

Review - The 5 Browns 2021

What's better than one piano played brilliantly? How about two? Let's make it five. Normally, that many pianos would just be a cacophony on stage, a wall of sound to confuse the ear and tire the mind. When it is The 5 Browns, however, it means a wonderful night of diverse beautiful music, technical mastery and personable artists who let us into a little bit of their lives.

I had the pleasure of reviewing these five young pianists six years ago. One of my favourite things as an adjudicator is to see an artist or a group improve, it's what we should all strive for as musicians, and what I saw in this most recent concert was a more mature, cohesive group. Each personality shown through, yet their musicianship and unity within the music was a true pleasure to hear, whether as the full five piece or a duo or trio.

Try this experiment. Find a friend or partner, choose a consonant sound such as "tuh" or "puh" and both make that sound at regular time intervals, matching perfectly. Now, try it with 20-50 friends. It's not easy! The piano is a very unforgiving instrument with a short attack. The smallest mismatch in timing is obvious, yet The 5 Browns played an entire night somehow connecting almost flawlessly, starts and finishes sounding as one, tempo changes synchronous, the music sounding perfectly natural.

The program was well put together, with a nice shift in energy and emotion. They started straight in, no talking, with a wonderful arrangement of pieces from the Nutcracker suite. Following that we saw three pianists on one piano, something unique in my experience but played exquisitely (with a particularly impressive display of technical ability from Desirae). The evening continued to impress, the Browns using arrangements that explored both the power of five pianos, and the delicacy of a fine touch. Throughout the concert each of the five spoke at intervals to give a personal story of connection to the upcoming piece, something I felt really made a difference in our perception of the music. With a theme of Christmas, there were some stunning arrangements of traditional carols, particularly in the second half, and a balance of classical and contemporary music that never allowed a lull in the energy. A notable piece for me was a stunning version of a song called *Still, Still Still*. Played in such a manner, it changed the energy in the room, created a gentle calm that we all need sometimes, that moment to just breathe. For that performance alone, I thank them.

It's tempting to go into detail about each arrangement, from the energy of the bold introduction, to the aggressive, fun back and forth of *Westside Story* pieces, and the contrast of *Oh Holy Night*, warm and familiar. They chose a fantastic, technically remarkable version of Sleighride to end, and honoured the deserved standing ovation with an encore of *In the Hall of the Mountain King*, smiling all along as they played. I'm quite sure they could have kept playing and few would have complained.

When I first saw The 5 Browns, they were very good, their uniqueness as five siblings from Juilliard being the big selling point. Now, a few years later, they have become something more complete, greater than the sum of their parts. Something truly special in the world of music. They left us with only one question, asked by a few as we left the theater. . . what exactly is a wassail...?

Neville Bowman