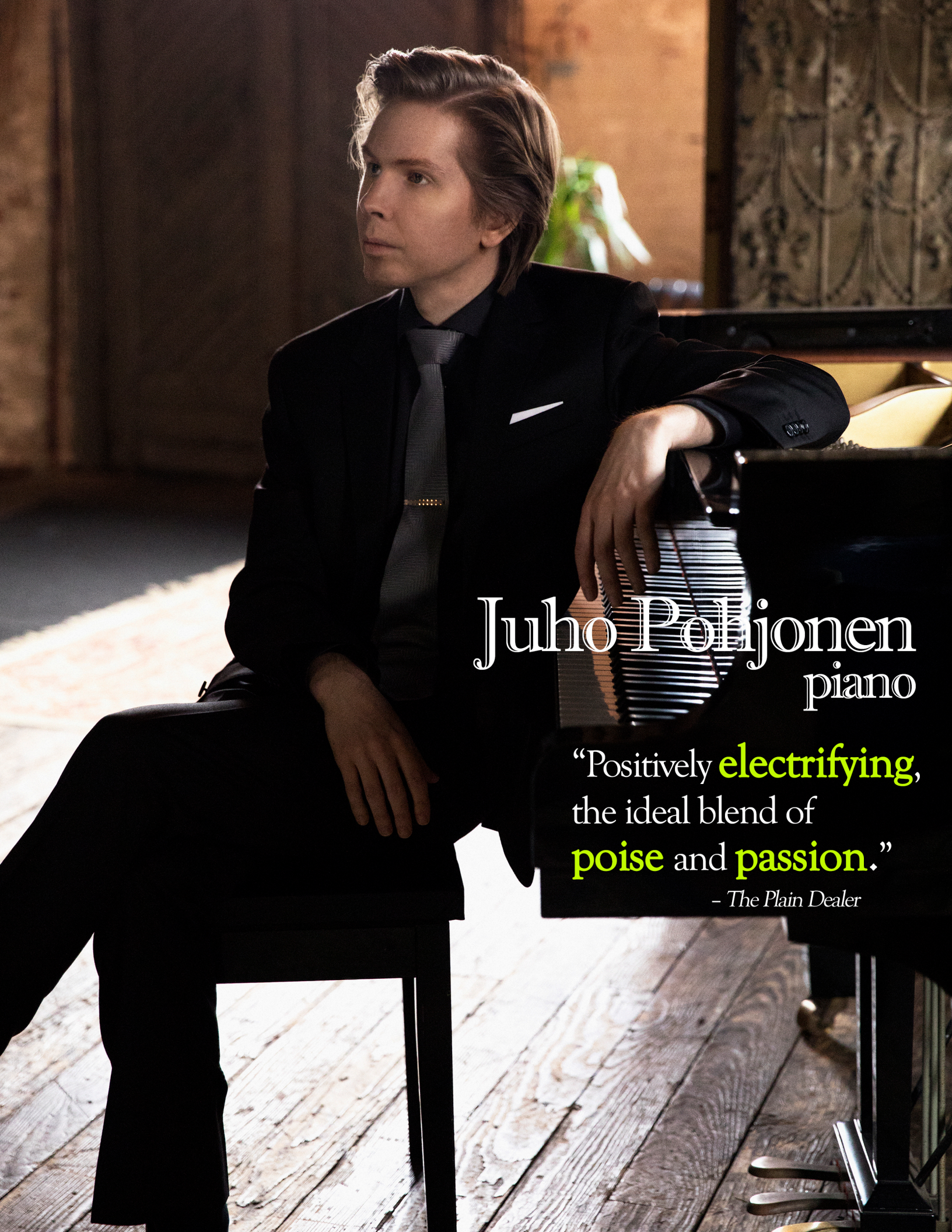
Juho Pohjonen
piano
"Positively electrifying, the ideal blend of poise and passion."
– The Plain Dealer

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Juho Pohjonen
Piano
2024 – 2025 Full Biography

Lauded for his "impeccable technique" (*The Washington Post*) and "elegant musicianship" (*The New York Times*), pianist Juho Pohjonen is in demand internationally as an orchestral soloist, recitalist, and chamber performer. An ardent exponent of Scandinavian music, Pohjonen's growing discography offers a showcase of music by Finnish compatriots such as Esa-Pekka Salonen, Kaija Saariaho and Jean Sibelius.

The "fast rising Finnish star" has garnered acclaim as a "delightfully unassuming but bewitching soloist" (*The Guardian*) in recent engagements with the German Radio Philharmonic, Taiwan, BBC, and Los Angeles Philharmonic orchestras; Cleveland and Minnesota Orchestras; the Symphonies of San Francisco, Atlanta, New Jersey, and Colorado; National Arts Centre Orchestra, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Danish National Symphony, Finnish Radio Symphony, Philharmonia Orchestra of London, and the Mostly Mozart Festival.

He recently performed Sauli Zinovjev's Piano Concerto with the Lahti Symphony and Daniel Bjarnason's concerto, *Processions* with the Helsinki Philharmonic, both with Bjarnason at the podium. Pohjonen has also collaborated with today's foremost conductors, including Marin Alsop, Lionel Bringuier, Marek Janowski, Fabien Gabel, Kirill Karabits, Osmo Vänskä, Pietari Inkinen, Stefan Asbury, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Robert Spano, Markus Stenz, and Pinchas Zukerman.

Highlights of the 2024-2025 season include recitals and chamber performances presented by Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Washington University in St. Louis, Society of the Four Arts in Palm Beach, and Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival. Additionally, Pohjonen performs Grieg's Piano Concerto in A Minor with the Philharmonia Orchestra, under the baton of Vinay Parameswaran, and makes an appearance at Wigmore Hall alongside violinist Stephan Waarts and cellist Jonathan Swensen. Pohjonen has performed in recital at New York's Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center, at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, the Steinway Society in San Jose, and in San Francisco, La Jolla, Philadelphia, Detroit, Savannah, and Vancouver. He made his London debut at Wigmore Hall, and has played recitals throughout Europe in Antwerp, Hamburg, Helsinki, St. Petersburg, and Warsaw. Following a program at the 92nd Street Y in New York featuring Salonen's *Dichotomie*, the *New York Times* commented, "[Pohjonen] played it like a master."

Pohjonen is an alumnus of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's Bowers Program and enjoys an ongoing relationship with the organization. With CMS, he has performed at Alice Tully Hall, the Saratoga Performing Arts Center and Wolf Trap. He appears several times on CMS's 2024-2025 season, including a solo recital featuring the world premiere of *Prélude oublié* for Piano by Finnish composer Jyrki Linjama, commissioned by Pohjonen. He is also featured on CMS's *Sonic Spectrum* contemporary music series, performing the world premiere of a new work for flute, percussion, and piano by Elise Arancio as well as works by Alejandro Viñao and Viet Cuong.

Pohjonen has played alongside the Escher and Calidore String Quartets, and has collaborated in a program at the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg. He has played festivals in Lucerne, Finland, Norway, and Germany; at the Gilmore Keyboard Festival; the Marlboro Music Festival; and ChamberFest Cleveland.

Pohjonen's growing discography includes the recently released album *Visionaries of the Keyboard* (Orchid 2024), featuring works by Rameau and Scriabin and showcasing Pohjonen's ability to navigate both baroque elegance and modernist mysticism. Previous recordings include *The Dvořák Album*, recorded with Jan Vogler and the Moritzburg Festival (Sony Classical 2022); cello works (Inbal Segev) of Chopin, Grieg and Schumann (AVIE 2018); *Bach: 6 Sonatas for Violin* (Nicolas Dautricourt) and *Piano* (La Dolce Volta 2018); *Music@Menlo Live: Maps and Legends* (2010); and *Plateaux,* works by Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, recorded with Ed Spanjaard and the Danish National Symphony. Pohjonen is a founding member of the Sibelius Piano Trio, who released "a gorgeous debut" (*Stereophile*) in honor of Finland's 1917 centennial of independence (Yarlung Records 2016).

Pohjonen earned a master's degree from Meri Louhos and Hui-Ying Liu-Tawaststjerna at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki. He was selected by Sir András Schiff as the winner of the 2009 Klavier Festival Ruhr Scholarship. In 2019, Pohjonen launched *MyPianist*, an AI-based app that provides interactive piano accompaniment. (https://mypianist.app).

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AUGUST 2024 - PLEASE DESTROY ALL PREVIOUSLY DATED MATERIALS

Juho Pohjonen

Critical Acclaim

“His playing is simply extraordinary. This was a night when a good view of the soloist’s hands was worth extra money. It was a performance worth recording of a work worth hearing.”

The Atlanta Journal Constitution

“Pohjonen's account of Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 1 was positively electrifying, the ideal blend of poise and passion...the pianist brought virtuosity in spades, flitting through the music with a touch that was steely and bright.”

The Plain Dealer

“Juho Pohjonen played the fiendishly difficult piano part brilliantly, conquering its technical challenges and highlighting myriad colors, as well as contrasting the exuberant elements with moments of introspective clarity.”

The New York Times

"Pohjonen has both impeccable technique and a cleareyed approach to music... Complete confidence, a superb performance."

The Washington Post

“Pohjonen proved himself to be a singularly luminous Mozart interpreter. Spontaneous, stylish, and well-paced, he seemed to conjure the notes from thin air, breaking fresh, verdant ground.”

Chicago Classical Review

“Everything about his recital was formidable. One reason his debut demanded attention was that his adventurous program made news from first (a rhapsodic Fantasy in C minor attributed to Mozart but completed by Maximilian Stadler) to last (two stunningly difficult works by the Finnish composer and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen). Mr. Pohjonen gave a bracing account of Bartok's daunting Sonata (1926), sailing through the propulsive final movement. He gave breathtaking performances of both works. When the audience broke into an ovation, the young pianist finally cracked a slight smile.”

The New York Times

“At the Hollywood Bowl, Juho Pohjonen became the first pianist after Bronfman to tackle the concerto [Esa-Pekka Salonen’s Piano Concerto]. Pohjonen, who is a fraction of Bronfman’s size and who still looks like a gawky teenager, knocked off this incredibly difficult solo part with calm, almost cavalier confidence. His fingers flew and occasionally his long hair flapped. But otherwise he remained unflappable, displaying little expression other than determination. He was deadly accurate.”

The Los Angeles Times

“He constantly adjusted his keyboard touch and drew an impressive range of nuanced tonal variety from the piano, infusing his phrasing with a refined, poetic sensibility.”

Chicago on the Aisle

“That his technique was more than up to the enormous demands of this complex music was a given; that a performer this early in his career should play with such confidence and insight is remarkable.”

The Vancouver Sun

“The Mozart concerto was rewarding from start to finish… he played with beautiful colorings and articulate touch, especially in the rousing, high-spirited finale. Every note spoke, and he had a musical idea about every phrase… After these two warmly received performances, tickets may be hard to get for Mr. Pohjonen’s late-night appearance on Friday.”

The New York Times

If we needed proof that exciting new talent is in the pipeline, there was the marvelous American debut of Juho Pohjonen at Weill Recital Hall. Mr. Pohjonen, a painfully shy and skinny 24-year-old Finn who could pass for 14, offered a formidable mixed program, topped by thrilling accounts of two fiendishly difficult works by a fellow Finn, Esa-Pekka Salonen”

The New York Times

“[The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra’s] reading of the Piano Concerto No. 3 was refreshing and wholesome, thanks largely to Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen, making his ASO debut. Pohjonen plays with a luminous virtuosity and detailed, crisp ideas. He shaped phrases delightfully in the finale.”

The Atlanta Journal Constitution

“Juho Pohjonen performed Chopin’s Piano Concerto No. 2 with sparkling bravura. The tuneful first movement, endowed with immaculately fluid playing and matched by Willen’s high energy direction of the BSO, bowed out to Pohjonen’s poetically inspired Larghetto with a delicious and raptly romantic ambience. Again, in the finale, his liquid finger work packed effortless grace into a brilliant conclusion.”

Daily Echo

“With remarkable concentration, flexibility, color and nuance, Pohjonen brought out their (Beethoven Bagatelles, Op. 26) contrasting character, from dreamy ambiguity to fiery assertiveness, leaving an impression of superior pianism and communicative power.”

New York Concert Review

“Pohjonen gave a quite outstanding reading of the concerto, a concerto in which the soloist is hardly ever silent. The difficulties of Prokofiev’s writing were handled with panache, the wit was relished and, when the few such opportunities came along (notably in the larghetto) he played with real lyricism. Handling the syncopation of some passages with ease and assurance, playing by turns percussively and delicately, richly dancing in the fifth movement finale, Pohjonen’s was a remarkable performance, full both of intimacy and sweep.”

