



'Where the biggies leave off...'

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Isles Ensemble concludes 2018-19 season on May 5 with a flourish

By Michael Wilson

The Isles Ensemble musicians have been bringing wonderful chamber music to our four Hill and Lake neighborhoods for 15 years now, on Sunday afternoons in the intimate and relaxed setting of Lake of the Isles Lutheran Church. They conclude their 2018-19 season on Sunday, May 5, at 2 pm with two lesser-known pieces by Beethoven and Rachmaninoff, followed by the grand Brahms Sextet in G Major.

Mozart's enormously successful opera "The Magic Flute" premiered in Vienna in 1791, two months before his untimely death. Its tunes were still very much on everyone's lips when ten years later Beethoven composed a set of seven variations on Pamina's and Papageno's duet *Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen* ("In men, who feel love"). Tom Rosenberg (cello) and Tim Lovelace (piano) bring this lovely 1801 piece to life for us on May 5.

Lovelace returns with pianist Ivan Konev to play four of the *Six Morceaux for Piano, Four Hands, Op. 11*, by Rachmaninoff. Konev has a particular affinity for this piece, Lovelace says, not just because he has played it several times. Konev's pianistic grandfather, Alexander Goldenweiser, knew Rachmaninoff and made an early recording of the work.

On May 5 Konev and Lovelace will play the *Barcarole, Scherzo, Romance, and Gloria*. "What I like about this opus," Konev says, "is that it was written by a still-very-young composer (21 years old). I love the freshness and expressiveness which you feel in each piece. At the same time despite the age of the composer you already sense maturity of style and get just what one expects from music of Rachmaninoff - poignance of minor key melodies in slower pieces and excitement and virtuosity in faster ones."

With his own unique and powerful music language, Konev notes, "Rachmaninoff continued the romantic tradition of writing characteristic piano miniatures which started with Schubert and continued with Schumann and Chopin, which proves to me that he deserves to be named one of the greatest (and unfortunately one of last) piano composers of the Romantic era."

Gorgeous melodies, rich harmonies.

For the second half of the program Stephanie Arado and David Leung (violins), Tom Turner and Sifei Cheng (violas), and Richard Belcher and Tom Rosenberg (cellos) will fill the room with the sounds of

Brahms' Sextet No. 2, in G Major, Opus 36.

The G-major Sextet is basically a secret love letter to soprano Agatha von Siebold, with whom Brahms was hoping to develop a romantic relationship after composing a few new songs for her, Leung notes, but the relationship unfortunately ended before the sextet was even completed.

"Having this particular romance in mind," Leung says, "I bet you will have no problem picturing Brahms writing the opening movement filled with an abundance of sweetness and passion. Brahms literally used the name 'Agatha' (A-G-A-B-A) in the first movement as his lover's name is infused and spelled out musically in its glorious yet heart-wrenching second theme."

The second movement *Scherzo* is intertwined with major and minor key changes and moody tempo changes, portraying some of the sweetness and bitterness in Brahms' romantic relationship with Agatha, Leung writes. "The sorrowful third movement is unmistakably dark, heavy, and depressed at first, leading listeners to follow the cloud of sadness after Brahms' painful breakup. Thankfully the gloom is rather brief! Tears eventually turn into a golden ray of hope at the end of this movement - the gloomy E minor main theme gradually moves to the sunny, warm E major key, all of the dark clouds are gone and the heavens are open for our sorrowful soul seeking comfort and consolation (what a great soundtrack for the Easter Season!)."

Leung sees the last movement as a brilliant display of joy and restored energy in our hero's spirit - the scherzo-like humor in the main theme reminds many of us of the famous fairy-like scherzo movement in Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* -- a very joyful, hopeful and celebratory ending persists and triumphs.

"I love and look forward to playing this piece so much," Leung says, "because of its gorgeous melodies, rich harmonies, optimistic and passionate and raw romantic emotions -- not to mention the masterful counterpoint writing for a group of six distinct instruments."

It's such a pleasure to have these impressive musicians come to the heart of our neighborhood. Go to islesensemble.org to read more about them. The suggested donation is \$20 for adults, \$10 for students. As always, there will be a reception following the concert.