

Preview**Pianist Martina Filjak returns to Northeast Ohio to play with the Akron Symphony on October 26**

by Mike Telin



“A return performance is always special,” Croatian pianist Martina Filjak told us by telephone from Colorado Springs. “It was a very good concert and I have to say, the people in Akron are not only good musicians but they are also really nice. We left things on a very positive note and that is why this return is so special.”

The concert Filjak is referring to was her 2011 performance of Rachmaninoff’s second concerto with the Akron Symphony. In her review for this publication Elizabeth Kalanja wrote “*What Filjak pulled from the keys was a sensual performance and her stage presence was mesmerizing... The orchestra and Filjak connected in a way that made it seem as if they always performed together and their joint effort resulted in an inspiring performance...*”

On Saturday, October 26 at 8:00 pm, Martina Filjak returns to the Thomas Hall stage for a performance of Tchaikovsky’s *Piano Concerto No. 1* with the Akron Symphony under the direction of Christopher Wilkins. The concert also includes the Sibelius tone poems *Finlandia* and *The Swan of Tuonela* (featuring Cynthia Warren, English horn) and his *Symphony no. 7*.

Since winning first prize at the 2009 Cleveland International Piano Competition (CIPC) Martina Filjak has developed a very busy international career. Her 2013-14 season includes appearances at the Ravenna Festival and Liszt en Provence Festival. Additionally, her performances with orchestras or as a recitalist or chamber music collaborator will take her to Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and the United States as well as to Brazil and Japan for first appearances. Her recording of Schumann’s *Andante and Variations* with cellists Jan Vogler and Christian Poltera was released on Sony Classical in August of this year.

Filjak credits these numerous performing opportunities as playing a vital role in helping her to refine her own voice as a musician. “I feel and I hope that because of having had the chance to only perform and not compete, that my playing has grown and that I have become more myself. There is something about playing concerts and having the freedom

to express yourself without being judged as in a competition. It is normal that it gives a boost to every young player who is experiencing the same process.”

Martina Filjak is very down-to-earth in conversation and when I ask her about performing Tchaikovsky’s first piano concerto she laughs. “It is a popular piece and that is what makes it so dangerous. Everybody knows it, but I think it is a great piece.” She also feels that the concerto is the product of a musical legacy. “I do believe that as pianists we are living and growing up on the legacy of great pianists who lived before us. And composers like Tchaikovsky were building on the legacy of concertos that were written before them.” She points out that Tchaikovsky grew up listening to and performing the concertos of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and Grieg.

“I do believe the first movement is a product of that legacy. It has a very classical form, and I believe that to a certain extent it should be played in a classical way. If you look at the structure and the instrumentation you cannot avoid the close association to, for example Brahms first piano concerto and in the way he uses the octaves in the piano to begin the development, it is identical to Brahms. I’m going to use the word 'legacy' again because I feel like I cannot stress that enough.” She also feels that it is important for the performer to keep the concerto’s structure in mind when performing it, especially during the work's long first movement.

Filjak also believes that the concerto is representative of Tchaikovsky’s maturation as a composer. “It is opus 23 and he was extremely talented, but he was a fairly young guy when he was composing it. But I feel that once he reaches the cadenza it is like the curtain drops and we fly right into what is absolutely recognizable Tchaikovsky. During the cadenza he reaches his own compositional style and that style blossoms during the second and third movements. And it is the same style that we encounter in his other piano concertos, his symphonies and the operas. I feel strongly that he matures throughout the concerto as a composer.”

Although Filjak has been spending a lot of time thinking about these things and she hopes that her thoughts will be conveyed through her playing, it is still important to keep the performance fresh and exciting. “Of course when you are performing a piece you don’t want to sound like you are teaching it to the audience. So there always has to be a good balance between one's thoughts and spontaneity.”

Tchaikovsky’s concerto has also played an important role in Filjak’s own maturation as a performer. “The first time I played it I think I must have been sixteen years old, so it’s actually been half of my life. Of course when I was sixteen I was just looking for a way to tackle it and to play it very flashy. I don’t play the concerto all the time, but every time I do come back to it, because I am listening to more repertoire of Tchaikovsky like his symphonies and also his opera, every time I hear a composition by him a little light bulb gets turned on and I think, oh, that’s what it is.”

In fact, Filjak admits that she is now spending ever more time listening to complete works of composers than she did in the past. “I am finding that nowadays it is more and more important for me to know a composer's chamber music and symphonic outputs. And if they wrote any operas it is important for me to hear and see them because you find

the same elements in the piano works. It gives you a broader picture about what they really thought instead of just practicing the piano.”

At the end of our conversation I ask her if there is anything more she would like to tell me. Martina Filjak quickly responds, “I’m so happy to be back in the Cleveland area and I send a big hug to all of my friends and acquaintances.”

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