Seen & Heard

Juho Pohjonen

The New York Times

January 12, 2018

Heavenly Hymn: The 8 Best Classical Music Moments of the Week on YouTube

Literally Sweep

On Thursday the dynamic conductor Susanna Malkki led the New York Philharmonic in "Helix," a teeming de facto overture by the orchestra's composer in residence, Esa-Pekka Salonen. Mr. Salonen has also written some knockout piano pieces. I'll never forget hearing the New York debut of the brilliant Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen in 2004, when he performed Mr. Salonen's staggeringly difficult, wildly inventive "Dichotomie." Here's a stunning, tantalizing excerpt from a fearless performance by the pianist Aura Go at the Helsinki Music Center. Catch the extended passage full of crazed glissandos, for which the pianist repeatedly uses a cloth to literally sweep the keyboard. ANTHONY TOMMASINI

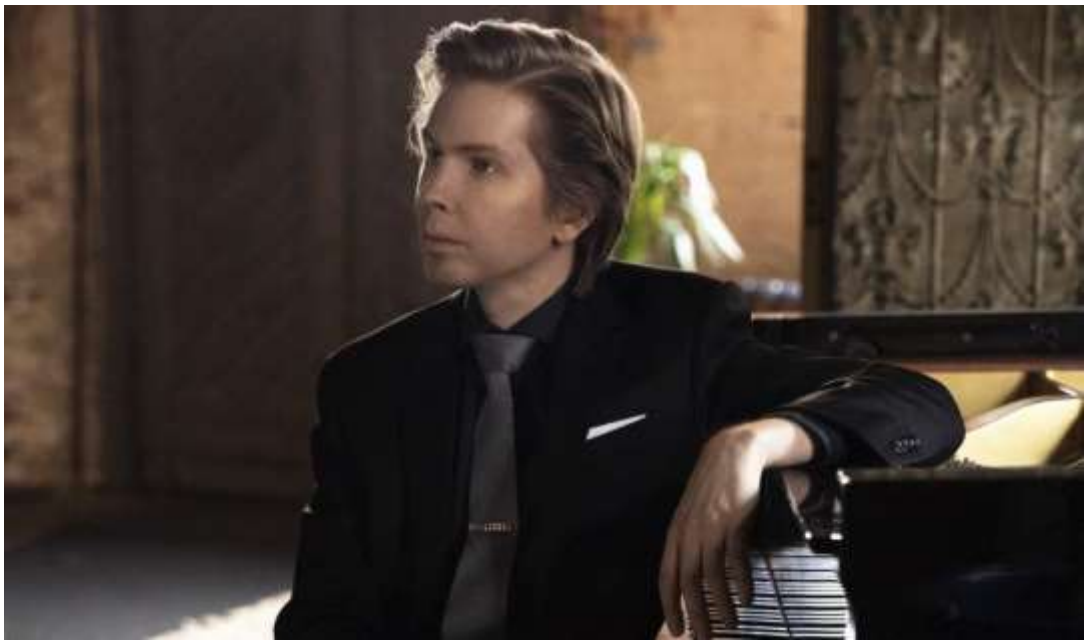
Juho Pohjonen

CLASSICAL VOICE
Concerts · Artists · Critical Reviews

July 17, 2023

Pianist Juho Pohjonen Was Experimenting With AI Before It Was Cool

By Victoria Looseleaf



Since making his American debut at Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall in 2004 at age 23, Finnish pianist **Juho Pohjonen** has been on the ascendancy, garnering rave reviews along the way. Indeed, *The Washington Post* hailed his "impeccable technique and … clear-eyed approach to music," while *The New York Times* lauded his "elegant musicianship."

That talent will be on full display when Pohjonen performs works by Franz Schubert, Clara Schumann, and Felix Mendelssohn **on July 23** at Atherton's Spieker Center for the Arts in a concert presented by **Music@Menlo**. (The internationally acclaimed chamber music festival and institute, which this year is dubbed "Beethoven Unfolding," runs from July 14 – Aug. 5 and features immersive programming, as well as a roster of world-class artists.)

One of today's most exciting instrumentalists, Pohjonen was born in Helsinki, Finland, in 1981 and began his piano studies in 1989 at the Junior

Academy of the Sibelius Academy, subsequently earning a master's degree at the conservatory in 2008. In 2009, he was selected by András Schiff as the winner of the Klavier Festival Ruhr Scholarship, just one of many prizes the young Finn has snagged at both international and Finnish competitions, including first prize at the 2004 Nordic Piano Competition in Nyborg, Denmark.

Performing widely in Europe, Asia, and North America, whether with symphony orchestras or in recital and chamber settings, Pohjonen is also — no surprise — an avid exponent of Scandinavian music, with his discography offering a veritable showcase of music by Finnish compatriots, including Esa-Pekka Salonen, Kaija Saariaho, and Jean Sibelius. Other recordings include *The Dvořák Album* with cellist Jan Vogler and *Bach: Six Sonatas for Violin and Piano* with violinist Nicolas Dautricourt.

Pohjonen has appeared numerous times at Music@Menlo and also enjoys an ongoing relationship with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. He has played alongside the Escher and Calidore String Quartets, in addition to regularly appearing at festivals, including those in Lucerne and Norway and at ChamberFest Cleveland.

SF Classical Voice recently had a chance to speak with Pohjonen over Zoom, with the conversation ranging from his attraction to new music to his AI-based app **MyPianist**, which he created with his brother Joonas.

Where are you based, and was there music in your family?

My home is in Helsinki; I was born there. [Regarding] my family, it wasn't particularly musical, but they had a very deep appreciation for sound and music because on my mother's side, my grandparents were both deaf and communicated through sign language. This made my family appreciate the ability to hear, and music had a special place in our lives. It's unusual for a musician.

Your upcoming Music@Menlo appearance will be something like your eighth time. What keeps you coming back?

They keep inviting me back. It's also one of, I would say, the world's best-organized festivals, and I always enjoy going there. I get to play with great people, and I get to teach students chamber music. And I don't teach just piano students — also string quartets, trios, everything.

Let's talk about your program, which will also be livestreamed. You're playing Schubert's String Trio in B-flat Major, D, 581; Clara Schumann's Three Romances for Violin and Piano, Op. 22; and Mendelssohn's Piano Trio No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 49. How do you go about programming a concert, what drew you to these works, and why are you not performing Beethoven in a festival called "Beethoven Unfolding"?

Mendelssohn was influenced by Beethoven, so were Clara Schumann and others. The programming is done by the artistic directors, David Finckel and Wu Han. They also decide which people will create a nice ensemble together. In this case, [violinist] Aaron Boyd, who I have played with quite a few times, and I will play the Clara Schumann, and it's going to be interesting to see what kind of approach other people take to the music. For myself, it's always rewarding to exchange ideas, and my own interpretation of the piece might change based on what other people are doing. You have to live kind of in the moment when you play chamber music. You can't have preconceived notions; it's [about] adaptability.

How would you describe your relationship with your fellow Finn Esa-Pekka Salonen?

I met him for the first time when I was in my 20s. I got a debut recital at Weill Recital Hall and was thinking what kind of program I should play and thought it would be nice to program something Finnish. At that time, Esa-Pekka had only two solo piano compositions, so I programmed them both.

The [director] of the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra heard somehow

that I was doing these pieces — I think she heard it through András Schiff, who happened to give a master class — and they put us together. I played for [Salonen], and he was very impressed that I was playing his music and was enthusiastic about this music.

Then he helped me to get a manager in the U.K.; he has been extremely helpful. Later, I played his [2007] concerto — I was the second pianist playing it after Yefim Bronfman — but we had played other pieces together [with Salonen conducting]. I think he's really great to work with because I feel like I'm playing chamber music with him. It's always an exchange of musical ideas. He's a conductor who not just follows you but also contributes all the time.

What's your attraction to new music, and what do you look for when commissioning a work?

I'm very curious about new music. I've only commissioned a couple of works, [including] something from my brother, who is also a composer, because I knew what I was going to get. I commissioned one cello sonata, and I then helped commissioned a piece for viola and AI, which I'll talk about a bit later.

I find contemporary music always demanding, and intellectually, I really want to get into the intentions of the composer. With Classical and Romantic music, I know that I have the background and the ability to see where it all connects — the history and what the composer wants to do — but sometimes with contemporary music, I feel more puzzled.

It seems like an intellectual exercise where I have to decipher the puzzle before I can play. I never just want to play the notes; I want to understand what the notes mean. There are some contemporary composers whose music speaks to me in a way I feel that I understand what they want to say.

[Australian composer] Brett Dean, when I listen to his music it gives my brain kind of the same thing, kind of the excitement that listening to Mozart does in some ways. It's really hard to say how, but somehow the harmonies, rhythms, and textures make sense, but they also have a freshness I haven't heard in another kind of music. I'm about to record Brett's piece, with the composer himself. He wrote an opera, *Hamlet* [2017], and then, as a side project, he did quite a major work for viola and piano that used material from the opera. It's called *Rooms of Elsinore*, which we were meant to record [earlier], but then COVID hit.

You mentioned AI, which you used to create the app MyPianist. It's a virtual accompanist that listens and reacts to your playing as if it were a real pianist. What was the genesis of the app, and how is it doing?

I had an unused talent for programming computers, and I always liked coding and never really did anything productive with that. But 10 years ago, I thought maybe it was time to put this unused talent to work. I remember [that] when I was a young student learning music on violin, the best moments were when I could play with somebody. [I thought] that there was maybe some way to replicate this process and bring it to young instrumentalists so they could enjoy their practice a bit more.

They could learn from hearing the piano part being played together with them. At that point, I didn't know how to do any of this and had to do a lot of research. I started thinking about what happens in my brain, what kind of thought process is happening, and slowly I tried to break down this program into small parts and figured out each part and how to solve it. My brother was quite skeptical, but one day I managed to make a prototype that could play an allegro from Suzuki books — something extremely simple. Once I realized that it was going to work, I got more excited about the project, and during the pandemic, I started thinking how to turn the prototype into a product. It still took a lot of time, and I released this app after seven years of work.

Because of the pandemic, suddenly there was a demand for this. People had to stay at home and couldn't play with other pianists. That gave a little boost because I never had much money to

spend on promotion. I tried to do it on the smallest budget possible — and didn't want to charge users too much because I know music students don't have much money. I wanted my app to benefit people as much as possible, especially students.

Did you ever wonder if it would put pianists like yourself out of work?

At some point, I was questioning the morality of the app — whether it's a good thing to have access to this kind of AI or if it's not going to be beneficial enough for the student: Are they going to learn bad habits, letting them play like crazy with no pulse or no timing? I had to think about all these things.

[Because] one of the nice things about chamber music is always the pushing and pulling of the tempo, which affects the exchange of ideas, I tried to somehow incorporate this aspect of playing chamber music into the app. Of course, it's never going to be a replacement for a real pianist, but it is valuable as a practice tool. Some students who were reluctant to practice anything have increased their practice time because of the app.

Barring your becoming some kind of tech mogul, where do you see yourself in the next five to 10 years?

That's a tough question. As a musician, I always want to keep exploring new ideas about music. I've learned to see so many new connections between piano playing and the life around me — to find analogies between things and new ways to create colors on the piano. I think my aim is to develop as a pianist just by learning new things.

Once you start being comfortable and thinking that you know everything, that's the beginning of the end. To focus on the present is more important. In life, you have to embrace the uncertainty of the present. Every day, you get unexpected opportunities. Either you act on them, or you don't. For myself, that's much more important. To live in the present, you [also] want to have a goal for yourself. I would never have released my app if I didn't have a goal. Some moments I had doubts. But the journey's more important than the destination.

Juho Pohjonen

The Daily Item
More for You!

April 6, 2023

Renowned pianist Juho Pohjonen to perform at Bucknell

By Jason C. Klose

Classical music performed by world-class musicians continues to delight audiences, as Bucknell University will present Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen, who will give a performance at the Weis Center for the Performing Arts, on Thursday, April 13 at 7:30 p.m., at 525 Weis Drive, Lewisburg.

Regarded as one of today's most exciting and unique instrumentalists, Pohjonen performs widely in Europe, Asia and North America, collaborating with symphony orchestras and playing in recital and chamber settings. An ardent exponent of Scandinavian music, Pohjonen's growing discography offers a showcase of music by Finnish compatriots such as Esa-Pekka Salonen, Kaija Saariaho and Jean Sibelius.

The Weis Center has a long-standing tradition of inviting world-class pianists to perform on the presenting series, and they are thrilled to have Pohjonen showcase his talents on the stage at Bucknell.

"As one of the most exciting and innovative pianists of our time, Mr. Pohjonen is a perfect fit," said Weis Center Executive Director Kathryn Maguet. "He has received widespread acclaim for his virtuosic technique and brilliant interpretations of the classical repertoire. Central PA audiences will be thrilled by superb musicianship, and I encourage everyone to not miss this rare opportunity to experience the artistry of Juho Pohjonen."

Pohjonen began his musical journey on the violin when he was just two and a half years old.

"As a very lively child, I needed an outlet for all the extra energy I had at my disposal," he said. "At the age of four, a piano teacher at my music school offered to give me some piano lessons, and I quickly picked up that instrument as well."

In 1989, Pohjonen entered the Junior Academy of the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, Finland, where he had the opportunity to work with two amazing piano teachers, Meri Louhos and Hui-Ying Liu-Tawaststjerna. Following that, he continued his studies in the same school, earning his master's degree in 2008.

"Along the way, I had the chance to learn from great musicians, including Sir András Schiff, who gave me some invaluable coaching on his masterclasses," he said.

Pohjonen's musical influences are diverse, with inspiration often coming from unexpected sources.

"I enjoy finding connections between music and non-musical things, drawing inspiration from things I see or hear around me, and distilling them into musical or pianistic ideas," he said. "Just about anything can be a source for creativity; for instance, I might be inspired by a work of literature, a piece of visual art, or even the sound of the wind rustling through the trees."

Throughout his career, Pohjonen has had the pleasure of collaborating with world-class conductors, such as Marin Alsop, Lionel Bringuier, and Esa-Pekka Salonen, and performing with some of the most renowned orchestras, including the Cleveland Orchestra, the Philharmonic Orchestra, and the San Francisco Symphony.

"Working with these accomplished musicians has been an incredible experience," he said, "and I am grateful for the opportunities I have had to share my playing with audiences around the world."

The theme of Pohjonen's recital program is musical storytelling, with each piece a narrative, taking the audience on a journey through the different moods and atmospheres that music can convey. For this program, Pohjonen will perform: Grieg's ballade in G minor, Op. 24; Ravel's "Gaspard de la Nuit," and Chopin's four ballades, Op. 27, 38, 47 and 52.

Pohjonen said he is thrilled to perform all of these pieces and believes they will create a memorable musical experience for the Bucknell audience.

"Grieg's ballade is an emotional rollercoaster, telling a harrowing story with its set of 14 variations that starts with nostalgic melancholy, and builds up to a heroic triumph before turning into a crushing defeat," he said. "The piece is Grieg's most ambitious work for solo piano, portraying not only the composer's affinity for folk music but also his ability to write music that is both extremely lyrical and extremely powerful."

Pohjonen said "Gaspard de la Nuit" conjures up magical imagery and evokes a sense of otherworldly beauty with its refined colors and textures.

"The first movement, 'Ondine,' tells the tale of a water nymph who falls in love with a mortal man," Pohjonen said. "The second movement, 'Le Gibet,' is a haunting depiction of a hanged man swaying in the wind. The third movement, 'Scarbo,' is a frightening portrayal of a mischievous goblin."

