

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Míceál O'Rourke

With singular poise and velvet cat's paw touch, Irish pianist Míceál O'Rourke inaugurated the Washington Performing Arts Society's spanking new Steinway concert grand at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater Saturday Afternoon.

Opening with two compositions by countryman John Field, O'Rourke demonstrated why he is considered something of a Field scholar. The "Chanson Russe Variee" mixed a flair for dancer's pacing with trills smooth as whipped butter. Precise diction on Field's Nocturne No. 14 in C established moody extremes with repeated base chords and treble cascades. (Field, who died in 1837, is credited with inventing the nocturne form, which elucidates an emotion rather than a melodic thesis.)

O'Rourke pulls the afterlife from a note, unfurling a thread then winding it back. The Chopin 'Polonaise-Fantasia' Op. 61, featured graceful open chord ascents using residual tone, then launched into a deceptively placid exploration of a recurring waltz motif. Deceptive, because of the ensuing showy cadenza passages.

Debussy Estampes, a trio of meditations on places – pagodas, evening in Grenada, a garden in the rain – demonstrated that O'Rourke readily shifts gears from staccato syncopation that prefigures Gershwin to keystrokes so delicate that a real drop of rain thunders by comparison.

The program closed with Schumann's "Carnaval", Op. 9, a pastiche of 21 elements combining manic and sober styles, which demands accelerating mood and touch shifts on short notice. Whether this sounds like a patchwork from the cutting room floor or an artful integration depends on the musician's skill; O'Rourke brilliantly demonstrated the latter. Four encores included a Romanian folk dance by Bartok and a waltz by Field.

-- L. Peat O'Neil

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