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GENOVA-DIMITROV DUO SERVES UP A DELIGHTFUL PREVIEW TO DRANOFF COMPETITION

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## GENOVA-DIMITROV DUO SERVES UP A DELIGHTFUL PREVIEW TO DRANOFF COMPETITION

by Lawrence Budman, South Florida Classical Review/Miami Herald

Aglika Genova and Liuben Dimitrov avoided the warhorses of the two-piano literature in favor of rarely heard scores and arrangements in a delightful program Friday night at the University of Miami's Gusman Concert Hall, presented by the Dranoff 2 Piano Foundation.

Winners of the 1997 Dranoff 2 Piano Competition, the Bulgarian husband and wife duo are faculty members of Germany's Hanover Music Academy and artistic directors of this year's Dranoff Competition coming in May.

Perhaps the most familiar score was the opener, Debussy's *En blanc et noir*. In this late work Debussy moved beyond impressionism to explore the modernist artistic currents that were all the rage in Paris following World War I. Genova and Dimitrov were alert to the rhythmic curves as well as the flowing lines in the opening movement, the glints of color vivid and strongly voiced.

The second movement, dedicated to a friend of the composer who was killed in battle, opens and concludes in a somber manner with a contrasting central episode that quotes a Bach chorale. Balancing the dark stillness of the outer sections with the forced jauntiness of the middle, the duo projected the music's sense of tragic loss. A fizzy reading of the final Scherzando captured the champagne and bitters of Debussy's keyboard writing, enhanced by the duo's finely balanced interplay of voicing and textures.

Saint-Saens' *Variations on a Theme by Beethoven* is based on the trio melody in the third movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 18. A series of episodes offer Chopinesque filigree, courtly dances and a grand fugue. Displaying Saint-Saens' pianistic ingenuity, this score is both a reverent tribute to Beethoven and bravura duo showpiece. Displaying impressive unanimity of tempo and pulse, Genova and Dimitrov retained a light touch, even in the most rapid contrapuntal passages.

The engaging vignettes of Anton Arensky's *Suite No. 2 (Silhouettes)* displayed the Russian composer's melodic gift. Best known for his Piano Trio No. 1, Arensky could create memorable themes in the manner of Tchaikovsky without that composer's aura of melancholia.

This five-movement suite is replete with witty touches. "The Marionette" is a satirical send up of a march while "The Dreamer" sports a salon tune dressed in imperial Russian garb. The players' lithe trip through the "Coquette" waltz sparkled with brio and their hesitant Spanish bolero rhythms in "The Dancing Girl" captured the insouciant humor of these virtuosic miniatures.

Friday's concert was dedicated to the memory of Sir Richard Rodney Bennett, the British composer-pianist who passed away in December. Bennett's *Lilliburlero Variations* was written for the 2008 Dranoff Competition. A musical chameleon who encompassed the avant-garde of the Darmstadt school, expressionism, jazz, Hollywood and the cabaret, Bennett created a skillfully crafted, eclectic set of variations on an old Irish tune, sculpted with wry sophistication. The Genova-Dimitrov duo's deft articulation and digital power swept through this challenging display piece at white heat.

Rather than the more frequently played Mikhail Pletnev transcription, the duo utilized an arrangement by Adolf Gottlieb of excerpts from Prokofiev's ballet *Cinderella*. More ornate than the Pletnev version, this suite played to the duo's strengths. The "Midnight Waltz" was colored in dark hues while the tolling of the clock was assayed with mechanistic precision and unhinged intensity.

The 12th Dranoff 2 Piano Competition will be presented May 11-16 at the University of Miami. 305-572-9900