"Finally, Chopin's four ballades are almost like a masterclass in storytelling through music. They explore the full range of human experience with great sensitivity and insight."

Pohjonen has previously appeared in recital at New York's Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center, at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and in San Francisco, La Jolla, Calif., Philadelphia, Detroit, Savannah, Ga., and Vancouver, Canada. He made his London debut at Wigmore Hall and has performed recitals throughout Europe including in Antwerp, Belgium; Hamburg, Germany; Helsinki; St. Petersburg, Russia; and Warsaw, Poland. He has appeared as a soloist with Cleveland Orchestra, Danish National Symphony, Finnish Radio Symphony, Helsinki Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, National Arts Centre Orchestra, Philharmonia Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, and Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

In 2019, Pohjonen launched MyPianist, an AI-based iOS app that provides interactive piano accompaniment to musicians everywhere. Designed and programmed by Pohjonen himself and infused with his keen musical sensibility, MyPianist allows people to practice with a "virtual pianist" that carefully listens to their playing and follows their timing and interpretation, recreating the piano part in real time.

"I have always had a talent for coding and computers, and around 10 years ago, I wanted to combine that with my passion for music, thus starting this project," he said. "By no means is the app meant to replace pianists — after all, there is no substitute for the depth of experience and interpretation that a live musician can bring. However, pianists (especially good ones) are not always available."

With MyPianist, one can have a high-quality musical partner anytime, anywhere. While Pohjonen won't be demonstrating the app in the concert, anybody interested can download the app for free and try it out.

Pohjonen's goal is to communicate the message of the music to the audience; and for this performance, he hopes to take the audience on a musical journey that will leave them with a sense of completeness and fulfillment.

“I would like them to empathize with the emotions that the music conveys and to feel a connection with the pieces on a very personal level,” he said. “If the audience leaves feeling inspired and uplifted, having experienced the beauty of the music, it would be a ‘mission accomplished’ for me. I firmly believe that music has the power to move people, and I aspire for the concert to be a memorable and meaningful experience for everyone in attendance at the Weis Center.”

Puhjonen said his plans with music in the near future are to continue to grow and evolve with it, much like a mutual journey.

“For a musician, it’s important to be adaptable and open to new possibilities, allowing the music to guide you towards unexpected paths,” he said. “After all, music is a lifelong adventure of learning and exploration, and I look forward to seeing where it will take me.”

Juho Pohjonen

PHILADELPHIA CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

October 11, 2019

Artist Interview: Juho Pohjonen

By Erik Petersons

Juho Pohjonen is the first artist to offer a debut recital with the Society this season. His October 27 program features repertoire that is rarely heard on our series—music by Rameau and Scriabin. We talked with him recently about these works, his influences as a pianist, and the app he is helping to develop in his free time.

Erik Petersons: How did your program come together and what drew you to these works? Are there any connections between them?

Juho Pohjonen: I wanted to present a program that showcases works of two great but lesser known visionaries of Western art music: Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) and Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915). Even though the two composers are separated in time by almost 200 years, they both share a similar approach to keyboard writing—a desire to search for new pianistic colors through an innovative use of ornamentation and harmonization, and a certain rhythmic flexibility that allows the performer to freely shape the music with their own creative ideas.

Interestingly, some of the harmonic concepts pioneered by Rameau, such as the octatonic scale cleverly hidden in the baseline of *L'enharmonique*, were later fully embraced by Scriabin, whose Sonata No. 6 is almost entirely based on harmonies extracted from this scale. Also, Rameau was a master of trills and ornaments of his time (he even invented his own special notation for ornaments)—however Scriabin took these ideas even further in his sonatas by creating trills that overlap with each other, trills that repeatedly phase in and out with dynamic changes, and even entire clusters of trills that happen at the same time.

The program is also a program of contrasts: while Rameau draws inspiration from concrete and occasionally rather mundane things such as chickens (as in *La Poule*), Scriabin's ideas are highly abstract and they evoke images that are more esoteric than familiar (such as "insects born from the sun" in the Sonata No. 10).

EP: Who have been your major influences as a pianist? How have they affected your approach to music?

JP: I would say that non-pianist musicians have influenced me a lot more than pianists. Piano as an instrument has so many restrictions (such as the constant decay of the sound, or no possibility for vibrato) that I think it is important to first think about music without those constraints and then search for ways to work around them. Of pianists I like to listen to recordings of "old-school" players, such as Alfred Cortot or Arthur Rubinstein; they have a special way of capturing the interest of their audience, which works by constantly setting up expectations and then either confirming them or defying them in some way. This creates a special feeling of unpredictability that still serves a greater musical purpose.

EP: What is your routine in preparing for a concert? How do you like to relax afterwards?

JP: My concert preparations practically start the day I start practicing any new piece, and the relaxation afterwards happens gradually over several days (unless there is a ton of new repertoire that I have to start preparing for). Ideally the concert day should feel like just another day, only with some extra concentration cushioned around the concert.

EP: What other projects are you working on?

JP: Apart from the obvious piano practice I am also developing an app for iPhone and iPad, MyPianist—an A.I. based virtual accompanist that listens and reacts to your playing almost like a real pianist. For example, one can play repertoire like Franck Violin sonata so that the A.I. plays the piano part through speakers while following the timing and the nuances. How closely it follows depends on the musical style and context; sometimes it reacts instantly and sometimes it prefers to just keep the tempo. It is a fun project to work on, because through it I am learning a lot about how music works on a very fundamental level!

EP: What are you reading at the moment?

JP: Right now I am working on several projects at once and have unfortunately little time for reading, but the last book I finished was *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* by Yuval Noah Harari which I got as a free e-book of the week from my Finnish newspaper subscription.

Juho Pohjonen

The New York Times

January 16, 2016

Chamber Music Society Aims to Expand Its Reach

By Phillip Lutz

The pianist Juho Pohjonen performing in New York City

As the artistic directors of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, David Finckel and Wu Han have expanded the group's reach over the past decade. Instead of just producing concerts at its home in Alice Tully Hall, the society produces and presents programs all over the world, from Seoul, South Korea, to Pleasant Hill, Ky.

Even as the society expands globally, Mr. Finckel and Ms. Wu are building audiences closer to home, having established a three-year residency with the Performing Arts Center, Purchase College that began in 2014. The residency is bolstering the reputation of the school's conservatory and helping fuel the society's growth.

"We never take our foot off the gas pedal," Mr. Finckel, a cellist, said as he and Ms. Wu, a pianist, worked in their busy Lincoln Center office. Married, the two were juggling tasks in an award-filled space with a large picture window on one side and a crowded bulletin board on the other.

Halfway through the residency — the sixth of 11 planned concerts, "Pianos/Pianists," will take place at Purchase on Jan. 23 — Ms. Wu said it

was too early to decide whether to extend the partnership. But she was encouraged by the quality of the audiences, who "understand the importance of a cultural event to the community." She was also inspired by the steady growth in attendance, with mixed groups that have included both students and older adults.

A typical concert now draws more than 350 people to the center's 468-seat recital hall, said Seth Soloway, the center's interim director. "This year we've really climbed to the other side of the mountain," he said.

Early worries that the upstate concerts would lower attendance at Lincoln Center have proved unfounded, Mr. Finckel said.

"The people who get turned on to chamber music through us at the Purchase venue, they get hooked and start coming down here for the programs we don't play up there," he said. "The ones who can't make it down here, we can bring it to them."

The music, selected from the society's database of nearly 4,000 pieces, has ranged widely, from the Baroque, in a concert in December 2014, to the modern, in a concert in November that included a quintet arrangement of "Kammersymphonie," by the 12-tone serialist Arnold Schoenberg.

The Jan. 23 program will include three 20th-century works: "The Miraculous Mandarin," by Bela Bartok; "Variations on a Theme by Paganini," by Witold Lutoslawski; and "Symphonic Dances," by Sergei Rachmaninoff. Rounding out the program will be "Silhouettes," by Anton Arensky.

Ms. Wu said the program was largely built around the Bartok, a piece for two players performing on one piano — the other works are for two pianos —and one that had long been proposed to her by the pianists Juho Pohjonen and Orion Weiss, who will play it.

"They bugged me for four years," Ms. Wu said with a smile.

Programming the Rachmaninoff, on which Mr. Weiss will team up with the pianist Alessio Bax, followed logically from the Bartok. Like that work, it draws on an orchestral score and thus makes for a natural pairing, Ms. Wu said, adding that the Lutoslawski work, a short, accessible piece, would serve as a "palate cleanser" between the two larger compositions.

The choice of concert opener, left to last, came down to the Arensky piece, a five-movement suite that Ms. Wu said would "really open up the sound world of the two pianos." Wu Qian, who is from China, will join Mr. Bax for that piece, and Mr. Pohjonen for the Lutoslawski.

The mixing and matching of pianists meant reconciling approaches. Mr. Weiss, for example, expressed enthusiasm for augmenting the piano score on the orchestral adaptations if "the texture is too thin." But Mr. Bax volunteered a note of caution, at least on the Rachmaninoff. "I always think twice before adding to his music," he said.

Wu Qian raised the problem of accommodating performers' differing senses of time without imposing metronomic rigidity on a joint performance. "That is the challenge: how to play together and still have the freedom and flexibility within," she said in a telephone interview.

And Mr. Pohjonen noted practical concerns on works in which pianists share a bench. He wrote in an email that compared with two-piano pieces, "the space is more limited (meaning that one has to figure out a choreography to avoid potential collisions) and there is only one set of pedals to share (or to fight over, depending on the players)."

Despite those issues, Wu Han, who works closely with her fellow pianists, said she had no concern about conflicts among the concert's international performers, all of whom have shown an ability to adjust as current or former participants in the society's rigorous young artists' program, CMS Two.

"They have to be both leaders and supporters," she said.

The oboist James Austin Smith, who came up through CMS Two, has embraced both roles as a part-time professor at Purchase. He said positioning the faculty onstage under the banner of the Chamber Music Society was critical to raising the school's profile.

"It's really important for the students to see us in that different context," Mr. Smith said, "and for the audience to get a concrete visual understanding of what's going on in Purchase across the street in the conservatory, and how that's reflected in the kind of quality they're coming to see from Lincoln Center."

Back at Lincoln Center, Mr. Finckel said, "When you're producing this much music and there's so much repertoire and now the society has so many more artists than it ever had, especially the younger generation, it becomes a kind of manifest destiny."

Juho Pohjonen

examiner.com

July 31, 2012

Interview with pianist Juho Pohjonen

By Elijah Ho

Born in Helsinki, Juho Pohjonen is a rising star in the world of pianism. Of his Carnegie Hall debut in 2004, The New York Times said, "If we needed proof that exciting new talent is in the pipeline, there was the marvelous American debut of Juho Pohjonen,". Pohjonen's latest review in the Times can be found here.Sunday, the pianist performed a Carte Blanche recital at the Music@Menlo festival. Below is a transcript of our July 2012 conversation with Juho Pohjonen.

EH: Finland has often been cited as a wonderful example of how education fosters interest and growth in the musical art form. Please describe for us the culture and education of music in your native country.

Pohjonen: From the cultural standpoint, we have very deep roots in traditional poetry and singing, though this has nothing to do with what we call 'classical music'. Perhaps the first *real* composer for us, after all, was Sibelius. Of course, there were composers before him, but he had the biggest influence on musical culture for us. After him, there was a bit of an explosion of music, and there are many composers and musicians now coming up.

Of course, education and culture go hand in hand, and from the educational standpoint, what we have is actually quite advanced. From an early age, we have access to the best teachers available in the country. I attended the Sibelius Academy youth program, which is

basically university-level, but we can study from the time when we're young. In school, we have music lessons where we deal with both classical and folk music. This part of our education is compulsory, though children are not required to learn an instrument.

EH: What is your own musical background ?

Pohjonen: My parents are not musicians, but I have an older brother who is a pianist-composer. He was already playing the piano when I was born, so it was quite natural for me to come to an instrument. I was born in Helsinki, was talented - as one must be in order to become a musician - but we never considered the word 'prodigy'. In Finland, we don't really use that word, actually.

EH: At what age did you begin thinking about the problem of piano technique?

Pohjonen: I think I was quite late to that. When I was a kid, I thought piano-playing was quite easy. I couldn't play very well, but I also didn't realize that I had problems with it *(laughs)*. When I was twenty, I really started to think about technique, from every possible viewpoint. Before that, I basically just played. I had fast fingers, but one has to find a relaxed, physical way of making music. And this is something that everyone has to learn for themselves. In a sense, we are all different and it's not really possible to teach piano technique. The most difficult Chopin Etude for me is probably the first one, in C major. My hand is quite small, but then again, I haven't played them all.
It also depends on how you define 'technique'. For me, technique has nothing to do with playing the right notes as fast as you can, but about the expression, creating as many colors and different voices on the piano. In the older generation, they concentrated on these nuances, but today, there is too much emphasis on just playing the right notes. I would say, however, that the clarity of technique is higher than ever today.

EH: What are your thoughts on piano competitions and the effects they've had on the artistry of this generation?

Pohjonen: There are so many piano competitions today. Even if you win, it's just one of hundreds. But yes, it's quite true that the ones who win tend to play it safe, in such a way that they give a good-enough impression to the entire jury. I think it's great that there are so any pianists today who take piano-playing so seriously, though. It's good to have competitions because the number of very serious musicians increases, and amongst these, you might find a few who have something quite unique to say. Good technique never hurts either *(laughs)*.

EH: You frequently appear in chamber recitals around the world. How would you describe your finest moments as a chamber musician ?

Pohjonen: You know, I get so many ideas playing chamber music. When you're playing solo, you get fixed to your own ideas. But with chamber music, you must accommodate other musicians. And this way, you constantly have to think of what you're trying to do with other people, there is that focus, and you're constantly searching for purpose. The repertoire is also wonderful, it would be such a shame to not play it!

EH: Is there a pianist whose recordings you find yourself returning to constantly?

Pohjonen: I really like András Schiff, who I studied with. He concentrates many ideas in a very short amount of time. In a span of a second, he already has so many ideas about coloring, singing and articulation. There is a lot of variation in his playing, and while he has mannerisms, we all do. I also love the recordings of Edvard Grieg, Debussy, and Alicia de Larrocha.

