

Ilya Itin performs a newly discovered piece as part of the Golandsky Institute Summer Symposium at Princeton University.

CONCERT REVIEW: A PROKOFIEV EVENING, RICHARDSON AUDITORIUM, PRINCETON, NJ, JULY 17

👤 Ilona Oltuski 🕒 August 15, 2009 👁 18 Views

Summer music festivals are the ideal frame in which to bring classical music performances to an audience that might not otherwise venture out to the famed concert hall stages the big cities have to offer. Often located in serene settings, the informal character lures families and interested spectators to a performance experience which can be rewarding on so many levels.

While relatively low production budgets and minimal publicity lend themselves toward a casual atmosphere, audiences are sometimes treated to extraordinary performances of artistically high caliber. Such was the case at the 2009 Golandsky Institute Summer Symposium at Princeton University's "Prokofiev Evening," held on July 17 in Princeton's Richardson Auditorium.

Russian pianist and Leeds Gold Medalist Ilya Itin began the performance with the world premiere of Sergei Prokofiev's "Music for Athletes," followed by "Peter and the Wolf" and "Piano Sonata No. 7," and the audience, enchanted by Itin's talent and charm, was as elevating to observe as was the stage. The historic impact of being witness to the presentation of a previously unknown work by a great composer of a bygone era was felt in the excitement that filled the magnificent auditorium.

"The piece was originally commissioned for the 'All Union Spectacle' of 1929 in the U.S.S.R. and was – due to the dramatic political history surrounding its composition – never performed," explained the program pamphlet, which was based on Simon Morrison's book, *The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years*, (Oxford, 2009).

The concert's producer, Adrienne Serkin, first thought to bring "Music for Athletes" to the public after attending a lecture given by Princeton University professor and Prokofiev scholar Simon Morrison. Morrison had discovered the lost piece while conducting research for his recently published book about Prokofiev's life in the U.S.S.R, and Serkin, a long-time participant in the Golandsky Institute's Summer Symposium, decided to get involved.

For Serkin, the internationally renowned Itin was the natural choice to perform the premiere of Prokofiev's recovered piece. A master of the Russian 20th century piano repertoire, Itin is on the faculty of the Golandsky Institute and teaches private and master classes at its Summer Symposium.

Since Morrison was unable to attend and introduce the program as planned, Serkin drew the audience into the historical context in which the work was conceived and the more recent process by which it was prepared for its premiere. The latter was a collaboration between Itin's conceptual mastery of the piano part and Princeton choreographer Jenny Scholick's assembling of six dancers, Serkin explained, all within an extremely short rehearsal period.

As the dancers and Itin entered the atmospheric, dark stage, Itin found his place at the piano behind the dancers, who exclaimed their quasi red army character, bellowing army commands into the audience but with Princeton colors on their athlete tricots and shouting salutations to the University president in reference to, but in place of, Stalin. The masterfully executed piano performance gave the spectacle its highly artistic value.

"Music for Athletes" was followed by Itin's charismatic solo performance of the original "Peter and the Wolf," commonly known as an orchestral piece but initially composed at the piano. The popular orchestral version is known to introduce young listeners to the different instruments that make up the orchestra by representing each character of Peter's tale with a recurring melody assigned to a specific instrument. The enormous challenge posed by Itin's score, of course, was to produce the multiple distinct characters and orchestral voices without the multiple instruments. But the solo pianist's polyphonic "orchestration," supported by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Paul Muldoon's narration, managed to establish a vital communication with the audience and bring each of Prokofiev's characters to life.

The program was filled with profound difficulties, like the "Sonata No.7," premiered by Svyatislov Richter in 1944 in Moscow. Prokofiev had composed the sonata with Richter, his favorite pianist, in mind, and it is, as the program pamphlet notes, one of the more "challenging and mesmerizing" pieces in piano literature.

Adding yet another nuance to his listeners' emotional experience, Itin's encore piece, a beautifully rendered Chopin nocturne, stood out as a generous offering to the audience, well aware of their privilege to have shared, for an evening, in Itin's intimate knowledge of the highest craft of piano playing.