

Prodigy Masters Complex Music

by Neville Bowman

How many of us remember what we were doing at the age of 14? I certainly don't have specific memories, but at a guess, most of us were finding our footing in high school, starting to establish our place in the social scheme of things, and playing at sports and other hobbies. Very few of us were achieving a mastery of any given skill, or even possessing the drive required to do so. That takes something else, something special.

Kevin Chen is someone special, an actual prodigy. He has that "something else". At the age of 14 he delivered a powerful, technically wondrous performance to the Kelowna Community Concert audience, pushing the Steinway concert grand to sing in the manner for which it was made. Sometimes that singing turned into a roar. The music of Liszt demands that.

For those not familiar with Liszt, he was the rockstar of the mid 1800s. Considered one of the most capable pianists of his time, even now his name and his compositions intimidate the best musicians around the world. Known both for writing his own music and rearranging the works of others, much of his music was deemed "unplayable" by fellow pianists, simply by virtue of difficulty. So of course, Kevin Chen chose an entire night of Liszt.

The first half of the program was unique, 12 Liszt Etudes. With not a sheet of music in front of him, Kevin played virtually non stop, with only small breaks between pieces to differentiate. The technical requirements and stamina needed to perform these etudes is mind boggling, yet he managed to do it with no apparent fatigue. As a musician, I almost felt exhausted myself trying to keep up with 75 minutes of fantastic playing. Again, remember this is a 14 year old who says he practices 3 hours each day. Remarkable. It was requested at the beginning of the evening that the audience not applaud until all 12 etudes were finished, but there were moments where I could tell that the audience was having great difficulty not clapping. When the final etude was done, the crowd gave a standing ovation, well deserved and very rare for the first half of any performance. Apparently it is not known that any other pianist has performed all 12 in a row, so we were treated to a special event.

For the second half of the night, Kevin played some more familiar pieces, with the undeniable crowd pleaser being the Hungarian Rhapsody No.2. But, as was said to the audience, just because they are more familiar, they are not easier to play. All three pieces in the second half were just as technically demanding as any other, with the third choice, Hungarian Rhapsody No.6 displaying amazing octave work from both hands. I was pleasantly surprised to hear his opening piece, Sonetto 123 del Petrarca, as a softer, almost Romantic piece, not a choice I would expect from a young man. His encore was a brilliant selection, a reinterpretation of a Schuman work. It was just the right length and relaxed the audience after such an intense night.

Was it perfect? There were some spots I thought I heard a "wrong" note or two (hard to tell with Liszt and I am certainly no expert), and perhaps some of the pedal work got muddy in places, so no. But that's being extremely nitpicky. I hope that as he matures, he'll interact with his audience a little. A mind such as his must have some fascinating insights on what he's playing. What I do know is that as he gains more and more experience, his playing will achieve that much more depth and will lead him to be a "rockstar" in his own right. I just hope he never loses that youthful willingness to take on the impossible and get it done. And I really hope I get to hear him perform again. Kevin Chen is a musical force with a long career ahead of him, should he choose that path. Definitely a young Canadian worth watching.

- Neville Bowman - local singer, musician, actor