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M.U.S.i.C presents a concert of spooks (Oct. 30)

by Kevin McLaughlin



A private home in Cleveland Heights, filled with guests in 1920s garb and Halloween costumes, became a congenial gathering place for ghosts and goblins and regular folk on Friday evening, October 30 as M.U.S.i.C. — Stars in the Classics presented its Halloween Musical Salon.

Lucas Peters and Jackson Naglick opened the gates of hell with Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain* in a two-piano arrangement, conjuring a witches' sabbath with furious rhythms and crashing chords. They supplied orchestral firepower along with the precision to keep the proceedings from running amok.

Qiye Li took on H.W. Ernst's formidable *Grand Caprice* on Schubert's *Erlkönig*, which asks a solo violinist to sustain a galloping accompaniment as a backdrop to a four-character drama. Li's commitment was evident, though technical difficulties sometimes got in the way of the storytelling.

As emcee and host Jodi Kanter explained, M.U.S.i.C.'s mission is to provide performance opportunities for emerging classical musicians in Northeast Ohio. There's something thrilling about hearing young talent, especially when you get to rub elbows with the performers afterward.

Baritone Charles Shaun Bohrer, accompanied by Naglick, explored two varieties of the macabre. In Schubert's *Der Doppelgänger*, he addressed his ghostly double with eerie stillness, as though communicating with another world. Later, in Bolcom's *Song of Black Max*, he revealed his theatrical side with the tale of a sinister figure reminiscent of Sweeney Todd. We were both charmed and chilled.

Soprano Shira Ziv was a bright light in the Halloween darkness, appearing as a witch in Mendelssohn's *Hexenlied*, Mozart's Queen of the Night in "Der Hölle Rache," from *Magic Flute* and a strangely pleased chronicler of Mack the Knife's misdeeds in the Kurt Weill song. She brought beguiling presence and vocal agility to the Mendelssohn, though Mozart's stratospheric coloratura proved a greater challenge. Naglick accompanied with energy and assurance.

Cellist Brendon Phelps impressed with an actor's bearing and solid technique. In Dolores White's *Las Tarantulas* (1992), he brought out the folk-song character and jerky rhythms of a tarantula-bite victim. De Falla's *Ritual Fire Dance* had a smoldering intensity that grew through its ghost-banishing ritual.

De Falla's *Dance of Terror*, from *El amor brujo*, portrays a young woman's fear of her dead lover's ghost in frantic rhythms and sharp accents. Violinist Yahli Anter and pianist Yao Xiao delivered a confident, rhythmically incisive performance of Kochański's arrangement.

Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre* summons skeletons to a midnight waltz, ending with a rooster's crow at dawn. Flutist Jake McQuaid caught the music's sly humor and mounting frenzy, while Xiao supplied the original's orchestral bustle. The final crow, though, was less convincing on the flute.

Ravel's "Scarbo," from *Gaspard de la nuit*, depicts a goblin who darts about, grows monstrous, and vanishes. This was both a trick and a treat. Peters seemed not to worry a whit about its lightning-fast repeated notes, enormous leaps, and dynamic extremes, and timed the creature's antics uncannily well.

Chris Neiner's *Red Riding Pictures Proudly Presents* (2022) was an intriguing discovery. Originally a sextet, the silent-film-style retelling of Little Red Riding Hood was performed here by clarinetist Justin Wisner, cellist Phelps, and Neiner at the piano. A jaunty fanfare launched a woodland journey, a wolf encounter, and a huntsman's rescue. Among Neiner's inspirations was published photoplay music by Cleveland-born John Stephan Zamecnik, once music director at the Hippodrome Theatre.

With guests dressed for the occasion and music-making a social affair, the salon recalled an earlier era of house concerts. The hors d'oeuvres, company, and old-fashioned ambience were pleasures of their own. There was plenty to be frightened of, though little reason to fear for the music.

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