Wang Duo offers lively holiday program for Dranoff Foundation

By Peter James Learn



(http://southfloridaclassicalreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/bild-14.jpg)

Duo-pianists Susan and Sarah Wang performed a holiday program Sunday night in Aventura for the Dranoff 2 Piano Foundation.

As Dranoff Foundation president Gabriele Fiorentino told the audience during her preconcert talk Sunday evening at Aventura Arts and Cultural Center, this performance was something of a homecoming for pianists Sarah and Susan Wang. The internationally acclaimed duo are now based in Germany, but are originally from New York, and were Dranoff laureates in South Florida in 2008. Their concert on Sunday, subtitled "Joy Around the World: Holiday Traditions and Winter Time Music for 2 Pianos," constituted Dranoff's 2014-15 seasonal concert offering.

To say that this was a "holiday concert," though, might be a little reductive; Much of the musical fare was meaty and challenging, showcasing both the virtuosity and mature sensitivity of the Wang sisters. The first half of the program was in a cleverly designed arch format, centered around a set of selections from Franz Liszt's *Weihnachtsbaum* ("Christmas Tree"). These were bookended by arrangements of sections from Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, with lighter, medley-like works at the beginning and end of the first half.

The first of these was the world premiere of an arrangement (by Jeremy Goodman) of Jim Stephenson's orchestral medley *Holiday Chestnuts* for 2 pianos. The Wangs gave a spirited show of it, athletically negotiating the piece's rapid shifts in texture and variety of styles, which range from classical to jazz and ragtime.

Selections from Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, (namely the arias "Ich will nur dir zu Ehren leben" and "Schlie ße mein Herze, dies selige Wunder," and the chorale "Ach, mein herzliebes Jesulein") gave the duo the opportunity to display a more delicate, restrained side. They showed a nuanced grasp of musical structure here in their phrasing and balance, especially in the fugal imitation and stretto sections of "Ehren leben." The duo brought off the *Weihnachtsbaum* selections (actually movements 1, 3, and 4, not 1, 2, and 3, as the program had it) with an appropriately Lisztian combination of exuberance and pious contemplation. The last of these, variations on "Adeste Fideles," was a rousing finale to the set.

The new work by Joshua Rosenblum, *Two Pianos, Eight Candles*, was a cleverly executed and humorous pastiche. The piece, which began with striking, challenging harmonies, quickly revealed itself to be a medley of juxtapositions, not only varying such traditional Chanukah tunes as "Hava Nagila" and "I Have a Little Dreidel," but marrying them to such unlikely accompaniments as quotations of Erik Satie's *Gymnopedie No. 1*, Dave Brubeck's *Take Five*, and a surprising fusion of "Ocho Kandelikas" with Rachmaninoff.

The latter half of the concert consisted of Nicolas Economou's arrangement of Tchaikovsky's perennial holiday favorite, *The Nutcracker Suite*. For this work, the Wang Duo was joined on stage by Chaz Mena, award-winning off-Broadway actor, who narrated. While amusing and evocative, his over-the-top delivery, coupled with the lighting effects that accompanied the scenarios, proved distracting from the music. However, the smooth, polished, and memorized performance given by Sarah and Susan Wang in this work sold it to the crowd and won them an ovation and calls for encores.

In the next Dranoff event, the Trivella Piano Duo performs music of Lowell Lieberman, Gabriela Lena Frank, John Corigliano, John Adams, Giovanni Sollima, and Alice Ping Yee-Ho at 5 p.m. February 8, 2015 at Aventura Arts and Cultural Center. dranoff2piano.org (http://dranoff2piano.org).

Posted in Performances (http://southfloridaclassicalreview.com/category/performances/)