There are two kinds of pianists. Some, like Murray Perahia and András Schiff, treat the score like it's sacred. They never put themselves above it. But there are other great pianists who treat the music as a tool to express their own ideas, and I'm pretty fine with that too. But I try not to do that myself.

EH: You will be performing, amongst other selections, Liszt's *Après une lecture de Dante.*What are your feelings about the piece, and what would you like the audience to pay especial attention to?

Pohjonen: Usually, I don't like Liszt very much. He's not really my composer *(laughs)*. But it was the most logical choice to end the 'Fantasy' program with this work, and actually, while I was studying the work, I began thinking how nice the music was *(laughs)*. Nowadays, I think people tend to play Liszt a bit too athletically. I listened to Claudio Arrau's recording of the work and it was a revelation. His sensitivity, his power, he made it a very organic entity. There was a specific tension that lasted from the beginning to the end of the piece, a large arc, and this is something I would love to do with the piece, what I would want the audience to hear.

EH: In your opinion, what is the purpose of performance art ?
Pohjonen: That's interesting. Art, in general, is searching for ways to make something out of the ordinary. If you listen to a great piece of art, you feel that you have grown, that you've become a better person. This is actually the kind of question that I'll have to think about more in the years to come *(laughs)*.

EH: Is the future of classical music secure?

Pohjonen: I think it is secure, because there is always interest in classical music. I actually prefer the term 'art music' to 'classical music'. Any kind of music that has so many concentrated ideas should have a future for it. There is always going to be a demand for art, whether music or painting, or even the merging of various forms together.
EH: Is there a relatively little-known contemporary composer whose works have inspired you?

Pohjonen: Well, Esa-Pekka Salonen is known more as a conductor, of course. But he has some great ideas about music. His music is very approachable and it doesn't sound too contemporary. He has other kinds of ideas about the concept or story-telling side of music, and I really like them as well. I also really enjoy the music of my brother (laughs). I compose too, but not as well as him. It's contemporary, he has his own system, but what I like is that he is very economical, he doesn't use too many notes and gives meaning to every note he writes - a great quality in a composer.

EH: Mr. Pohjonen, it's been a great pleasure speaking with you today. Thank you for taking the time.

Pohjonen: Thank you, it was my pleasure.

Juho Pohjonen

SAN FRANCISCO CLASSICAL VOICE
The Go-To Place for Classical Music in the Bay Area

July 11, 2012

Juho Pohjonen: Keyboard Flair From Finland

By Marianne Lipanovich

Juho Pohjonen may have first moved into the international spotlight with his Carnegie Hall debut in 2004, but it was clear from his early childhood that he was meant to be a musician. He began playing violin at 2½, took up piano at age 4 (he considers that a little late), and entered the Junior Academy at the Sibelius Academy in 1989 at age 8. His talent is a given, of course, but he combines it with great technique and a reputation for intriguing interpretations of both mainstream and contemporary classics. He returns to Music@Menlo at the end of the month, where local music lovers will have a chance to hear him in two different programs.

This is your second trip to Menlo Park, right?

My third, actually. The first time I was rehearsing, then I was there last year.

What do you enjoy about Music@Menlo?

I really like it. It is extremely well-organized; I've never seen anything like it. They pay attention to details. When you're traveling, they make sure there is the music you like in the car. The practice facilities are great. The whole atmosphere is warm and inclusive.

One of the things you're known for is your programs, which include interesting choices and combinations. What is it like when doing a festival with a theme where you're more limited in what you can program?

It's not a problem at Music@Menlo. The Schubert piano recital [Fantasy in C Major, part of the "Concert Program" on July 21 and 22] is one of my favorites and something I really wanted to do.

I could make my own program for the "Carte Blanche" solo recital [on July 29]. The theme of this year's program is about the world of music — they put it really well in their program — and I could put together a program of sonata fantasies. This is quite an unusual musical form; it's usually one or the other. The fantasies usually represent freedom while the sonatas represent order. Combining these two creates something very unusual and interesting.

As a musician, you travel to a lot of different cities. Do you have time to explore, and what are some of the places you've liked?

For me, it's exciting to explore the concert halls. Traveling is exhausting. I'm in Bonn right now, just got here, so I'm hoping to see some things.

I've heard there's good hiking near Menlo Park, so I hope I can do that this time.

You started with violin, and then went to piano. Do you still play violin?

Not really. Sometimes I do, but the sound is so shocking and bad. It's very useful to have the experience with the violin. I can listen to the other players and know what the possibilities are.

Any instruments you wish you could play?

Maybe cello. Well, every instrument. I wish I could sing.

I'm happy with the piano. It has so many possibilities. You can imitate a whole orchestra. You can create polyphonic sounds. The maximum for the violin is three notes, and it's very hard to do.

What I *don't* like about the piano is the sound always starts to vanish. You can't make a crescendo with one note, or vibrato. You have to play around this.

I enjoy playing with orchestras but never had any ambitions to be a conductor. I don't want to be a boss. I want to do it myself.

I think Finland is a country most people in the U.S. don't know a lot about. What are some of the things you feel people don't realize about the country?

We have a language quite unlike any other. For instance, we don't have a form of the verb "to have." You have to express it as "with me." It's a very cold country, with extreme differences in sunlight. Northern Finland has constant sunlight in summer.

Culturally, Finland is both quite young and very old. Our poetry and singing is very old. Classical music is new, but we have some good composers. We're a little bit like Canada.

We're socialist, very northern, but somewhat the black sheep of Nordic culture. We're not really part of Scandinavia.

I have to ask about the tango. I saw something on the U.S. TV program *60 Minutes* a number of years ago about the tango being a huge Finnish pastime. Is that still true?

Yes. There's a tango singing competition, and they crown the Tango Queen and Tango King. I've never gotten into it, but it is still popular.

What are some of the things you do for fun?

Playing is the most fun. It's a hobby and work combined.

What might you do if you were not a musician?

I have a strange talent for computer programming. I have a computer game, *Reflections,* that's available. It's strange. I didn't look for a publisher; they just contacted me.

I have other ideas, but it takes so much work to create the computer program.

But for as long as I remember, I thought *I will be a musician.*

What are you listening to, musically?

I don't listen a lot to music. The last time was Bartók and Mozart. I usually listen professionally, to hear what other musicians are doing with phrasing and dynamics. Otherwise, I listen to contemporary orchestral music where I don't have to pay attention to those details.

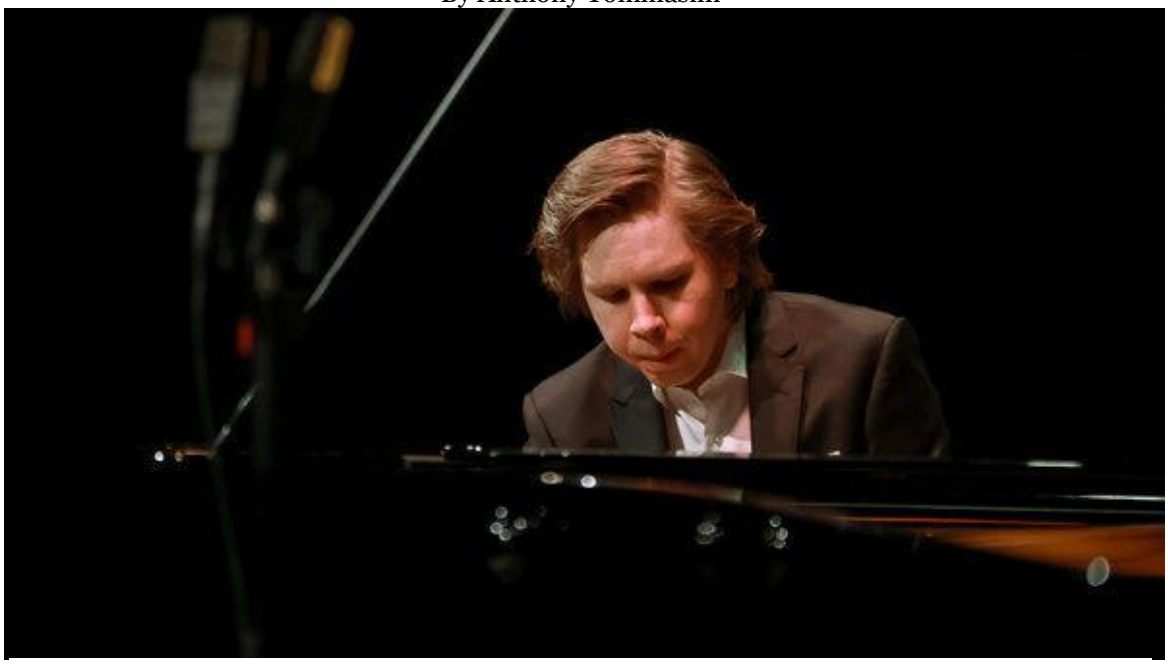
Juho Pohjonen

The New York Times

April 8, 2019

A Pianistic Master and an Upstart, 15 Years Later

By Anthony Tommasini



The pianist Juho Pohjonen played a daunting work by Esa-Pekka Salonen as part of his recital on Friday at the 92nd Street Y.

In October 2004, two days after the master pianist Maurizio Pollini gave a recital at Carnegie Hall, Juho Pohjonen, a 23-year-old from Finland, made his American debut upstairs at Carnegie's Weill Recital Hall. At the time, the two were far apart in their careers: one an eminence, playing Chopin and Debussy with his characteristic cool brilliance and probing musicianship, the other a boyish newcomer.

Yet back then Mr. Pohjonen already had formidable technique and an exploratory streak. After winning accounts of works by Mozart, Schumann, Scriabin and Bartok, he ended that recital with fearless performances of two stunningly difficult pieces by Esa-Pekka Salonen: "Yta II" and "Dichotomie," a wildly exuberant 17-minute piece that begins like some fractured avant-garde version of Stravinsky's "Petrushka."

Fifteen years later, the two pianists happened to return to New York two days apart. On Friday, Mr. Pohjonen gave an hourlong recital for an audience of about 100 in the intimate Buttenwieser Hall at the 92nd Street Y, again ending with Mr. Salonen's "Dichotomie." And on Sunday, Mr. Pollini returned to a packed Carnegie

Hall for a splendid recital of works by Brahms, Schumann and Chopin. These seemingly different pianists had more in common than you might assume: An eager musician of around 40 can also be a master of his craft; a towering artist, at 77, can still be an adventurer.

Mr. Pollini certainly took risks in the days when he championed thorny modernist works by Boulez and Nono. In recitals at Carnegie, he would play selections from Stockhausen's monumental "Klavierstücke" series alongside Beethoven's "Hammerklavier" Sonata and "Diabelli" Variations to make the point that both composers were visionaries pushing toward new realms of the piano.

In recent years Mr. Pollini, who has grappled with periods of illness, has been hewing mostly to standard repertory, as he did on Sunday. Still, his searching performance of Schumann's seldom-heard Sonata No. 3 in F minor suggested why this work has the subtitle "Concerto Without Orchestra." The first movement begins with a dark, majestic theme that immediately breaks into swirling turbulence. But Mr. Pollini sensitively drew out the plaintive melodic lines that penetrate the tangles of passagework and counterpoint. He managed to reconcile Schumann's extremes, especially in the teeming finale, in which the music's fixation on dotted-note rhythms seems at cross purposes with its dancing energy.

Since that long-ago debut at Weill, Mr. Pohjonen has won a following in New York for his regular performances with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. On Friday, he gave an elegant account of Rameau's Suite No. 2 in G, and conveyed the episodic fervor of Scriabin's single-movement Sonata No. 8.

He again conquered Mr. Salonen's "Dichotomie." The second part of the piece unfolds in passages of oscillating chords and pummeling repeated figures, until the music bursts into a long episode of sweeping glissandos, through which thematic lines and pungent chords must break through. As he did 15 years ago to ease the execution (and protect the fingers of his right hand), Mr. Pohjonen managed to quickly slip on a thin glove to dispatch the glissandos, then deftly slipped it off — a neat trick.

But, more than in 2004, he had the piece sounding alluring, with watery runs and milky colors amid bouts of pummeling chords. It no longer seemed nearly impossible. You might say he played it like a master.

Juho Pohjonen

RUTLAND HERALD ONLINE

August 13, 2024

Marlboro delivers excellence in the diverse and the traditional

By Jim Lowe

Marlboro Music Festival closed its 2024 season Sunday as it traditionally — but not always — does, with Beethoven's "Choral Fantasy," Op. 80. The celebratory performance was made all the more special by a passionate and deeply probing performance by pianist Mitsuko Uchida, the festival's co-artistic director, in the solo role.

Composer Thomas Adès conducted the Marlboro Festival Orchestra, comprised of most of the festival's topnotch instrumentalists, and Chorus, volunteers from the festival and community, along with the festival's fine vocal soloists. Although somewhat under-rehearsed, Sunday's performance exuberantly expressed the joy of the players — as well as their audience — to be making music in Vermont's music mecca.

Most think of Marlboro as home to some of the finest chamber music heard in Vermont, indeed anywhere, but it is in fact a music school. Talented young up-

and-coming musicians, some already into a major career, come to learn chamber music by rehearsing and performing alongside veteran, often famous artists. Unusually, there is no rehearsal time limit — it doesn't get performed until it is ready.

Over the weekend, one of the best examples was Saturday's performance of Johannes Brahms' Piano Quartet in G minor, Op. 25. Pianist Juho Pohjonen, violist Cara Pogossian and cellist Taeguk Mun, seemingly very young players, were joined by violinist Meesun Hong Coleman, the American-born concertmaster of the Potsdam (Germany) Chamber Academy and the Haydn Philharmonic, in an unaffectedly beautiful performance.

Pohjonen, in particular, played with the requisite virtuosity tempered by a nuanced musicality and sense of ensemble. But all four played as equals, serving the music of Brahms rather than themselves. The final "Rondo alla Zingarese" was pure joy — for the players as well as the audience.

