

Review**Tri-C Classical Piano Series: Antonio Pompa-Baldi
at the Cleveland Museum of Art (November 24)**

by Guytano Parks



Pianist Antonio Pompa-Baldi performed a recital on Sunday afternoon as part of Tri-C's Classical Piano Recital Series at The Cleveland Museum of Art. Billed as a tribute to the greatest piano virtuoso of all time, Franz Liszt, and described in the program as a "truly compelling combination of emotional fire and finger acrobatics," Pompa-Baldi indeed delivered, performing works dedicated to Liszt by Sergei Lyapunov, Frederic Chopin and Roberto Piana in addition to two of Liszt's own compositions.

In traditional-sounding harmonic language with colorful tinges of bitonality, Lyapunov's *Transcendental Etude Op. 11, No. 12 "Elegy in Memory of Franz Liszt"* opened the program deliberately and dramatically, much like a Hungarian rhapsody. Continuing in true Lisztian fashion with cascades of octaves, scales and shimmering harmonic effects, Pompa-Baldi's playing revealed a musical temperament ranging from the poetic to the virtuosic, with great intelligence and a kaleidoscopic imagination.

As the First Prize winner of the 1999 Cleveland International Piano Competition and top prize winner of several others, Pompa-Baldi's repertoire undoubtedly includes a cache of etudes. Chopin's output (twenty-seven in all, comprising two separate collections of twelve, numbered Op. 10 and 25, and a set of three without opus number) are perhaps the most familiar and popular, and it is a joy to hear them as exquisite little tone poems rather than showy technical studies. In Pompa-Baldi's hands, the *Twelve Etudes, Op. 10* were just that as his affinity for the lyrical and expressive served these gems well.

Flexible rhythms, extremely cantabile playing, exemplary voicing and balance — and yes, virtuosity — were all key in the success of his performance. A restless yearning was expressed in the lovely third etude in E major while the middle section let loose in a flurry of broken diminished-seventh chords, resolving back to the opening melody. In the sixth in E-flat minor, the melody searchingly sang in despair above the moving polyphonic texture in a dream-like manner. The "*Black Key*" No. 5 was effervescent and sparkling and No. 4 in c-sharp minor pulsed with jabbing accents amid the dizzying rush of well-articulated notes.

The right hand writing in No. 1 in C, No. 7 in C and No. 8 in F is in typical brilliant etude style, but Pompa-Baldi subdued the figurations enough for them to be heard, while clearly focusing on the melodies in the left hand. He also tastefully brought out some counter-melodies, enriching the musicality. A masterful handling of dynamics made No. 10 in A-flat blissfully exciting. No. 11 in E-flat impressed with its extended arpeggiated chords and No. 2 in a minor glided chromatically up and down the keyboard smoothly. The final declamatory "Revolutionary" No. 12 brought the set to a stirring and passionate conclusion.

After intermission came a brief onstage chat between pianist Pompa-Baldi and author/journalist Charles Michener about the historical, literary and interpretive aspects of the music on the program, including a demonstration by the pianist of some performance issues in certain Chopin etudes.

Three works by Liszt were next: *Ballade* No. 2 in B minor, *Sposalizio*, and *Paraphrase on Ernani*. The *Ballade* opened with turbulence in the bass of the piano, then was contrasted in the treble with serene and melodic replies. Pompa-Baldi's cantabile and lyrical approach never allowed the decorative figurations to intrude on the melodies as he kept everything in optimal balance here, then again in his tender and supple handling of *Sposalizio* which was inspired by Raphael's painting "The Marriage of the Virgin."

The *Paraphrase on Ernani*, based on themes from the end of Act III of Verdi's opera, is a much more extroverted work and was brilliantly played with its march-like opening, exciting octaves and repeated chords, dazzling chromatic scales and trills. Careful scaling of dynamics made crescendos leading up to climactic points of arrival especially effective.

Roberto Piana's *Après une lecture de Liszt* (composed in January 2013; this performance marks its Cleveland premier), was commissioned by, and dedicated to Antonio Pompa-Baldi. Quoting Liszt twenty-four times throughout, Piana infused this virtuosic homage with light but respectable humor, composing in Liszt's style of utilizing every sonic resource of the piano. Pompa-Baldi executed everything brilliantly while expressively projecting the melodic content at all times.

Poulenc's lilting and bittersweet waltz, *Les chemins de l'amour* (included on Pompa-Baldi's new CD, *The Rascal and the Sparrow*) served nicely as an encore.

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