

In the limelight

Rudolf Budginas

By Graham Dixon

‘It’s hard to be a cowboy and a concert pianist at the same time.’ A pearl of wisdom from the talented and entertaining Rudolf Budginas as he sported a jaunty cowboy hat, purchased for a concert in North Dakota. Anyone lucky enough to attend his Live on Stage! Concert last Thursday experienced both virtuosic pianism and a well-honed comedy routine, together with a genuine passion for communicating the joy of music.

Budginas, a naturalized American from Lithuania, spoke with a winning accent as he joked about his name being not one, but two beers – Bud and Guinness. One of the remarkable aspects of this performer is his ability to move so smoothly from witty raconteur to consummate musician. He made

affectionate fun of the supposed dullness of Beethoven by repeatedly playing a G-sharp before illustrating how it is in fact an integral part of the famous second movement from the Moonlight Sonata. Many phrases had a Chopin-like flourish as we heard this often played music as if for the first time — quite an achievement.

When Budginas is playing the piano, he is completely involved — intense, precise, flamboyant — everything one expects from an Eastern European pianist trained at the Moscow Conservatory.

But he can also be hilarious in his virtuosity, playing harmonica with the right hand at his mouth and the piano with the left — then Bach’s “Prelude in C” included some heavenly chimes, snare drum, bongo and piano. After this display many in the audience seemed to be checking whether Budginas indeed has only two arms ... he does, despite his multi-instrument performances.

In the first half one of the most memorable moments happened when he showed how

Franz Liszt’s “Hungarian Rhapsody” possesses a direct musical link to Johnny Cash’s “Walk the Line.” Budginas has obviously reached the rarefied heights of musicianship — Yo-Yo Ma is another example — where the artistic snobbery of creating a hierarchy of music, in which one form is innately better than another, has been left far behind. Yes, he seemed to be saying, there are gradations within the various forms, but to say that Liszt is “better” than Johnny Cash is as absurd as saying that blue is a better color than red.

Highlights of the second half included a gorgeously languid version of Scott Joplin’s “Solace” and an audience-participation rendition of “Carmen.” The gentle but precise manner in which Budginas enabled the three audience-members — and for full disclosure one of them was my wife Charlotte — to get to some semblance of a unified rhythm gave a glimpse of his teaching ability. He must be challenging to the gifted, but genuinely nurturing of those less talented. What a professor he must be.

Budginas ended with Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue.” Before he caused jaws to drop at his apparently effortless technical expertise, the pianist said this was a suitable piece to close with as he had just become an American citizen.

Enthusiastically, he said how proud he was to be an American. After this great, joyful concert we should be proud to have him as a fellow citizen. America still attracts the best and brightest from around the world.

Congratulations to Midland’s Live on Stage for bringing such a premier artist to the city.

The 2009-10 season continues with “Celtic Crossroads” on Jan. 16. For tickets go to www.liveonstage-pb.com/membership.html.

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