

REVIEW

Pianist Cumming dazzles with sure technique

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By Christopher Hyde

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Lewiston's Franco-American Heritage Center is rapidly becoming the place to go for people who love solo piano music.

Friday night featured Duncan Cumming, a Bates College graduate who studied under Frank Glazer. Cumming also studied in Europe and received a doctorate in music from Boston University, where he serves as assistant director of the young artist's program at Tanglewood Institute.

Cumming, who is also known for playing chamber music with the Cecilia Trio, has matured considerably as an artist. His playing was always technically flawless. It is now thoughtful, deliberate and balanced, without a wasted gesture or any histrionics, rather like Rachmaninoff.

This was shown particularly well in the final selection of Chopin works on the program -- a quasi sonata consisting of the Scherzo in B-flat Minor (Op. 31), the Etude in C-sharp Minor (Op. 25, No. 7), the Waltz in A-flat Major (Op. 34, No. 1) and the Etude in C Minor (Op. 25, No. 12).

The Scherzo, which can degenerate into a warhorse of a display piece, was thrilling, but it also was so well balanced that it became more of a musical experience. The Waltz was played faster than any reading I have ever heard, but the concept worked brilliantly, making the most of the accent change at the close, when it almost becomes a mazurka.

The least successful of the Chopin pieces was the "Ocean Waves" etude. The speed and precision of the passage work was incredible, but the procession of waves became too regular. Even the ocean has rubato.

Cumming began the program with two Debussy Preludes from Book 1, and, like the composer, did not reveal their names until afterward, so that the audience could form its own impressions.

They were Prelude V (The hills of Anacapri) and Prelude VII (What the west wind saw), two of Debussy's most tumultuous creations. The West wind conjures up the right image, although I'm not sure about the hills.

The Preludes were followed by the Mozart Sonata in D Major (K. 284), with its long series of variations as the final movement. These variations show off Mozart's budding genius at the age of 19. In Cumming's performance one could almost see the composer improvising them.

After the Mozart variations, Cumming played a minimalist set of eight by one of his teachers, Martin Amlin (b. 1953). The encores, after a standing ovation, were the Scottish tunes "Mairi's Wedding" and "Annie Laurie."

Christopher Hyde's Classical Beat column appears in the Maine Sunday Telegram.