Adès (b. 1971), also one of the two composers-in-residence this summer, conducted the Marlboro Festival Chamber Strings in his 2020 "Shanty — Over the Sea," opening Sunday's concert. The attractive 10-minute work has a largely ethereal affect — thanks to the creative use of harmonics — with a somewhat Asian flavor. It warrants more listenings — and thus performances.

Marlboro is best known for instrumental music, but it has long been building a substantial vocal program. Lydia Brown, one of the festival's pianist-vocal coaches, led two important performances over the weekend. She was joined Saturday by soprano Bridget Esler; mezzo-soprano Chihiro Asano; tenor Patrick Bassenbacher; and bass-baritone Evan Luca Gray in a richly beautiful performance of Brahms' "Sechs Quartette (Six Quartets)," Op. 112 — including the more flavorful "Four Gypsy Songs."

More interesting though was Sunday's performance of Benjamin Britten's intriguing "Canticle IV: The Journey of the Magi," Op. 86, the 20th-century English composer's 1971 setting of the T.S. Eliot poem. Countertenor Daniel Moody, tenor Daniel McGrew and bass-baritone Gray were joined by Brown in a deeply penetrating performance of this edgy storytelling masterpiece.

While Saturday's performance of Robert Schumann's Trio in G minor Op. 110, by Sahun Sam Hong, violinist Clara Neubauer and cellist Christoph Richter, who teaches at the Royal Academy of Music in London, was certainly well-played individually, it lacked the cohesion of a compelling performance.

Marlboro's excellent woodwinds were showcased Sunday in the 1894 Divertissement, Op. 36, by French composer and organist Émile Bernard (1843-1902). This late Romantic music, most enjoyable but not particularly memorable, couldn't have asked for a better performance.

Founded in 1951 by the Busch-Serkin and Moyse families, Marlboro Music Festival has long been a world-famous mecca for the best in chamber music — and yet, how many Vermonters are aware of it?

Juho Pohjonen

Washington CLASSICAL REVIEW

March 11, 2024

Chamber Music Society of LC serves up gourmet feast of rarities at Wolf Trap

By Charles T. Downey

The Barns at Wolf Trap has become a sort of southern outpost for Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center under the tenure of artistic director Wu Han. That is not a complaint, for this elite organization has the roster to present an endless variation of intriguing programs. Sunday afternoon's concert featured a veritable cabinet of curiosities: five eclectic works, culminating in Johann Nepomuk Hummel's rarely heard Septet in D Minor.

In the first half, each of the seven musicians needed for the Septet combined in smaller works, equally obscure, with pianist Juho Pohjonen getting the most time on stage. Horn player Radovan Vlatković opened the concert with Beethoven's rarely heard Horn Sonata. This challenging piece was composed for the virtuoso Giovanni Punto in 1800, who played it on a natural horn with a low range.

Playing on a modern valved horn and sans score, Vlatković rendered the piece with nearly faultless execution. He glided through many arpeggiated passages in the first movement, but it was the subtle way with the tender second theme that stood out, as Vlatković softened each repeated note just slightly. He and Pohjonen enhanced this effect each time the motif reappeared, and the second movement added to the sense of the horn as a sensitive melodic instrument, with more patiently ordered fireworks in the third movement.

The most singular oddity on the program was Rossini's Duetto in D Major for cello and double bass. Written for an amateur cellist while Rossini was in England, it is no mere party trick but a beautifully constructed duet for two equal partners, which the music found in cellist Nicholas Canellakis and double-bass player Nina Bernat.

Contrapuntal exchanges in the first movement ensured that Bernat had to do almost everything Canellakis did, including a perilous climb far up the highest string. Textural variety gave the middle slow movement a poignant delicacy, as Canellakis in particular savored his melodic role. Just when the listener may have forgotten Rossini the comic opera composer, he appeared in the third movement, a playful romp where the cello got the spotlight again, gracefully accompanied by Bernat's larger instrument.

Oboist James Austin Smith joined Pohjonen for Benjamin Britten's *Two Insect Pieces*. The two movements, as indicated by their titles, evoke a grasshopper and a wasp. Pohjonen pecked at the jumping motif of mildly clashing dissonances, while Smith

leapt from one perfectly placed staccato note to another, all perfectly in tune well into the top range. Buzzing trills emanated from Pohjonen's keyboard in the second movement, a sensitively paced accompaniment for his oboist.

Finally violist Paul Neubauer and flutist Sooyun Kim took the stage to play Duruflé's *Prélude, Récitatif et Variations*. Pohjonen began the piece at the piano, a restless prelude of murmuring dissonances obscuring the underlying harmony of C sharp major, marked "slow and sad." Neubauer's viola and Kim's flute wove melancholy tunes into the mix, building to a climax before the somber recitative section began.

The theme of the concluding variations had the fluidity of plainchant, which few other composers excelled at setting as naturally as Duruflé. The three musicians traced the contrasting variations on this theme with masterful clarity and athletic virtuosity, bringing to an end a remarkable first half.

For all of his work up to this point, Pohjonen's real chance to shine came in Hummel's Septet, which combined all of the instruments. The Finnish pianist, speaking at the Q&A before the second half, described the piece as something like a piano concerto with a seven-player orchestra. He leaned towards a subtle approach to the endless roulades and big chords in the first movement, with the other musicians layering on their own parts in a carefully balanced whole, rather than hammering relentlessly to display his virtuosity.

Devilish flair marked the second movement, with the same kind of lightness across the ensemble. Other instrumental solos came to the fore in the trio section, set in the parallel major, especially the cello and horn. The third movement, a tender theme and variations, brought out some melodic parts for the double-bass, with Bernat's solid playing like the anchor at the other pole of the work against Pohjonen's constant movement, with spectacular variations in lacy repeated-note motifs and gossamer trills.

Octaves in both hands posed no problems for the pianist either in the racing Finale. A somewhat academic fugal section featured the chance to savor the playing of each of Pohjonen's colleagues again each time it occurred. Canellakis produced some of his finest playing in the brief moment of respite in this turbulent movement, on a gently rising melody in radiant A major. The theme sounded even more angelic transposed up into D major, leading to the piece's conclusion.

Juho Pohjonen

Oberon's Grove

July 18, 2023

CMS Summer Evenings 2023 ~ Concert 4

The final concert in **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center**'s 2023 Summer Evenings series presented a quintet of distinctive artists in music of Haydn, Mozart, and Fauré. The remarkable Finnish pianist Juhi Pohjonen was at the center of this engrossing program, playing in all three works with the combination of passion and subtlety that is his trademark.

Haydn's *Trio in E-flat major* for Violin, Cello and Piano, Hob. XV:29, dating from 1797, made for an elegant start to the evening. The opening *Poco allegretto* commences with a sustained note from the three artists: violinist Stella Chen, cellist Sihao He, and Mr. Pohjonen. The music then progresses in a 'theme and variations' setting, briefly entering the minor mode. The pianist's rippling florid passages delighted the ear, whilst violin and cello duetted lyrically.

The pianist opens the *Andante* with the most delicate of *pianissimi*, taking up a simple melody in which the three voices blend sweetly. The ebb and flow of passion and restraint leads to a mini-cadenza from the pianist before the *Allemande* finale kicks off with a burst of energy. Mr. Pohjonen spins off immaculate *fiorature* laced with trills, whilst Sihao He offers rapid cello scalework. After pausing for a playful piano passage, the music dances on: winding down, only to re-boot to a zesty finish.

Mozart's *Concerto No. 12 in A - major* for Piano and String Quintet, K. 414, was written in 1782 for the composer himself to perform, with a small ensemble; the string quartet setting was created later. This piece offers a perfect showcase for Mr. Pohjonen's artistry.

The opening *Allegro* features genial strings: violist Beth Guterman Chu has joined violinists Stella Chen and Danbi Um, with Sihao He's mellow sound enriching the harmonies. Mr. Pohjonen's marvelous tone and sparkling agility are pure magic. Ms. Guterman Chu, with a gleam in her eye, is a wonderful addition to the ensemble, whilst Sihao He's rich-toned descending motifs are truly appealing. At last comes a fabulous Pohjonen piano cadenza, so gracefully played.

The *Andante* suffered from the intrusion of two dropped objects and a jangling cellphone, but the artists kept their focus, opening with a string quartet. Mr. Pohjonen's nuanced playing was just sublime, and I must again praise Sihao He's plush sound. A minor-key piano passage underlined by sighing strings achieves a marvelous blend, and Mr. Pohjonen's cadenza was offered in a hushed *pianissimo*, with trills etched in.

The final *Rondeau: Allegretto* is lively indeed, with nimble, utterly clear piano phrases and unison string passages, which eventually develop into a fugue. Full stop...and then the pianist's virtuosity was in full flourish, pausing only for some enticing delicate measures along the way. Bravo Juho!

Following a rather longish the interval, Gabriel Fauré's *Quartet in C-minor* for Piano, Violin, Viola, and Cello No. 1, Op. 15, was given a luminous performance

by Mr. Pohjonen, Danbi Um, Beth Guterman Chu, and Sihao He.

The opening *Allegro molto moderato* momentarily has an *à la Russe* feeling, later becoming quietly rapturous. A piano theme is soon taken up by Danbi Um's silken violin, then passed on to Ms. Chen and Ms. Guterman Chu. The music becomes overwhelmingly beautiful and passionate, before turning more lyrical. Mr. Pohjonen's sorcery is again evidenced in the movement's sustained conclusion.

Delicate plucking opens the *Scherzo,* with sprightly motifs from the Steinway: all is lightness and air. Rhythms compete, the music covering a broad dynamic range with shifts of energy. After a false finish, the piano gently resumes. The unison strings then part company, taking up slithering scales. The music dances on, full of fun.

Sihao He introduces the *Adagio* with an achingly gorgeous theme; the strings unite, and the pianist is at his most pensive. Danbi Um's violin sounds radiantly, whilst the violist and cellist, playing in unison, introduce darker hues. These lower voices join Danbi in poignant harmonies. The music is lush and passionate until a sudden mood swing comes from the piano, playing *pianissimo*. The the opening cello solo returns, and a feeling of time standing still gave me the chills...so haunting. Then Mr. Pohjonen offers a final benediction.

In the final *Allegro molto*, we can simply sit there and savour the vibrant playing that's on offer. Juho is beyond splendid, and bits of melody are passed about among the string players. After a brief interlude, the music seems to be summoning energy for a big finish, but instead there's a full stop. From the silence, Danbi Um's exquisite sound emerges, opening a pathway to a grand and sweeping finish.

Juho Pohjonen

StarTribune

June 4, 2022

Osmo Vänskä winds down his Minnesota Orchestra tenure with an emotional premiere

By Rob Hubbard

When the Minnesota Orchestra announced music director Osmo Vänskä's final season, I asked him which concerts he most avidly anticipated. He immediately mentioned the premiere of the first symphony by a dear friend, composer, conductor and violinist Jaakko Kuusisto.

Planned for Vänskä's penultimate weekend at the helm, that premiere took on a sorrowful hue after Kuusisto died of brain cancer in February at 48.

The symphony was unfinished, but his younger brother, Pekka Kuusisto, who recently completed his tenure as a St. Paul Chamber Orchestra artistic partner, set about completing the work from sketches his brother left behind, working through a grief compounded by their mother's death in April.

It proved a moving finale to Friday night's concert at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis, a deeply emotional work with lovely layers of orchestral sound, arrestingly stark solos and intriguing interplay among the musicians. The evening was a fine opening to Vänskä's final fortnight, full of high-energy offerings that included a very exciting yet seldom played concerto by Felix Mendelssohn.

Actually, the Minnesota Orchestra wasn't the only orchestra onstage. The concert featured the Sphinx Virtuosi, a string orchestra made up of some of America's most talented young Black and Latinx string players. They started the evening with a work by one of their alumni, Xavier Foley, "Ev'ry Voice," a solemn, then spirited variation on a song often called the Black national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

The Sphinx strings subsequently offered a relentlessly exhilarating take on the "Finale Furioso" from Alberto Ginastera's Concerto for Strings. How exciting it was to watch this conductor-less ensemble interacting with visual cues on an anxious roller-coaster ride of a piece.

The concert's centerpiece was Mendelssohn's Concerto for Violin, Piano and Orchestra, a work he wrote at age 14. Mendelssohn may have been classical music's consummate prodigy, arguably surpassing the legendary wunderkind Mozart in the consistent quality of his output. In this case, he wrote a great piano part for himself to premiere, and it was played with an impressive blend of sensitivity and bravado by Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen.

The violin soloist was Minnesota Orchestra concertmaster Erin Keefe, and she and Pohjonen engaged in some deeply involving dialogues when the orchestra fell away. It's a work full of ebbs and flows of tempo and mood, the segues smooth in the hands of the two soloists. And the Adagio was positively dreamy, reminiscent of the slow movements in a couple of Beethoven piano concertos in sound, underlined when Pohjonen bounded into the vigorous finale a la Beethoven.

Kuusisto's symphony proved a powerful piece, the dark menace of its opening strings giving way to a recurring theme of delight that wrestled with insistent

percussion to establish the work's tenor. The solos of cellist Anthony Ross proved engrossing interludes, a brass chorale emerging as a calming influence.

The symphony's closing strains will stay with me longest — a collage of fragmentary phrases inspired by signals sent forth from lighthouses and watercraft, sending Kuusisto's spirit off to sea in a very touching conclusion.

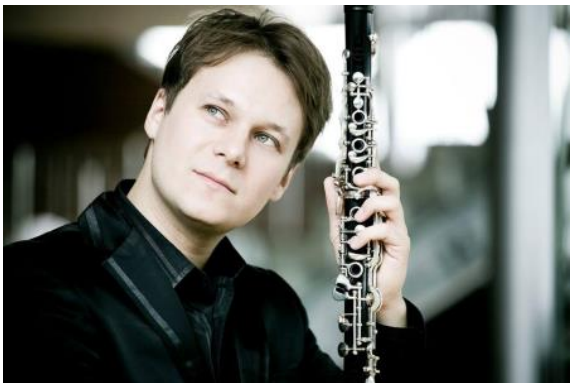
Alas, illness kept me away from the hall Friday evening, but I was able to enjoy the livestream, which will be free on demand through next Friday at minnesotaorchestra.org.

