

Piano Cleveland: Gabriela Montero at Reinberger (July 9)

by Daniel Hathaway



Surely one of the highlights of Piano Cleveland's International Piano Competition for Young Artists this summer will turn out to have been an inspiring guest recital by the amazing Venezuelan pianist Gabriela Montero.

In Reinberger Chamber Hall at Severance on Sunday evening, July 9, Montero presented pristine, penetrating performances of works

from the literature, followed by four ingenious improvisations on musical material submitted by the audience. I watched the recital via the excellent live webcast.

Seated Radu Lupu-style on a straight-backed chair at the Steinway, Montero began with an exploratory journey through Chopin's *Polonaise Fantasy in A-flat*, followed by Schumann's intense portraits of the characters who showed up for the masked ball in his *Carnaval*. After intermission, she gave a finely etched and effortless reading of Stravinsky's *Piano Sonata* with carefully managed dynamics.

Then the real fun began as the pianist presented an engaging demonstration of her improvisatory powers, not unlike her Mixon Masters Series [performance](#) at CIM that many will vividly remember from January 2014.

Montero invited the audience either to suggest by title or to sing themes for her to improvise upon, a skill she began to develop at an age when most of us are just learning to walk. "This is the way I tell stories," she told the audience. "There's no plan, and I use a different part of my brain. Something happens and I go to another place."

Rejecting suggestions of tunes that were already too developed or weren't widely known, she accepted four — Beethoven's *Für Elise*, Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*,

Édith Piaf's signature song *La Vie en Rose*, and the first-movement motive from Beethoven's Fifth — to weave into pieces she would create on the spot.

The results were fascinating, all created without a moment of hesitation or stylistic confusion.



Für Elise began with a sinfonia in which the theme kept popping out. Transformed into a major key and becoming more intense, the piece built on the tension created by the opening notes of the theme.

Rejecting Debussy's *Girl With the Flaxen Hair*, Montero accepted the main theme of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* as a better-known tune, and began with a two-part invention that played with its nervous repeated notes. Things got jazzier as she warmed to the subject, and a hint of boogie-woogie turned into a bass ostinato.

Montero questioned whether *La Vie en Rose* was well-known to the younger generation in the audience. "Yes!" they said, and she obliged with a moody introduction out of which the melody eventually poked its head, then appeared in an inner voice, leading to a triumphant major-key ending.

"Should I do one more?" The Beethoven Fifth theme was introduced with a decorated aria that morphed into a habanera/tango accompanied by laughter from the audience. The concert ended with a prolonged ovation, just as it should.

For more of Montero's improvisational artistry, she's recorded 17 moods of *Für Elise*. Watch [here](#).



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