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## Culture Monster

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### Music review: Igudesman & Joo, inspired nuttiness at the Broad

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Last spring, Aleksey Igudesman and Hyung-ki Joo made their New York debut at the 92nd Street Y to minimal mainstream press attention. Three days before their West Coast debut Saturday night at the Broad Stage in Santa Monica, the Russian violinist and Korean/British pianist arrived from Europe to play in small-town Warren, Pa.

And even the Broad performance was way, way under the radar. The hall was rented. The bar was closed. The hard-to-find Igudesman & Joo DVD was not to be found for sale. The ticket line was chaotic, as if ad hoc. Although prices were steep, with a \$100 top, a presenter didn't bother to print a local program, handing out instead small booklets from an upcoming appearance in Cupertino, including a happy-hour offer from a Silicon Valley bar.

So let's get one thing straight. With P.D.Q. Bach not quite so quick anymore and in semi-retirement, Igudesman & Joo is the current king of classical music comedy. And if still small in Santa Monica, New York or Pennsylvania, the duo is huge in Europe, Russia and Asia, and it is downright viral on YouTube, boasting 23 million views.

Bernard Haitink and Gustavo Dudamel are big fans. Gidon Kremer is a sometime co-conspirator. Emanuel Ax has chased Joo around the piano and shoved him off the bench. The team turns the severe Russian violinist Viktoria Mullova into "Viktoria's Secret." I was hoping, to no avail, Saturday for a surprise appearance by John Malkovich; a YouTube clip of his strait-laced music critic send-up with the pair is side-splitting.

Since one clip is worth a thousand words, describing the Igudesman & Joo humor in detail would be to deflate its brilliance. For the put-upon Igudesman, think Jack Benny and Jascha Heifetz rolled into one. For the zany Joo, try an unholy Chico Marx, Vladimir Horowitz and Jerry Lewis mash-up.

No slapstick is too crude for Igudesman & Joo -- Joo sings of cows while Igudesman makes mooing sounds on his violin before Joo segues into "Moon River." Nor is any classical music joke too inside baseball, if I may mix metaphors, since that is exactly what these guys do musically in inconceivably versatile fashion. Saturday's crowd, which included families with small children and well-dressed date-night couples, was kept in stitches, of course. But also in musical thrall.

The Igudesman & Joo anthem is Gloria Gaynor's '70s hit song "I Will Survive." Igudesman begins it as if singing a Russian folk song, and he electrifies it by playing on the violin strings with an electric swizzle stick (on a priceless 1717 Santo Seraphin violin, no less). Ultimately, it survives -- barely and hilariously -- as an unclassifiable audience sing-along. But the idea of surviving is also a serious business with these two miraculous performers.

In their act, titled "A Little Nightmare Music," they survive in a world where music of all sorts comes at us from all sides all the time, where machines rule, where everyone is harassed by something, where stress is endemic. But when James Bond and Mozart duke it out and both win, when Bach morphs to tango, when Joo falls asleep under the piano and wakes up playing Satie upside down, when the pianist bests a credit card-operated Steinway, we are permitted to fantasize that maybe this is, if not always the best of all possible worlds, not the worst either.

Joo complains that Rachmaninoff had big hands and that he has small hands ("only hands small," though). So the pianist is helped out in the C-Sharp Minor Prelude by a fumbling Igudesman throwing the pianist notched boards, a feat of head-scratching magic. Elsewhere, Joo, in apron, sweeps up during an Igudesman solo. The violinist's facial expressions are pliable and his legs elastic. He is straight man and plastic man. Joo is manic. Before your disbelieving eyes, they turn it into a stomping Riverdance number.

Nothing is ever, with these two, as it seems. Joo plays Beethoven with karate hammer chops. Igudesman handles his bow like a samurai's sword. They play fast, sometimes unbelievably fast, and loose (equally unbelievable) with composers. Joo sorts sheets of music and Igudesman, musically bouncing off the wall, flits from one classical chestnut to the next in dazzlingly quick midmeasure.

Through it all, Igudesman & Joo personify the idea that with skill and devotion and a good nature and perfect comic timing, we can do more than merely survive, but enjoy ourselves. The violinist and cellist, it should be mentioned, are music education advocates. They preceded Saturday's show with master classes at UCLA and the Santa Monica Academy of Music.

They must come back, and next time let it be big time. *Hello*, Hollywood Bowl. We need them maybe more than we know.

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-- Mark Swed

*Photo: Hyung-ki Joo, left, and Aleksey Igudesman at the Broad Stage Saturday night. Credit: Barbara Davidson/Los Angeles Times*

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