

MUSIC

Review: Diabolical Diabelli at Rutgers, With New Variations

By JAMES R. OESTREICH FEB. 24, 2015

The Piano Studio of the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers pulled off a neat trick last week. Its program at Weill Recital Hall, “The Unknown Diabelli Variations,” strayed far from the beaten path and, most notably, avoided Beethoven, the composer of the actual work called “Diabelli Variations.” Yet Beethoven’s ghost was a constant presence, looming over the proceedings with, undoubtedly, a wry smirk.

The story is familiar, at least in bare outline. In 1819 Anton Diabelli, an Austrian composer and music publisher, wrote an inane little waltz theme in C and sent it to dozens of composers prominent in Austria at the time (now mostly little remembered), inviting each to write a variation on it. Fifty complied, including Schubert, Liszt and Mozart’s son Franz Xaver. Diabelli published most of the resulting heap in 1824 as an anthology, “Vaterländischer Künstlerverein” (“Patriotic Association of Artists”).

Beethoven, ever a law unto himself and an inveterate overachiever, dismissed the tune as a “cobbler’s patch,” then sent in a magisterial set of 33 variations. Diabelli published it in 1823, enhancing Beethoven’s renown and making the publisher’s name immortal.

The 1824 compilation was evidently not intended to be performed complete. Diabelli made no attempt to impose an overall dramatic arc. He merely strung together the variations in alphabetical order by composer and added a grandiose

coda by one of them, Carl Czerny, who studied under Beethoven and remains famous for his keyboard exercises, which are still in wide use.

In running commentary from the stage at the concert on Feb. 17, Min Kwon, the artistic director of the Rutgers studio, cited a precedent for performing the complete compilation: a concert in Brisbane, Australia, in 2009. She added that there may well have been others. But the studio's Diabelli project was distinctive both in supplementing the collection with seven variations written for the occasion by young composers of the Mason Gross School and in dividing the 57 variations among 25 pianists.

It was a remarkable evening, showing the high level of virtuosity that composers took more or less for granted on the still-developing piano in the first quarter of the 19th century. Liszt, who would go on to carry that virtuosity to its heights, was only 11 when he wrote his variation, but his flamboyance was already in place. Schubert, No. 38 alphabetically, grabbed attention in an understated way, with a subtlety rare here, swaddling the theme in luxurious colors and harmonies. The concert also revealed a wide range of pianistic and compositional gifts among the students, undergraduate as well as postgraduate. Any singling out will be unfair to many others, but Jisu Kim, Yun Kyung Choo, Kelly Yu-Chieh Lin and Robert Grohman stood out among the players.

Several of the newly composed variations were notable for their humor. Among the most immediately captivating were those by Edgar Girtain and Chung Eun Kim, and a four-handed variation by Matt Anderson, played as an encore.