Juho Pohjonen

Oberon's Grove

July 13, 2022

CMS: Summer Evenings 2022 ~ Concert III



The third and final concert of **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center**'s summer series brought together the eminent Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen and an ensemble of the Society's top-notch wind players.

The playing all evening was impeccable, and highly enjoyable. Musically, the program's second half was infinitely more appealing to me than the first half.

Composer Anton Reicha was born in Prague on February 26th, 1770. As a teacher, his pupils included, Franz Liszt and Hector Berlioz. As a composer, he made a substantial contribution to the catalog of works for wind quintet. Reicha moved to Paris in 1808, became a naturalized citizen of France in 1829, and died in Paris on May 28th, 1836.

This evening, Reicha's *Quintet in E-minor,* Op. 88, No. 1, opened the program. The musicians were Tara Helen O'Connor (flute), Hugo Souza (oboe), Sebastian Manz (clarinet), Marc Goldberg (bassoon), and David Byrd-Marrow (horn).

This work was composed in 1811-1817, and it brings forth wonderful blendings of timbres and interesting rhythmic variety; but it seldom if ever touches the heart. Commencing with a descending unison passage, the individual voices are then introduced, and the music rolls along thru four movements. The *Andante poco Allegretto* introduces a Spring song for Mr. Manz's handsome-toned clarinet, and later has a theme and variations feeling. The following *Minuetto & Trio* features a pulsing beat and lovely passages for Ms. O'Connor's silky-sweet flute. Each movement felt a bit longer than necessary, and in the end it all seemed pleasantly decorative but inconsequential.

From Beethoven, we heard the *Quintet in E-flat major* for Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn, and Piano, Op. 16 (composed 1796) with Mssres. Souza, Manz, Goldberg, and Byrd-Marrow joined by Mr. Pohjonen at the Steinway. The work's slow introduction, marked *Grave*, commences with fanfare-like motifs with the winds playing in unison. Then the piano asserts itself in a solo passage, with Mr. Pohjonen's mastery of dynamics brilliantly evident. The exceptional beauty and clarity that each player brings to his part makes for gratifying musical experience. Mr. Manz's clarinet sounds especially dulcet, and Mr. Pohjonen's *pianissimi* are extraordinary.

The *Andante cantabile* gives each instrumental voice golden opportunities to sing, both in solos and as members of the ensemble. The delicate theme introduced by the piano returns after each player has had his say, creating the feeling of a conversation among friends.

The concluding *Rondo* gathers speed as its theme is progressively embellished by the various players. Beethoven finds a place for a piano cadenza, lovingly played by Mr. Pohjonen, before the quintet sweeps on to a happy end.

Despite the overwhelming pleasantness of the music - and the very appealing playing of all involved - I was not deriving any emotional rewards from the evening so far.

But that changed radically after the intermission, when music from Hungarian- and French-born composers delighted me thoroughly.

Following the interval, the opening of György Ligeti's *Six Bagatelles* for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, and Horn (1953) swept thru the hall like a breath of fresh air. Each of the six movements is very short, being of two or three minutes duration. The first bagatelle, *Allegro con spirito*, is fast and fun, with Ms. O'Connor piping up on the piccolo.

Next, Mr. Souza's sorrowing oboe opens the *Rubato Lamentoso,* taken up by Mr. Goldberg's bassoon; the music becomes dramatic, and strange harmonies are heard before the music resolves on a pure chord. The marking *Grazioso* is true to itself in the third bagatelle; clarinet, bassoon, and flute are heard in turn, and the horn joins the duetting clarinet and oboe in a bubbling motif.

Bagatelle number four, *Presto Ruvido*, commences with a dissonant chord; it then becomes quite lively. Dotty chords mark the fifth bagatelle, dedicated to the memory of Béla Bartók. The forlorn flute gives way to the blazing horn. After a full stop, trills are heard; then the oboe produces an uncannily long note before a final '*amen*'.

The last bagatelle, *Molto vivace*, is a bustling affair; Mr. Manz's impetuous clarinet playing delighted the crowd, and Ms. O'Connor has again taken up her piccolo. The composer indicated that the concluding measures should be played "as though insane"; but the piece ends with a muted horn solo from Mr. Byrd-Marrrow. Thank you, Maestro Ligeti, for giving us this brilliant collection of musical gems!

Jean Françaix's *L'heure du berger* for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn, and Piano (composed in 1947) consists of three character sketches drawn from Parisian café life. Françaix described his style as "...*la musique sérieuse sans gravité"* ("...serious music without weight...").

The first movement is *Les vieux beaux* (The Old Dandies). The piano plays an off-kilter waltz, and the oboe seems to meow; the music moves briskly along, with skittering horn, jovial clarinet, and...a sudden end.

Mr. Manz's clarinet steals the scene in *Pin-Up Girls,* slow harmonies underlining his cordial playing, replete with cadenza and trill. The flute replies and..."è *finito*!

The set ends with *Les petits nerveux* (Nervous Children), a romping dance with the instruments skittering about, as in a free-for-all. Nervous excitement builds, then everything collapses. It's all in good fun.

To close the program, Francis Poulenc's *Sextet* for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn, and Piano (1932-39), a lighthearted and satiric work. The first movement, *Allegro vivace*, is vibrant and rhythmical; all the players are fully engaged...and engaging. After a sudden stop, Mr. Goldberg gives us an absolutely gorgeous bassoon solo, and then from Mr. Pohjonen's keyboard comes a heavenly waltz.

In the *Divertissement: Andantino*, amazing textures emerge; after a sudden rush, the movement ends abruptly. The *Finale: Prestissimo* veers from lyrical to lively as the tempo accelerates. Jazz influences pop up, as well as rich themes, and the music becomes cinematic.

At the music's end, the audience leapt up to cheer the evening's six super-stars as another sensational summer series from **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center** came to an end. My special thanks to Beverly Greenfield of Kirshbaum Associates for arranging everything all season long, and to the fine folks at the Alice Tully Hall box office. Enjoy the rest of the summer, everyone!

Juho Pohjonen

Oberon's Grove

January 14, 2020

Debussy & Brahms @ Chamber Music Society

Continuing the celebration of their 50th season, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center tonight programmed music from the Czech, French, and German schools, played to perfection by as assemblage of prestigious artists.

Josef Suk's *Elegie* for Piano, Violin, and Cello, Op. 23 (1902) was originally scored for solo violin, solo cello, string quartet, harmonium and harp. A shorter version, for piano trio, was performed tonight. Pianist Juho Pohjonen, a master of evocative music-making, was joined by Adam Barnett-Hart (violin) and Jan Vogler (cello). Following a peaceful opening passage from the piano, the violin sings a sweet, sad melody on high. This is taken up by the alto voice of the cello. A sublime melding of the three instruments ensues, interrupted by a burst of passion. With calm restored, Mr. Barnett returns to the opening theme as Mr. Vogler's cello comments; then, they switch roles. Near the end, some ominous rumblings stir from Mr. Pohjonen's left hand, but all ends peacefully. It's a truly beautiful piece, and the playing was captivating.

Leoš Janáček's Sonata for Violin and Piano (1914-15), played this evening by Mssrs. Barnett-Hart and Pohjonen, was the composer's "response to war". In its opening movement, Janáček establishes a restless atmosphere wherein melodic fragments are tossed back and forth between violin and piano; mood swings and rhythmical gestures abound. By contrast, a love of homeland finds expression in the *Ballada*, with its shimmering piano setting the tone and its lyrical main theme spun out with heavenly clarity by the violin. The music takes on a quiet intensity, turning ethereal with delicate piano textures supporting a *cantabile* for violin. Passion and subtlety intersect, and then Mr. Barnett-Hart's violin ascends to the stratosphere.

The zippy, folksy *Scherzo* has a gypsy-like lilt; a melodic breakdown follows until some soft *pizzicati* bring a sort of *da capo*. The sonata's finale attempts a return to lyricism, led by the piano, but the violin's short, urgent slashings prevent the mood from developing. To finish, the violin rises yet again to the heights.

The Escher Quartet have recently undergone a personnel change, with violinist Brendan Speltz (brother of cellist Brook Speltz) joining. It is a pleasure to report that the Escher's signature blend has been preserved; their playing of the Debussy tonight was simply spectacular.

Claude Debussy's Quartet in G-minor for Strings, Op. 10 is the composer's only work for string quartet. He completed it in 1893, when he was 31 years old. How amazing this music must have seemed at its premiere, and how fresh it can still sound to us today in the hands and bows of the Eschers.

From note one, it was clear we were in for a most engaging performance of the Debussy tonight; the integration of the four voices filled me with delight. Melodic motifs afforded each of the players the opportunity to display their tonal allure whilst the harmonies, so abundant in this score, were so

appealing in their clarity and warmth. A special tip of the hat to Brook Speltz for the musical magic of his playing in the opening movement.

Debussy established his second movement in a swarm of guitar-like *pizzicati*, relished by the Eschers before moving on to a more lyrical flow, both subtle and vibrant. I cannot begin to convey the...*happiness*...I felt in listening to this music tonight.

Brendan Speltz introduced the *Andantino* with pliant expressiveness; violist Pierre Lapointe takes up the theme, and then the almost painfully lovely harmonies arise, evoking thoughts of past loves and of present desires. Music has seldom seemed so personal. Mr. Lapointe's viola sings wistfully, and from Brook Speltz's cello this romantic dream is sustained. Just when it seems that the emotions have reached their peak, Mr. Barnett-Hart's ravishing violin sound carries us higher still.

The cello again casts a spell as the final movement opens, and the viola sounds moody. Thru a series of harmonic transformations, and the ebb and flow of passion, this remarkable quartet sails to its finish. A wave of unbridled enthusiasm broke forth in the hall even as the last note was hanging on the air: the Eschers were hailed as the musical heroes they are.

Following this extraordinary performance, I spent the interval trying to decide if the return of symptoms of a cold I have been battling should induce me to head home. I was especially concerned that a coughing fit might spoil everyone's evening in the course of the dauntingly long Quartet No. 2 in A-major for Piano, Violin, Viola, and Cello, Op. 26, by Johannes Brahms, which was to follow. I had just heard this piece two days previously and found it rather long-winded. But a quartet of favorite artists were to be playing the Brahms tonight; that, and my charming concert companion, persuaded me to stay.

Mr. Pohjonen can take a great deal of the credit for sustaining me thru this prolonged, uneven work with his breathtaking artistry. His colleagues - Danbi Um (violin), Richard O'Neill (viola), and Jan Vogler (cello) - played marvelously as well, with such polish and vitality that I soon ceased to even think about my "illness" and simply embraced the music and the playing of it, feeling very connected and alive. Only in the final movement, in which I think Brahms tends to ramble, did I begin to fade a bit. A large-scale and vigorous ovation greeted the players at the end, and was much merited.

Juho Pohjonen

PrincetonInfo
princetoninfo.com

November 6, 2019

NJ Symphony Orchestra

By Susan Van Dongen

Take a German musical master inspired by time spent in the Austrian Alps, a famed Norwegian schooled in Europe, and a French composer whose family musically dominated the Baroque period.

Now mix these cultural ingredients with a Finnish piano soloist and a masterful German conductor, and you have a night of music with true international flair. Such was last Friday's concert by the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, led by guest conductor Markus Stenz at Richardson Auditorium in Princeton.

The program included Edvard Grieg's Piano Concerto in A Minor, performed by virtuoso soloist Juho Pohjonen, Johannes Brahms' Symphony Number 2 in D Major, and the NJSO's premiere of Jean-Fery Rebel's "Chaos" from his ballet "Les Elemens (1737)."

This composition was Rebel's late Baroque contribution to the concept of the birth of the universe, from chaos into order. The NJSO tackled the piece with gusto and the skills needed to balance the serene moments with musical dissonance that was some 200 years before its time.

Beautiful work by the ensemble's two flutes (one doubling on piccolo) gave brightness to the many dark passages of this unusual composition. The brief piece piqued my interest and left me wanting to learn more about the aptly named Rebel.

Then came Grieg's piano concerto, played with bravura by Pohjonen, born in Helsinki in 1981.

You probably know the opening to this work, a flourish followed by a melody that might sound more like Rachmaninoff than Grieg to some. By the end of the piece the composer's Scandinavian roots shine through, however.

I was impressed by the calm, fluent way Pohjonen's hands traveled across the keyboard. A long cadenza, which revisited the main theme, rose with passion then fell to just a whisper, and the soloist played it all with grace and control. This wild ride of a first movement drew applause from the audience — unusual for the staid Richardson crowd — until the second movement put us in a more introspective place.

The melody was traded from the principal cellist, Jonathan Spitz, to the orchestra, then to the principal French horn. Bravo to hornist Chris Komer and his excellent playing during the Grieg: in fact, the entire French horn section was brilliant.

The third movement fires up the energy again. Driven and rhythmic, this section is actually a Norwegian folk dance called a "halling," which evoked an all-night celebration of the solstice in the land of the midnight sun. A new mood arose in the second half of the movement, much more akin to Grieg's gentler folk influences.

Then the storm returned, with powerful sound and dynamics. Pohjonen played with such intensity, the audience held its breath as he and the NJSO concluded

the Grieg. The hall then erupted with applause and kept going so much so that the pianist had to make two curtain calls.

I was also fascinated with maestro Stenz, an emotive leader who seemed to connect personally with the individual musicians throughout all this swirling sound.

The Brahms Symphony in D Major was splendid, a “pastoral” that made ample use of a fine wind section, especially flutist Bart Feller and Karl Herman on clarinet.

Hornist Komer again shone with an exquisite solo amid the dreamy first section. The second slower movement was a little darker, with Brahms employing the lower brasses and even timpani. Featuring a lovely oboe solo, the third movement was like a palate cleanser before the spicy finale.

Here in the fourth movement, Brahms might have been playing with the listener but also showcasing his skills with counterpoint, as the vigorous melody passed around the orchestra from upper winds to lower brasses and strings.

By the end conductor Stenz was totally caught up in the music, actually jumping up and down on the podium, moving with the exuberance the composer intended and the NJSO delivered.

