PianoSummer opens season at SUNY New Paltz

By James F. Cotter

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PianoSummer opened its 21st season of concerts, teacher, student recitals and competition under Vladimir Feltsman, artistic director, Saturday evening at SUNY New Paltz’s Studley Theatre with its annual Faculty Gala featuring six keyboard instructors.

From baroque to modern music, the program offered piano pieces played with amazing skill and personal interpretation, mostly from memory, by world-class artists. The selections built to a climactic performance that brought the capacity audience to its feet for the six performers gathered on stage amid bouquets of flowers.

Feltsman himself opened the concert with Bach’s Partita No. 1 in B flat Major, his first work to be published in 1726 when he was 46. It’s a lighthearted piece that the pianist’s lightning fingers played with grace and agility.

A three-part prelude in slow motion is followed by seven dance movements in variations of the main theme.

An allemande with rapid scales and corrente of rolling triple meter is followed by a smoothly soothing sarabande.

Two minuets pick up the tripping tempo that leads full speed to the final gigue with triplets and cross-handed flourishes. Feltsman made it look easy with flowing perpetual motion. Paul Ostrovsky played Beethoven’s “Andante Favori in F major” with quiet measured pace in rondo form with variations on a four-note theme and his “Rondo alla ingharese quasi capriccio,” a rollicking run of arpeggio scales and fast and furious attacks.

The soloist sped through his score with rapidly turning pages and flawless timing. Humorously titled as “Rage over a lost penny, vented in a caprice,” the piece is a challenging tour de force that Ostrovsky brought to vigorous life.

Susan Starr did the same for Chopin with her warm, masterful playing from memory of Nocturne in B flat minor, a sonorously haunting theme imbedded with warm poignant emotion, and of Etudes Op.25, No. 1 in A flat major and No. 2 in F minor.

High octaves soar from the right hand in a lovely melody in the first etude and shift to rapidly rising rhythms in the second. Starr explored the inner voices with original attention to shifting phrases and tone in a perfectly satisfying performance.

After intermission, Robert Roux played by heart three parts from Brahms’ “Klavierstucke.”

Intermezzo No. 1 in A minor is a quick-fingered allegro that leads to Intermezzo No. 2 in A major, a longer lyrical andante that embodies the romantic ideal of beauty and sonority.

Intermezzo No. 6 in E flat minor is also an andante but with a melancholy mood echoing the “Dies Irae,” and Roux made each note matter in his expressive interpretation as he moved from sadness to passionate resignation.

Robert Hamilton introduced Bartok’s Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs with a brief moderato statement of the folk motif followed by seven variations of changing tempo and atonal dissonance. Hamilton’s forceful attack on the complex score from memory was awe-inspiring and fully engaging.

From sharp chords and birdlike anthems to quick stops and low and high octave leaps, he met each challenge with virtuoso confidence.

The same virtues marked Alexander Korsantia’s arrangement of Ravel’s “La Valse.” Low brooding chords soon yield to the lovely melody that emerges from the groundswell. Lilting trills surge over the swirling scales and heavy glissandos as the keyboard transforms the Viennese waltz into something rich and strange. Exuberant fortissimo chords engaged the soloist in a physical performance of strength and excitement that brought listeners to their feet.

PianoSummer is off to a great start. For more information and tickets, call the box office at 257-3880 or visit newpaltz.edu/piano.