

CIPC Guest Recital by pianist Drew Petersen (June 4)

by David Kulma



The prize-winning young pianist Drew Petersen gave an excellent guest recital for an appreciative crowd in Mixon Hall on Monday night, June 4, as part of the Cleveland International Piano Competition for Young Artists. His chronologically organized program stretched from repertory mainstays by Beethoven and Chopin to two wonderful American works by Griffes and Barber.

Petersen, who turns 25 this year, is a former child prodigy with professional skills beyond his years. Last year, the Harvard graduate, currently enrolled in Juilliard's artist diploma program, was named the grand prize winner of the American Pianists Awards, an intense year-long competition that tests a pianist's full range. He plays with clarity, elegance, and precise phrasing, and has technique to burn. When he's inspired, he draws out beautiful colors and digs deeply into captivating interpretative depths.

He began with Beethoven's early *Sonata in c*, Op. 10, No. 1. He balanced the lightness and heaviness of the sparkingly dark first movement well, and brought clear textures to the gracious, slow variations of the second. The zig-zagging finale was appropriate, but he could have showcased the music's weirdness rather than papering over it.

Chopin was represented by his three *Grand valse brillantes* and the *Ballade No. 4 in f*, Op. 52. The waltzes were technically impeccable, but Petersen played the A-flat waltz without the supple rhythmic sense of Italian opera (Chopin based his bel canto melodic style on Bellini). The Ballade was lovely and crystalline, but Petersen sounded like a figure skater hitting all his marks without displaying a deeper understanding of this expansive work.

After intermission, the pianist's inspiration was in full view. Written in 1915, Charles Tomlinson Griffes's *Fantasy Pieces* show his affinity for Debussy, and here Petersen brought out his spectacular ability with tone color. The opening Barcarolle was flowing and full of verve, the Notturmo utterly atmospheric, and the ending Scherzo rumbled along beautifully. Petersen painted this melodious music with just the right brush.

Samuel Barber's *Piano Sonata* is his foray into heavy chromaticism that dabbles in twelve-tone writing. Petersen played this astringent and often tempestuous 20-minute work with passion and understanding. The opening was weighty with dotted rhythmic tattoos, while the tinkly second movement was deftly infused with humor. The serious slow movement was full of grandeur, and Petersen's virtuosity in the final boisterous fugue was astounding. It was clear that he was enjoying himself throughout this fantastic sonata.

Petersen finished the evening with an encore: a sonically gorgeous rendition of Chopin's *Nocturne No. 8 in D-flat* from Op. 27. His spellbinding playing showed that he has a brilliant artistic future ahead of him.

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