

Steven Osborne
presented by Vancouver
Recital Society
Sunday, October 14, 8pm
Vancouver Playhouse
by Colin MacDonald

Traditionally, concerts of Western European classical music are very formal affairs, played out to unspoken rules of conduct. Young artists such as Scottish pianist Steven Osborne are making an effort to relax the stiff atmosphere of the performance ritual, to connect with the audience on a more personal level. Stepping onto the stage of the Vancouver Playhouse the first rule he broke was to speak directly to the audience, as he introduced each piece from the stage.

Osborne began his recital with Ludwig van Beethoven's *Sonata in G major, Op. 79*. Described as a shorter work written for amateurs, this piece nevertheless held many challenges for the performer. Osborne had a strong command of the many dynamic shifts in the first movement, creating a lively conversation of voices that hummed and whispered and sang. The final movement gave a taste of technical displays to come, as racing melodies were casually rolled off his fingertips.

Claude Debussy's *Children's Corner* may have been written to entertain children, but its soothing textures hid a complexity that required an adult to perform. Osborne brought out the childlike excitement, wonder, and curiosity of childhood in Debussy's music. His beautiful pedalling created soft washes of harmony amid flurries of notes, waves of energy that dissolved into daydreams and fantasy.

A Processional by George Crumb revealed a more mature sense of mystery. Unlike most of his compositions, Crumb did not rely on unusual sound effects in this work, but his sense of mystical transformation was still evident as a single repeated chord passed through moments of wonder, violence, confusion, and awe. Osborne's control of voicing and dynamic gave the performance an indispensable strength and clarity.

The variety of the programming showed a desire to suit diverse musical tastes, and Osborne went further to break with tradition by including some improvisation and jazz. A tongue-in-cheek invention on "Happy Days Are Here Again" got some chuckles from the audience, but his rendition of Thelonious Monk's "Bemsha Swing" proved that it takes more than clean scales to play in a jazz groove.

Osborne also played a direct transcription of an Oscar Peterson performance of "Back Home in Indiana," but again his jazz feel was too clean and rehearsed. It takes a great amount of dedication to perfect the interpretation of either classical or jazz music, and it is rare to find a performer who can do both with conviction. Osborne did inject some lightness into the recital with these programming choices, but it had the flavour of a novelty act.

Sergei Rachmaninov's *Thirteen Preludes, Op. 32* filled the entire second half of the program. Displaying both technical and compositional virtuosity, these works were by turns majestically exuberant and lyrically reflective, with an undercurrent of melancholy throughout. Osborne shone on delicate melodic passages, but he encountered difficulty in containing the ferocity of louder moments, as though his hands were not large

enough to transmit the intensity of his emotion.

With a confident presence and a somewhat unorthodox presentation, Steven Osborne made many new fans in his Vancouver debut, proving that performers are really just using music to meet friends.