Juho Pohjonen

BroadStreetReview.com
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October 28, 2019

PCMS presents pianist Juho Pohjonen
Piano perfection

By Linda Holt

In few other performance formats does a musician's artistic attainment stand out stark and clear as in the solo piano recital. Regardless of the program, every aspect of the performer's artistry, from technical facility to the communication of the most profound ideas and sensations, shines naked and alone. Every crack in the pianist's armor will be exposed. No matter how well prepared, the artist's fingers cannot go on autopilot. Every solo musician takes the concert stage with an entire career on the line; the audience expects nothing short of perfection. And perfection is what young Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen delivered for PCMS at PAFA's new Rhoden Arts Center on October 27.

Most Americans know Finland for Sibelius, marinated herring, and President Niinistö's recent encounter with Donald Trump. The musical luminaries of southern Scandinavia are less well-known on this side of the pond. All that may change, at least locally, thanks to the innovative programming and derring-do of PCMS.

Rameau meets the piano

Pohjonen presented a fascinating program of unexpected pairings. The first half of the concert was dedicated to the third book of *Pièces de Clavecin* (keyboard pieces) by Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764), master of the late French Baroque. *Pièces* is a collection of rococo dances and other short works, usually played on the harpsichord, from 1727. Included among these pieces are the familiar *La Poule* (the hen) and *Les Sauvages* (the savages, which we now know is a false and racist moniker), inspired by a Native American performance that Rameau saw in 1725. A number of the selections have titles of dance forms familiar to Bach enthusiasts (allemande, courante, sarabande).

Over the course of 45 minutes, Pohjonen performed the 15 selections with only a short pause between, treating each work as a sparkling, unique entity worthy of his complete absorption and attention. For listeners used to hearing this work performed, perhaps mechanically, on the harpsichord, with its flat dynamics and sometimes shrill timbre, the pianist's performance was truly a revelation, exploring a wealth of innuendos and broad vistas with tonal coloring that was at once intelligent and full of feeling.

Rameau's music is spangled with trills and other late Baroque ornaments, often designed to give the impression of the sustained tones which cannot be achieved on the harpsichord. Pohjonen has transformed these frills into solid musical elements: they can be light and feathery, or strong and commanding, depending on his interpretation of a passage or an entire piece. The breadth and maturity of his vision made this assortment of musical bonbons something truly extraordinary and not the French-court fluff we may commonly expect to hear.

Serving Scriabin

The second half of the program was dedicated to a composer who couldn't be more artistically different than the rococo master. Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915) was born in Moscow on Christmas Day and died during Eastertide, befitting an artist whose musical life was a mystical quest involving synesthesia (in his case, associating tones with visual colors), a signature mystic chord, and the blending of music with the visual arts. Listening to these three sonatas—Nos. 6, 8, and 10—we are struck by how modern this composer sounds in the context of his time, or even today, remembering that he died just two years after the premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and pioneered the creation of tone rows before Schoenberg.

One of the first things notable about Pohjonen's approach was the different way he held his hands over the keyboard as he launched into Sonata No. 6 Op. 62. Unlike the purposeful arc of his fingers in the Rameau, for Scriabin his right hand was flat, almost concave on the keys, foretelling a completely different point of departure. With as many ornamental flourishes as anything by Rameau, the music swelled from the Steinway almost organically, like a time-lapse photograph of leaves that explode from a few tendrils into a tangle of forest vines.

A miracle of virtuosity

The three works were played without interruption, and though sometimes it was difficult for those unfamiliar with the scores to know exactly where the artist was taking them, the mood of introspection, exploration, and serendipitous discovery was captivating. Scriabin's sonatas are demanding on both artist and audience, but transport us to another world of sensation and expectation. Pohjonen's performance was a miracle of virtuosity, offering an intelligent interpretation, a kind of pulling together of the tone patches, shapes, and colors Scriabin provides, whether or not one cares to consider the composer's explanation of the basis of his work. In Pohjonen's hands, the gifts of both Rameau and Scriabin are pure art.

Juho Pohjonen

PIONEER PRESS
TwinCities.com

September 19, 2019

Minnesota Orchestra captivates with intimacy and beauty in season opener

By Rob Hubbard

Glancing at the program for the Minnesota Orchestra's season-opening concerts, it looks as if they want to go in with a bang. Edvard Grieg's Piano Concerto has one of the most explosive openings in the piano repertoire, and there's plenty of thunder and lightning coursing through Edward Elgar's "Enigma" Variations.

But Thursday's midday season launch succeeded not because of bangs, but of whispers. The orchestra's music director, Osmo Vanska, directed the sound more toward introspection than exclamation, emphasizing intimacy and beauty where others might seek to seize attention by more blunt means. It proved a captivating approach, particularly on the Grieg concerto.

And for that, one can send the lion's share of the credit to Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen, who stepped in for one of the living legends among concert pianists, Andre Watts, currently recovering from neck and back surgery. Pohjonen chose not to compete with the specter of Watts, whose Minnesota visits of the past decade have demonstrated that he can still almost break a piano with those powerful hands — and the crashing, cascading opening of the Grieg concerto invites such aggression.

Yet Pohjonen, Vanska and the orchestra found seldom-tilled tenderness in the work. Yes, Pohjonen's fiery first phrases were exhilarating, his accuracy admirable on this notoriously difficult work. But it was his first-movement cadenza that caused me to lean forward in astonishment. It was stark, subdued and the quietest I've ever encountered on this concerto. It was an approach aimed at the heart, wafting and haunting while nevertheless impressing with its deftly fingered flourishes.

But gentleness emerged at every juncture, as if inviting the audience to consider the concert hall a sanctuary, a place of refuge within an often assaultive outside world. This soft beckoning was there not only in the piano's imploring whispers, but in the sumptuous beauty of the strings on a deeply absorbing Adagio. Even the vigorous folk dancing of the finale sought sweetness in every solo.

And, if there were hearts among the almost capacity crowd that remained untouched by the Grieg, there was a stretch of Elgar's "Enigma" Variations that was breathtaking in its beauty. While the "Nimrod" variation is known for that, I've never encountered a performance of it that moved me so deeply. Vanska and the orchestra eloquently conveyed its rare blend of grief and comfort, pain and transcendence, again eschewing explosions in favor of something that sounded like surges of compassion.

But that wasn't the only compelling variation: Anthony Ross and the cellos made something mournful of the 12th, while the 13th shimmered darkly, Gabriel Campos Zamora's clarinet

singing like a mythological siren on distant rocks.

If a concert of Grieg and Elgar sounds to you disappointing in its conventionality, know that two adventurous contemporary works are also the program. Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara's 1954 work, "A Requiem in Our Time," made for a very unusual (post-National Anthem) opener, a piece for brass and percussion that bears conflicted fanfares, disconcerting exchanges and an exceptionally well-expressed eeriness, especially from the baritone horn of R. Douglas Wright.

Elliott Carter's "Three Illusions" for Orchestra had an even more fragmentary feel, as if the winds were creating a collage from snatches of musical conversation while the strings heaved worried sighs beneath them. It sounds like a work designed for discomfort, but don't let that scare you away, for, as the freshest piece on the program — Carter completed it in 2005 at the age of 96 — I felt it speaks to the anxiety of our times. Hats off to the orchestra for a gutsy programming choice.

Juho Pohjonen

Chicago CLASSICAL REVIEW

February 12, 2019

Chamber Music Society avoids the usual suspects in engaging program of Mozart rarities

By Hannah Edgar

The line between a heavy hand and interpretive freedom is rarely so slim as when playing Mozart. More than two centuries on and plenty of instrumental innovations later, the composer's works—with their harmonic limpidity and complexity masked as unassuming simplicity—still place even the most assured musicians under a microscope.

In lesser hands, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's Mozart extravaganza Monday night at the Harris Theater—bookended by works featuring the French horn—might have merely shuffled along.

But the Society offered Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen and the Escher String Quartet, two CMS regulars whose careers have quickly progressed from early-career accolades to international repute. Their interpretations were a testament to the subtler shades of brilliance necessary to bring Mozart's music to life.

Playing together, these abundantly gifted artists drew sparks during the Piano Concerto No. 12 in the composer's chamber version for keyboard and string quartet (here widened to a quintet with New York Philharmonic principal bassist Timothy Cobb). Often heard with CMS as a chamber partner or soloist in more offbeat repertoire, Pohjonen proved himself to be a singularly luminous Mozart interpreter. Spontaneous, stylish, and well-paced, he seemed to conjure the notes from thin air, breaking fresh, verdant ground. But, true to the thin-line principle, the actual liberties he took were tasteful yet few. Mozart's cadenzas, with an ornament here and there, sounded strikingly fresh, pensive with an idiosyncratic lilt.

As an ensemble, the six musicians were finely balanced, even in Harris's sprawling space. No mere orchestral cushion, the Eschers and company played to the strengths of the arrangement in an energetic and collaborative interpretation. The strings perfectly tapped into Pohjonen's expansive phrasing in the first movement; shapely ritornellos complemented the soloist as he seamlessly wove together the different episodes of the perky third-movement Rondo.

The Eschers played the lyrical theme of the second movement with the same breadth they'd brought to Mozart' String Quartet No. 22 in B flat major–lavishing over each phrase while maintaining the overall sweep of each movement.

The quartet interpretation felt a bit heavy and over-luxuriant at times; more urgency might have made contrasting sections like the funky third-movement trio pop a bit more. Even so, the group's intricacy and of-the-moment musicianship still brought this late Mozart work (1790) to vibrant life. Whether accompanying or etching out the soaring solo lines of the first movement, cellist Brook Speltz played with buoyance and flexibility. First violinist Adam Barnett-Hart repeatedly

drew attention for his silvery sound and evocative phrasing.

Though Barnett-Hart and Speltz usually had the meatier melodic material, second violinist Danbi Um and violist Pierre Lapointe were noticeably engaged and sensitive middle voices. Um and Barnett-Hart were wonderfully simpatico partners during their tandem melodies, and Lapointe exuded warmth in his aria-like solos throughout the piece.

Mozart's *Twelve Duos for Two Horns* made for an easygoing, promenade-like opener—though perhaps not for horn players, who may balk at the pieces' wide range and fast-moving passages. Hornist Eric Reed played the sprightly melodic lines with a big, brassy sound, but repeatedly struggled with the upper line's technical demands. His partner Jennifer Montone was mellower in tone and presence but far more polished.

All except Pohjohnen and Cobb reunited onstage for the Divertimento in F major for Two Horns and Strings, mostly a fun romp besides an unexpectedly earnest, strings-only fourth movement. Barnett-Hart brought consummate creativity and *joie de vivre* to the soloistic first violin role, wringing unexpected delights out of what is functionally background music. The horns act mostly as textural garnishes; Reed and Montone were best when they were attuned to the balance established by their collaborators.

Juho Pohjonen

Oberon's Grove

February 10, 2019

All-Mozart @ Chamber Music Society

An all-Mozart evening at Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center was a fine antidote to mid-Winter blahs. Expert playing from a stageful of top-notch musicians made each piece so vivid and fresh...but then, that's always the case at CMS.

Selections from *Twelve Duos for Two Horns*, K. 487 (composed in 1786) opened the program. In four duets, horn players Jennifer Montone and Eric Reed presented a fun *Allegro*, a more staid (even somber at times) *Andante*, a *Menuetto* that felt both gracious and dynamic, and a celebratory *Polonaise*. A couple of fluffed notes along the way didn't surprise me; as a long-ago low-level student of the instrument, I know how recalcitrant it can be.

The wonderful Escher Quartet then took the Tully Hall stage for the *Quartet in B-flat major* for Strings, K. 589 (1790). Incredibly, this was my first time hearing the Escher since Danbi Um joined them; her attractive tone, technique, and presence maintain this ensemble's sky-high standards.

From its gentle start, the opening movement takes its glowing quality from a serene violin theme. Cello and viola duet genially, and the blend of the four voices is unceasingly engaging. Brook Speltz's poetic cello theme launches the *Larghetto*, to be taken up by Adam Barnett-Hart's violin as the cello takes a downward turn; Pierre Lapointe's viola has a lovely glow. A descending phrase is passed from player to player before the violin takes a high ascent and the movement ends softly.

Brisk accents alternating with charming turns of phrase mark the Esher's interpretation of the *Menuetto*, with its animated interlude; then the final *Allegro assai* rolls along with appealing dynamic shifts. The audience eagerly applauded this excellent performance.

Any appearance by pianist Juho Pohjonen is most welcome; this charismatic artist today played the *Concerto No. 12 in A-major* for Piano and String Quintet, K. 414 (1782). Joining the Eshers to form a chamber ensemble on equal footing with this inspired pianist was The New York Philharmonic's fantastic principal bass player, Timothy Cobb.

Mr. Cobb's steady pulsing beat sets the music on its way; the energy level rises, but there's quite a long delay before the piano makes its entrance. Mr. Pohjonen's playing is well worth the wait, though, for he makes the music so very alive, with gleaming tone, spot-on articulation, and exquisite turns of phrase. At every moment throughout the concerto, Mr. Cobb's velvety tone was meted out with ideal weight and resonance: perfect mastery of an instrument whose musical presence I am increasingly learning to savour. Mr. Pohjonen's sparkling cadenza, with enchanting dynamic shadings and alluring hesitations, was marvelous to hear.

A perfect blend from the strings opened the *Andante* in heavenly style, with Mr. Barnett-Hart bringing forth a solo line that turns into a duet with Ms. Um. The pianist makes beautiful music over lovely modulations from the strings; Mr. Cobb is just sublime here. The music, tinged with sadness, tapers down to a

sustained Pohjonen trill, and then flows onward into a pensive reprise of the theme with the strings in a heartfelt, lyrical mode. The pianist's series of evocative trills carries the movement to a restrained finish.

Immediately, the musicians launched the final *Allegretto*, with gracious piano passages and unison strings. A persistent cougher near us made my concentration falter foe what seemed like minutes of end. But then a rising musical energy halts for a cadenza, wherein Mr. Pohjonen - with his vast dynamic range and a knack for etching tiny pauses into the music - made for a delightful experience.

