

Leung's Mastery Goes Way Beyond Gaming

By Fred Volkmer

Martin Leung, the featured performer at last Saturday evening's piano recital at the Southampton Cultural Center, has achieved a certain amount of fame on the internet as the "Video Game Pianist," also as the "Blindfolded Video Game Pianist," and, if you do a Google search for him, you will find more than 31,000 references to him on the web.

He has an extensive article devoted to him on Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia. He was launched into celebrity at age 17 (he is now 20) by a video clip of him playing, blindfolded, the theme of "Super Mario Brothers," a clip that has been viewed on YouTube more than one million times. He performs all over the country and throughout Europe playing the music of video games. At one video game performance he was encouraged to give 21 encores.

But Mr. Leung is also a serious classical musician. He is a student of Paul Schenly at the Cleveland Institute of Music and has been a participant in Pianofest for the last two summers. His performance on Saturday certainly dug deep into the classical repertoire.

The Cultural Center's performance space, known as the Levitas Center for the Performing Arts, is probably the finest on the East End, though it is certainly intimate. It was designed by the late Michael Tortorice, a member of the Cultural Center's Board, with the acoustical advice of Norman Pickering.

The Cultural Center's series of classical piano recitals has been a very important part of the East End's musical life for the past four seasons, organized and presented by Liliane Questel, a member of the Cultural Center board and a classical pianist.

Mr. Leung began his program with Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 8 in C minor, Op. 13, the "Pathétique."

The piece opens with a grand rhetorical statement, marked *grave*. This is heaven-storming Beethoven. It delays the feverish body of the first movement, but fragments of that powerful opening make dramatic reappearances twice.

Some consolation is offered in the second movement, marked *andante cantabile*. And the final *presto* movement provides some sense of positive affirmation. The fleet-fingered Mr. Leung gave a thoughtful and compelling interpretation of this, one of the great masterworks of the piano literature. One felt dramatic power, sensitive nuance, and moments of sheer poetry.

The central portion of his recital was devoted to several of the "Lyric Pieces" of Edvard Grieg. Grieg wrote 66 of these pieces, and I confess to a special fond-

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ness for them. They have added to the world's store of beauty, a beauty that the world has always so desperately needed.

The "Lyric Pieces" are little miniatures, heavily influenced by Schumann, and are delightful for their inwardness and their lyrical expressiveness. This is especially true of the "Arietta" and the "Berceuse" on Mr. Leung's program. Then, there were those pieces, like "Elfentanz" (Dance of the Elves) and "Zug der Zwerge" (March of the Trolls) filled with echoes of Norway's folklore, in which trolls and elves play a large part.

These require the kind of knuckle-busting technique of which Mr. Leung had so much to spare. He concluded with "Hochzeitstag auf Trolldhaugen" ("Wedding Day at Trolldhaugen"), which was rapturously joyous and completely engaging. Toldhaugen, Grieg's country home, is translated as "Troll's Hill."

Mr. Leung closed the program with Chopin's Andante Spianato et Grande Polonaise, Op. 22. The polonaise was originally written with orchestral accompaniment, but Chopin wrote this second version for solo piano. And, in fact, the orchestral writing is so spare that many feel it isn't necessary.

The Spianato was written after the polonaise and grafted on. It is a wonderfully poetic work and Mr. Leung drew out of it all of its exquisite beauty. The polonaise was full of glitter and nationalistic feeling.

Mr. Leung, such was his good nature, took a request from one young member of the audience to play "Halo," which is the music from a video game. I have to confess that I liked it. He closed with the Liszt Transcendental Etude No. 10 in F minor.

Mr. Leung gave a colorful performance, varied and played with an astonishing technical assurance. In the Beethoven he reached into the depths of the piano for the sublime and brought out the intimations of it that the audience expected.

In the Grieg he found wit, tenderness, and moments of the grotesque; in the Chopin he served up a heart-on-the-sleeve romanticism. And his video game music is an indication that he is more than a little playful. He is clearly a pianist to watch.

This was the final performance by a guest soloist in the 2006-2007 series at the Cultural Center. By popular request, Liliane Questel, the series organizer, will perform on May 5.