

Preview

Antonio Pompa-Baldi talks about his November 24 Tri-C Classical Piano recital and his new Poulenc/Piaf CD on the Steinway label

by Mike Telin



On Sunday at 2:00 pm in the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium, the Tri-C Classical Piano Recital Series presents [Antonio Pompa-Baldi](#) in a concert dedicated to Franz Liszt.

“I think it is an interesting program and one that I also recorded in a live recital in Cape Town, South Africa at the end of June for the Two Pianist label,” the pianist told us during a telephone conversation. “It’s a program dedicated to Liszt — but not entirely of his music.”

Sunday’s program opens with Sergei Lyapunov’s *Transcendental Etude No. 12 (Elegy in memory of Franz Liszt)*. “Lyapunov composed twelve Transcendental Etudes just like Liszt, and the set is dedicated to him. I’ll complete the first half with the *Twelve Etudes, op. 10*, of Chopin – which as a set are also dedicated to Liszt.”

The second half of the program features Liszt’s *Ballad in b minor* and *Sposalizio (Years of Pilgrimage, Book II)*. “*Sposalizio* was inspired by Raphael’s painting of the Marriage of the Virgin, and since this is also the Verdi year I’m also including Liszt’s *Paraphrase of Verdi’s “Ernani.”*”

The program concludes with Roberto Piana’s *After a Reading of Liszt*. “Roberto is a friend of mine. I asked him to write a piece dedicated to Liszt and I think it’s one of the wittiest hommages ever. Liszt is heavily quoted. It’s not tongue-in-cheek too much but it has a sense of humor. It’s also an exploration of virtuosic nineteenth century writing but from a modern standpoint. Humorous but tasteful.”

In addition to his active concert and teaching career, Antonio Pompa-Baldi has recently released a new CD, *The Rascal and the Sparrow — Poulenc meets Piaf*, on the Steinway label. The CD interweaves the music of both artists in order to create the sense of an imaginary meeting between Poulenc and Piaf. “We don’t have any actual proof that they ever met, but I personally think that they must have. It’s hard to imagine that they

wouldn't have because they also had many friends in common — most notably Jean Cocteau. And they sort of hung out in the same spots.”

But in the end, Pompa-Baldi didn't think it was relevant whether or not they had met. “I have a friend, Gabriel Tacchino, who is the only student Poulenc ever had, and he told me that Poulenc knew all of the Piaf songs and really loved them — so for me that was enough.”

Pompa-Baldi says the idea for the project came to him on Christmas Day, 2012. “I was sitting at my computer sending e-mails and listening to music and I decided to listen to some of the Piaf songs because I have always loved them.” Soon he began to realize how much he had always wanted to play Piaf's music but knew it was not part of the standard piano repertoire. “Then I started thinking about the fact that it was the 50th anniversary of Piaf's passing.”

After more thinking he says he realized the only piece of music he knew that had anything to do with Edith Piaf is the improvisation *Hommage a Edith Piaf* by Poulenc. “I played through the score. It is beautiful and almost written in the style of a Piaf song — and that was when the idea started to take shape in my head that maybe I could do something.”

Although he always had an interest in Poulenc's music, Pompa-Baldi says he didn't know all of his songs, so he bought the scores and started to imagine having arrangements made for solo piano, which he eventually did himself. “Arranging the Poulenc songs was not too difficult to do — or at least the way I arranged them — because I simply brought the vocal line into the piano part, and through some intricate voicing, I didn't have to suppress any of the notes.” However in the case of the Piaf songs he felt that they were too naked to play with only the chords and melody line. “So I decided to enlist the talents and imagination of a real composer.”

Enter long-time friend and composer Roberto Piana. “I knew that once I tasked him with the job, he would do wonderfully. He took the songs and in some cases respected the atmosphere and the characteristics of the original songs. In other cases — like the very famous *No, je ne regrette rien* — he turned it into a beautiful lullaby. I think Piana's elaborations work beautifully even though I didn't know what would happen when you lost the incredible power of her voice and her charisma — let alone the words.”

Antonio Pompa-Baldi says that he is very happy with the CD and thus far has received positive reactions from many people. “I am very pleased because in a way it's new material, even though every song and melody was already well known. It brings the Piaf songs, that had never been considered to be a possibility for the piano, over to the classical side. And hopefully, if someone doesn't know the repertoire they might not be able to tell which songs are Poulenc's and which are Piaf's.”

So why has the music of Poulenc and Piaf never been paired before now? “Personally I was baffled by the fact that no one had done it before because it makes so much sense. I do find it refreshing to take a little break from the usual repertoire — which of course I crave and need because I love it deeply. But it's nice to think a little bit outside the box

and to find new areas to explore. I really enjoyed it and I'm very grateful to the Steinway label because it didn't take much to convince them. They were immediately interested in the idea."

On December 6 from 6:00 to 9:00 pm at the new [Steinway Piano Gallery](#), Antonio Pompa-Baldi will celebrate his debut album on the Steinway label with a CD launch party. "I will be playing music from the CD. It's free and everybody is invited."

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