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Some Hefty Chops, Seasoned by Antics

Igudesman & Joo Join Philharmonic at Avery Fisher Hall

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During the New York Philharmonic's New Year's Eve concert at Avery Fisher Hall, the pianist Hyung-ki Joo revealed the three simple steps necessary to make it in the music business: 1. Always smile. 2. Play only music that everyone knows. 3. Show off.

That's also the recipe he adhered to with the violinist Aleksey Igudesman, his partner in the comedy duo Igudesman & Joo, in the evening's exuberantly silly program. But there's nothing simple about it. Their blend of classical music and comedy, laced with pop culture references and a wholly novel take on the word slapstick, is fueled by genuine, dazzling virtuosity. It's that final ingredient that adds a dose of magic to their routine — and proves infectious to other musicians.

Because on Tuesday evening, the entire Philharmonic came out to play, in both senses of the word. The musicians headbanged to the theme of Europe's "The Final Countdown." They sobbed theatrically when Mr. Joo segued from the Adagio of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto into the pop ballad "All by Myself." Rebecca Young, the associate principal violist, showed off some fancy footwork in snazzy salsa moves. And a whole chorus line of Philharmonic players (including the principal cellist, Carter Brey, hugging his Guarneri to his chest) came to the front of the stage to perform an Irish step dance, all the while playing their instruments.

Mr. Igudesman and Mr. Joo met as students at the Yehudi Menuhin School in England, where they developed the technical chops to start solo careers. Instead, they joined the sparsely populated world of classical comedy with sketches that on YouTube have scored tens of millions of views. Tuesday's program featured some of their most popular ones, including the "Riverdance" tribute, which grows out of a scene in which Mr. Joo, impersonating an obtuse cleaner, sweeps around the feet of Mr. Igudesman, forcing him to jump over the broom. Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" becomes the starting point for a musical medley that traverses centuries and styles, including a Baroque fugue and that headbanging fanfare from "The Final Countdown." Mozart's "Rondo Alla Turca" becomes "Alla Molto Turca" when Mr. Igudesman first transposes it to A major and then adds B flats, giving it an injection of Balkan klezmer fever that suits it surprisingly well.

Then there is the physical comedy, which approaches the level of acrobatics. Mr. Joo, complaining of lacking the necessary hand span to play the huge chords of Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C sharp minor, enlists the help of Mr. Igudesman, who supplies him with wooden sticks fitted with knobs that are precisely spaced to fit the chords. The conceit itself is funny, but the fluid way in which the two men tossed the sticks back and forth to each other was hypnotic.

There were further jaw-dropping acrobatics in Mr. Igudesman's kung fu rendition of Kreisler's "Tambourin Chinois" — itself a devilishly difficult piece — when he performed it standing on one leg, then with his bowing arm threaded under the raised thigh, and finally with a bow that was clownishly short.

Alan Gilbert, the Philharmonic's music director, took revenge on the cellphone trolls of concerts past. "Do you ever feel your cellphone ringtone doesn't match the music you are disturbing?" he asked, before offering a special Philharmonic ringtone potpourri in which the original dee-dee-deeee-dee "Grand Waltz" kept popping up dressed up as Beethoven, or Ravel or Mozart. I'm downloading mine now.