

Marvelling at the Talent of Fialkowska by Neville Bowman



Once again, I find myself in a position of reviewing a performance and a talent which I am really not qualified to review. A pianist of such a calibre that at her level of ability and knowledge, describing one as "better" than another is purely subjective, and ultimately pointless. We should just sit back and marvel at such people.

Earlier in the Kelowna Community Concert season we were treated to Kevin Chen, playing with the wonderfully reckless energy of youth, amazing the audience with such ability at his age. This time, in a fascinating contrast, we heard the controlled power, experience and technical prowess of Janina Fialkowska. She is possessing a familiarity and touch on a piano that is seldom heard, ever, and her list of mentors and colleagues is a who's who of the great performers, including Rubinstein, who recognized her talent and went on to become a lifelong supporter. Her awards include Officer of the Order of Canada, Governor General's Lifetime Artistic Achievement Award, honorary doctorates, and a Juno award.

With the exception of Mozart, the entire first half of the evening was comprised of French composers. In fact, with her remarkably consistent style and interpretation, even the Mozart selection slotted in well with the others (he was of course Austrian and much earlier), giving the first portion of the evening a smooth flow, with one composer blending in to the next. Debussy did stand out a little to my ears, as his work has a unique harmonic quality. Of particular interest to me was a short number by Germaine Tailleferre, (Marcelle Germaine Tailleferre), Impromptu in E Major. Many commented on enjoying that piece, and she was rare in a time when female composers weren't often taken seriously. With this piece and all the others, Janina played with a grace and lightness that was a joy to hear, drawing gorgeous tones and dynamics out of the instrument, and the French composers seem to demand a kind of legato that is difficult to maintain.

In the second half, things got a little more lively and familiar, as she treated the audience to Chopin. From the opening Polonaise in A Major, to the final Ballade Opus 23 in G Major, the crowd was murmuring and starting to clap before the last notes had finished ringing. My favourite, Waltz Opus 18 in E-Flat, was so clean and quick, I was amazed at watching her hands on the big screens (a wonderful and well received addition) and the efficiency with which she played. It seemed effortless. By the end of the last Chopin, people were already getting to their feet to show their approval, and she rewarded them with an utterly perfect rendition of Debussy's Clair de Lune as an encore, a lovely way to finish the evening.

We Canadians are a fairly humble bunch, (at least that's the reputation), and known for apologizing. We need to stop, at least when it comes to our talent. Janina Fialkowska is yet another example of how much we punch way above our weight, sending Canadian artistry out in the world to shine and teach and amaze, often with humility and class. A remarkable musician, an unofficial ambassador on a very long list of brilliant Canadian talent who will hopefully grace our local stage again very soon.