

Review

CIM Mixon Masters Series: pianist and improviser Gabriela Montero (Jan. 23)

by Daniel Hathaway



Professional organists carry the skill of improvisation around as an essential item in their tool belts because, like tailors, they routinely have to customize the musical fabric of church services. French organists especially have honed their abilities to the point where they can craft whole symphonies on demand, often on amusingly inappropriate tunes submitted by presenters or audience members — like college fight songs.

Pianists don't often do this kind of thing in public, which made Venezuelan-born pianist Gabriela Montero's appearance on the Mixon Masters Series at the Cleveland Institute of Music on January 23 such a remarkable event. On a series devoted this year to the composer / performer, Montero dedicated the second half of her program to six masterful and stylistically varied improvisations on themes or concepts suggested by audience members (she ended up playing seven).

Inspired by the wintry backdrop of snow drifting down among the trees outside Mixon's glass wall, the first suggestion was the pop song, *Let it snow*, which led Montero to craft an energetic, Bachian two-part invention that morphed into a Mendelssohnian scherzo (a witty reference to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?)

The suggestion that she build a piece on Schumann's *Träumerei* brought forth a Debussy-like fantasy with hints of Scriabin. An initial request for something based on a tune by Lecuona engendered a delightfully raucous Latin number. Switching to concepts rather than musical themes, Montero delivered a crystalline essay on snow — its charms and its dangers — and an impressive tone poem on the subject of "Tango in Buenos Aires."

The odd suggestion that she build a piece around the opening motive from *Parsifal* evoked a short and not so fruitful improvisation, but Montero turned Debussy's *Clair de lune* into a real adventure which began as a Baroque *tambourin* and culminated in a barn-burning ragtime extravaganza which left the audience breathless.

In order to improvise on the spot like that, a pianist has to possess outstanding technique and carry a lot of music around in her brain and fingers. Montero's keyboard technique is flawless and apparently effortless, and her command of musical forms and harmony is exceptional.

Montero demonstrated those qualities —and her superb sense of architecture and pacing — during the repertory section of her program as well. Her ruminative and carefully structured performance of Brahms's *Three Intermezzos*, *op. 117* and her savvy interpretation of Schumann's rangy and cyclic *Fantasia in C*, *op. 17* established her as a first-class pianist with intellectual skills as impressive as her musicianship. Only a medium-sized audience turned out to witness this amazing event. The hall should have been packed in spite of the weather.

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