



REVIEW

Energy and Fire

*'Close Encounters with Music' from Scottsdale,
heard by MARLA NOCKIN*

On 2 February 2012, the Scottsdale Center for the Performing Arts presented the *Close Encounters with Music* program *Lisztomania*. This chamber music series involves not only the music, but also fascinating commentary by cellist Yehuda Hanani that adds considerably to the audience's understanding of the works. For example, before pianist Jeffrey Swann played two of the *Legends* by Franz Liszt (1811-1886), Hanani explained that the first told of St. Francis of Assisi preaching to the birds and the second of St. Francis of Paola walking on the waves. When the latter saint was refused passage on a boat, it is said that he laid his cloak down on the water and rode on it across the Strait of Messina between Calabria and Sicily. Liszt owned a painting of St. Francis of Paola walking on the water and he captured the story in music. Swann's sensitive performance communicated the musical picture of a passage through rough seas with high waves rushing to the shore.



Jeffrey Swann. Click on the image for higher resolution

The second group of Liszt pieces consisted of the *Romance Oubliée*, *La Lugubre Gondola*, and three of his *Consolations*. Most of the music on this program was written in the latter half of the composer's life. The *Romance* dates from his sixty-ninth year but it still has the feeling of romantic love when played by piano and cello. *La Lugubre Gondola* seems now to have prophesied the death of Wagner, which took place in Venice a short time after the work was written. The German composer's funeral procession began with a gondola leading the procession to the railway station. Hanani and Swann played the piece with emotion-filled elegance that was never exaggerated or overstated. Three *Consolations*, short pieces that Liszt wrote around 1850, were the simple romantic delights that completed the first half of this concert.



Yehuda Hanani. Photo © Judith Grunberg. Click on the image for higher resolution

After the intermission, came the *pièce de résistance*, the C minor Piano Trio, Opus 66, by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847). He composed this expertly crafted trio in 1845 and it was the last chamber piece published during his lifetime. The first movement is marked *Allegro energetico e con fuoco*. Hanani, Swann and phenomenal young violinist Tim Fain played it with all the energy and fire that any composer could ask for. It was the beginning of a brilliant rendition. The plaintive theme that followed was an opulent contrast to the more urgent music at the end of the movement. The middle movements marked *Andante espressivo* and *Scherzo: molto allegro quasi presto*, gave us a spectacular dialogue between the strings and the keyboard. There were also gorgeous harmonies between violin and cello.



Tim Fain. Photo © Briana Blasko. Click on the image for higher resolution

For the finale marked *Allegro appassionato*, the trio played propulsively and they seemed to coalesce as one unit because each was so responsive to the other. They were truly an impressive group. All of the pieces played this evening require considerable virtuosity and these musicians played them with consummate ease. Happy for Arizona music lovers, *Close Encounters with Music* will return to Scottsdale on 8 March 2012, with performances of piano quartets by Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms. The soloists will be cellist Yehuda Hanani, pianist Lydia Artymiw, violinist Arnaud Sussmann, and violist Toby Appel.

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