

HUFFPOST ARTS

Maybe Classical Music Isn't Dying



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Some time ago, while looking at old newspapers from 1954 in the morgue of the *Daily News*, I spotted, next to the article I needed, a tiny item telling readers that a young soprano would be making her Town Hall debut that week. I found it interesting that the *News* considered this news, though I should not have been so surprised. During my years there, when people would stop me on the street to discuss something I had written, it was invariably about my opera reviews.

In this case those attending the debut would have heard one of the most glorious voices of the 20th century, that of Leontyne Price. Did the editors understand the full significance of their item? I doubt it. What remains fascinating was that they considered a soprano's debut worth a few inches of space.

In those days, of course, a debut really did mark the first time an audience would hear a new musician. Wednesday night, when I attended the New York debut of Igudesman and Joo, I was probably the only person in the audience at the 92nd St Y who really did not know their work. From the boisterous reception they received it was clear most of the people there already knew them from YouTube -- their clips have had 20 million hits. (Among those in the audience was Adrien Brody -- their fans include Emanuel Ax and

Gidon Kremer.)

Alexey Igudesman is a violinist, Hyung-Ki Joo a pianist, both virtuosos. They were supposed to have made their New York debut last June, but they were literally "washed out" of Zankel Hall, in the basement of Carnegie Hall, when the adjoining subway was flooded and water seeped into Zankel.

The two met when they were both young students at the Yehudi Menuhin School in England. At a certain point they began combining their music with comedy in the tradition of P.D.Q. Bach and Victor Borge. At one point, for example, Joo, who often adopts a domineering tone, tells Igudesman that they are not going to play the familiar Mozart Rondo Alla Turca in the conventional way. It is written in the minor key -- they will play it in the major, which has a wonderfully giddy effect.

At another point, Joo concedes he has small hands. "That's the only thing that's small," he declares. In order to play a Rachmaninoff piece that utilizes the stretch of the composer's own gigantic hands, he has constructed long wooden devices that strike the huge chords. Igudesman hands them to him with split-second precision as the fiery piece proceeds -- the coordination required to do this stunt is infinitely harder than just playing it straight, which I suspect Joo's hands are completely capable of doing. But the effect is quite dazzling.

As the two explore a wide range of zany ideas, Igudesman finds ways to use his violin as a kind of weird sound effect machine, though he is of course capable of getting traditionally sensuous sounds out of it, as he proved at a party afterward in the spectacular triplex loft of violinist Joshua Bell, where the two played a ravishing duet version of one of the world's greatest melodies, "Danny Boy."

Joo also bossed around Bell, ordering him to play the Bach-Gounod "Ave Maria" more spiritually. Not entirely sure what Joo means, Bell continues getting exquisite sounds out of his instrument while he kneels in prayer, no easy feat.

For me the real debut of the evening was another entertainer at Bell's, a young man known as The Whistler, Michael Barimo. Though he was a discovery for me, he's already

been on Letterman. He has a splendid tenor voice (if you go to his website you can hear a stunning version of an Italian art song, but his special talent is whistling.)

He whistles arias from grand opera. Last night he whistled the fiendishly difficult Queen of the Night Aria from Mozart's "Magic Flute" and the equally difficult Bolero from Verdi's "I Vespri Siciliani." You can hear him whistling Mozart on his website. It is my impression that the sound of his whistle is even richer than when that video was made. He sings with astonishing precision and artistry, with evident respect for the music.

Respect for the music was something that characterized the entire evening -- however wild their comedy, there is no question but that Igudesman and Joo love the music they are toying with. The audience at the Y was full of children -- the two a few rows ahead of me were giggling with pleasure throughout. They were also introduced to a lot of good music -- Satie and Scriabin as well as more traditional fare.

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