,” Genova and Dimitrov played with crystalline tone before tearing into rapid-fire elucidations of searing despondence. The Nocturne contains some of the most melodic, beautiful music Shostakovich (or any composer) has ever written, a musical declaration of love and despair that Genova and Dimitrov conveyed with restraint and tenderness. In the finale, the depiction of tolling bells, introduced in the first movement, seemed to convey Shostakovich’s consternation about facing life without his father.

There was much to admire in the first three works of the program, too. In Bach’s Concerto for Two Pianos in C Minor, Genova and Dimitrov demonstrated remarkable control and an innate feeling for the melody. The Adagio was sweet and pensive, the final allegro racing but perfectly articulated.

In the introduction to Brahms’ *Variation on a Theme by Haydn*, Genova and Dimitrov’s tone was deep and rich. In the eight variations that followed, they proved adept at handling rapidly changing tempos, whether slow and atmospheric or lightning fast, virtuosic or sometimes just fun. In the seventh variation, the two pianists, with impressive clarity, put one in mind of two lovers taking a walk in the country.

Dimitrov and Genova opened the second half of the program with *Martha and Mary Meditation for Two Pianos*, a St. Martha’s Concert Series commission by UM Frost School of Music Dean Shelly Berg. It’s a brief, alternately serious and energetic work that Dimitrov and Genova performed at Festival Miami in 2014. Berg’s depiction of two biblical sisters with opposite personalities is at turns meditative and light-hearted and deserving of the duo’s advocacy.

The encore was a lovely rendition of Bach’s “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring.”

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