Our two horn players returned to close the concert with the *Divertimento in F-major* for Two Horns and Strings, K. 247 (1776). In six movements, this music has a lot of rhythmic variety. As the piece unfolded, it seemed a wonderful showcase for violinist Adam Barnett-Hart. Buoyed by his Escher colleagues and the mellow horns, Mr. Barnett-Hart reveled in the many opportunities Mozart had provided. Most of my scrawled performance notes are simply: "...the violinist...", "...again, the violinist...", "...yet again..." and finally: "...exceptional violin playing!" Mr. Barnett-Hart's gift for *pianissimo*playing, his polished tone and expressive nuances, all made for a very, very satisfying performance.

The horns, now well-warmed-up, were rich-toned and confident here, and the audience celebrated this all-Mozart *fête* with enthusiastic applause at the end.

Juho Pohjonen

Chicago CLASSICAL REVIEW

October 31, 2018

Chamber Music Society brings a refining fire to artful Kreutzer program

By Lawrence A. Johnson

The works presented in the "Kreutzer Connection" concert by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center Tuesday night at the Harris Theater made such a logical and complementary program that one wonders why such a mix hasn't been done more often.

Rodolphe Kreutzer (1766-1831) was the fulcrum, an acclaimed violinist of the early 19th century who is better known to history for the works his name became attached to rather than his own music or accomplishments.

Beethoven dedicated his most epic violin sonata to Kreutzer, a work that bears his name. And Leo Tolstoy wrote a short story, *The Kreutzer Sonata,* which took literary inspiration from Beethoven's Op. 47. The tragic love triangle of Tolstoy's tale in turn inspired Leoš Janáček's String Quartet No. 1, also titled "The Kreutzer Sonata."

Clever as the interconnected thread was, the outstanding performances by youthful members of the CMS roster kept audience attention focused on the music.

The Calidore String Quartet led off the evening with Beethoven's Quartet in F minor, Op. 95. The most concise of Beethoven's fifteen essays in the genre is also the only quartet he personally titled, and "Serioso" certainly describes this music.

From the bristling attack on the harsh opening motif, the Calidore musicians were clearly in synch with the grim sobriety and mercurial drama of this score. Yet the players also brought consistent tonal refinement, as with the mellow Old World grace of the Allegretto, rendered with impeccable taste and balancing. The segue into the more unsettled middle section was fluently handled and the reprise of the opening section brought back with an even greater sense of yearning.

The players brought daunting intensity to the conflict of the final movement with a dervish burst of virtuosity at the coda, yet without the music ever feeling inflated or out of period. This was world-class Beethoven, exquisitely performed.

The Calidore performance of Janáček's First Quartet was just as inspired. The Czech composer clearly identified with Tolstoy's doomed heroine, trapped in a loveless marriage, whose love affair with a dashing young violinist leads to tragedy.

The musicians conveyed the operatic quality and emotional danger of the music, as with the arresting sting of the viola in the opening movement. The off-center polka rhythms of the second movement were jarringly upended by buzzing harmonics, and even the impassioned slow movement spins out into bursts of aggressive violence.

As with the Beethoven quartet, so accomplished and communicative was this Janáček performance that one had the rare experience of seeming to

encounter the music itself without intermediaries. First violinist Jeffrey Myers was especially fine, bringing an almost vocal quality to his solo flights.

In between the two quartets, pianist Juho Pohjonen provided timbral and stylistic contrast with Sergei Prokofiev's *Sarcasms*.

Composed while Prokofiev was still a student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, this set of five iconoclastic piano sketches is aptly named for its abrupt and sardonic qualities. Though the subversive elements seem to personify Prokofiev in his *enfant terrible* mode, after a century of aural assaults, *Sarcasms* sounds rather mild and almost quaint today.

Pohjonen showed a keen grasp of the composer's idiom, conveying all the spiky outbursts, frantic moto perpetuos and elliptical lyric fragments with concentrated focus and a striking range of dynamics and tonal hues. The Finnish pianist's kitten-on-the-keys touch in the final item was especially delightful.

The largest work of the evening was the aforementioned "Kreutzer" Violin Sonata in A major of Beethoven, performed by Angelo Xiang Yu and Pohjonen.

The two musicians were impressively well-matched, each bringing a full-blooded vitality and poetic sensibility to this music. Rarely will one hear such a finely layered welding of dramatic fire and expressive elegance as that served up by Yu, as with his seamless easing into the lyrical passages from the main theme.

Pohjonen's poised keyboard work was consistently impressive and both players brought out the light caprice, quirky bravura and interior eloquence of the Allegretto's variations. The final movement went with ample driving energy, yet also with a quicksilver quality that kept the music in scale.

Yu preceded the Beethoven sonata with a brief aperitif by Kreutzer himself. His Caprice No. 35 in E flat for solo violin doesn't offer Paganini's brand of fiddle fireworks, but Kreutzer's unprepossessing little march was thrown off by Yu with a firm bow arm and jaunty vigor.

Juho Pohjonen

theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

October 2018

CHOPIN Cello Sonata op.65
SCHUMANN 3 Fantasiestücke op.73 **GRIEG** Cello Sonata op.36
Inbal Segev (cello)
Juho Pohjonen (piano)
AVIE AV2389

Vivid and captivating recital of Romantic cello works

The Romantic programme featured in this beautifully recorded release really suits the overtly lyrical playing of Inbal Segev. Eliciting a remarkably warm cello tone, she is particularly glowing in the Largo of the Chopin Sonata, where the cello line subtly reflects the harmonic underlay of the piano. Both artists give elegant and poised performances, eschewing mannerism yet allowing full expressive power to characterise the melodic invention.

Segev achieves a beautifully balanced partnership with pianist Juho Pohjonen, whose impressive playing projects much variety of colour and power, but without ever swamping the cello. Occasionally there are moments when the players could be a little more uninhibited; a good example comes in the development section of the first movement of the Chopin that lacks the last ounce of intensity and undermines the degree of dramatic conflict between the instruments. Equally, the 'Rasch und mit Feuer' from Schumann's *Fantasiestücke* could have projected more emblazoned passion, with a wider dynamic range.

On the other hand, their performance of the Grieg Sonata has a vivid feeling for narrative and is entirely captivating from the first bar to the last. They are particularly compelling in the finale, where the contrasting material and tempo changes are sharply etched, and the gear-changes of mood convincingly handled. Here they encapsulate the fiery figuration of the Allegro molto and the gentler lyrical folk-inspired theme most effectively, delivering the roller coaster of emotion with élan.

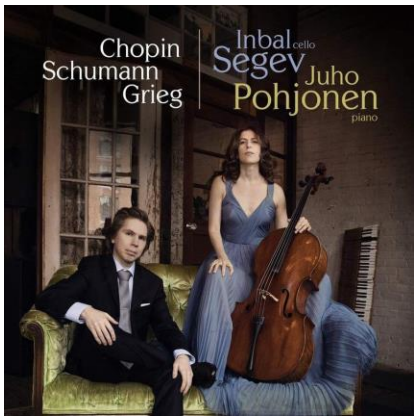
JOANNE TALBOT

Juho Pohjonen

August 13, 2018

Classical Album of the Week: Romantic Works for Cello and Piano

By Debra Lew Harder



On their new album, Israeli-American cellist Inbal Segev and Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen combine their artistry in three ultra-Romantic works. Released this summer, *Chopin, Schumann and Grieg* features their interpretation of sonatas by Chopin and Grieg, and Robert Schumann's *Fantasiestücke*, Op. 73.

Segev and Pohjonen shine brightly in Frédéric Chopin's Cello Sonata in G minor, written at the end of Chopin's career, and one of the few works he produced that was not for solo piano.

Puhjonen's stellar pianistic skill—pearly tone, virtuosic brilliance, and gorgeous phrasing—is matched by Segev's soulful, majestic lines. Her 1673 Ruggieri cello especially sings in the Largo movement, a beautiful example of Chopin's love of *bel canto*.

The recording brings out the relationship between late Chopin and the music of Robert Schumann. Segev and Pohjonen explore this surprisingly close connection in Schumann's Fantasiestücke, written in 1849 for clarinet and piano, and translated here with nuance and passion.

Finally, Segev and Pohjonen show loving attention to Edvard Grieg's rarely heard Cello Sonata in A minor, convincingly emphasizing its folk elements and drama.

Recorded with refinement at the Academy of Arts and Letters in New York by engineer Da-Hong Seetoo, our Album of the Week will compel you to listen with all your attention.

Juho Pohjonen

AUDIOPHILE AUDITION
web magazine for music, audio & home theater
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July 28, 2018

Cello Sonatas by CHOPIN; SCHUMANN; GRIEG
Inbal Segev, cello/ Juho Pohjonen, piano – Avie

By Gary Lemco

This recital (rec. 4-6 October 2017), which represents the debut of cellist Inbal Segev on the Avie label, would seem to extend a career as meaningful as those of contemporaries Natalia Gutman, Sol Gabetta, Alisa Weilerstein, and the great precursor Zara Nelsova. The blazing sonority of Segev's 1673 Ruggieri instrument, particularly as employed in the stunning *Cello Sonata in A minor* by Edvard Grieg, will electrify auditors from the outset, especially given the equally alluring keyboard collaboration from the Finnish virtuoso Juho Pohjonen (b. 1981), whose work at the Music@Menlo Festival I have followed with some dedication.

Segev and Pohjonen open with Chopin's 1846 *Cello Sonata in G minor, Op. 65*, created for the admired August Franchomme (1808-1884). After the piano, Chopin most revered the cello, and of his five concerted works, three are for that instrument. Chopin and Franchomme performed the piece together as part of Chopin's last appearance in Paris, 13 February 1848. The intensified aspects of the late Chopin style predominate in terms of harmonic richness and audacity, a penchant for idiosyncratic polyphony, and a disarming simplicity of the melodic line, as in the secondary subject of movement one, *Allegro moderato*, which constitutes a mere ten-note tune in B-flat Major. Pohjonen's piano begins the piece, quickly bounding up from a solemn march to a glistening flourish in high register. With the entrance of the cello, Pohjonen's hands will often divide the melodic line, so that the cello adds what constitutes a three-part instrumentation. The writing often suggests a dramatic ballade as much as it embraces sonata-form structure. The lovely cantabile B-flat theme will come back unchanged in the recapitulation as something pristine, untouched by the (chromatic) turmoil the music often develops.

A mischievous sensibility inhabits the D minor *Scherzo*, built upon short, thrusting phrases between the instruments, with Segev's melodic, *Trio* waltz soaring in rapt bliss over Pohjonen's arpeggios. The central *Largo* movement, incredibly brief (27 measures) provides a nocturnal gesture, sadly intimate. The deep tones of Segev's cello play against the ariosi the middle-voice piano sings. The *Finale: Allegro* sports dotted rhythms at first, playful, in the manner of a rondo. Pojhonen's part runs rife with triplet figures, the sonority well anticipatory of later Rachmaninov. Chopin's lines weave a complex tapestry, sensuous and darkly galloping. Late in the movement the dotted rhythm dissipates, and the music gravitates to G Major, where sun and smiles can still

exist in the late, often tragic, Chopin universe.

Schumann wrote his *Three Fantasy Pieces for Clarinet and Piano*, Op. 73 in 1849. The transcription for the cello's plaintive deep register is common currency, The opening work, marked as "Tender and with Expression," proceeds in a glowing A minor, with a flowing accompaniment from Pohjonen in triplet arpeggios. The melancholy mood yields eventually to serene A Major. The A Major tonality extends into the second piece, "Lively and Energetic," in which the syncopes of duple eighths in the cello line compete with piano triplets. The *Trio* section, in F Major, has the triplets become more chromatic, moving between both parts. Segev's cello takes up a lyrical line that recalls the opening of the piece, though the coda seeks a quiet close. Quick on the heels of the middle piece, the last seeks a level of intense virtuosity, marked *Rasch und mit Feuer*, quickly and with fire, even demanding *Schneller*—more quickly—at the coda. The last page provides a mutual interchange of passion, a real surge of the Romantic temperament.

Edvard Grieg's only *Cello Sonata* (1883) came at a time of personal indecision and anxiety for the composer, who had abandoned any attempt to write a second piano concerto. He retreated to much of the harmonic and melodic style of his *A Minor Piano Concerto*, and he dedicated his *Cello Sonata* to his brother John. Commentators have quibbled that the central movement of the sonata borrows much from the *Homage March* from *Sigurd Jorsalfar*, Op. 56. To the music's credit, the entire work abounds in melodic richness that its national character insures in girth, vitality, and staying power. The martial first movement, *Allegro agitato,* utilizes the same motif in varying harmonic guises, all of which feed Segev's instrument—particularly its low register—with musical manna from Heaven. Pohjonen's liquid figures and Segev's ardent passions demand we repeat the whole piece moments after we finish listening to the original run-through. Segev mentions in her program note her happiness with the recording venue, New York's Academy of Arts and Letters, whose warm acoustic provides the most elegant sonic cocoon for this endeavor. Of some "historical" interest, in their only recital together, Pablo Casals and Artur Rubinstein performed this melodious sonata, which, in the words of Percy Grainger—who in Grieg's opinion, often discovered more in his scores than Grieg himself—expresses "Grieg's soaring ecstasy of yearning wistfulness."

Juho Pohjonen

New York
CLASSICAL REVIEW

March 5, 2018

American works come off best in ’20’s program from Chamber Music Society

By George Grella

The 1920s for classical music was a decade when several styles were prominent simultaneously. Romanticism was still strong and was growing a branch of expressionism; the atonality of the Second Viennese School was on the rise, as was Stravinsky’s neo-Classicism; and even though jazz had yet to mature it was already influencing composers and musicians.

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center took a quick look into that past Sunday afternoon in Alice Tully Hall with a program they called “The Roaring Twenties.” There was some distinctive music of the era from Copland and Gershwin, and two surprise selections by Leoš Janáček and Erich Wolfgang Korngold.

Just as WWI was a precursor to WWII, so were the ‘20s a foreshadowing of things to come 20 years later, at least for America. Copland’s “Lento Molto” from *Two Pieces* for String Quartet and Gershwin’s two-piano version of *An American in Paris* were natural representatives of the rise of American cultural power. In an interesting juxtaposition of old worlds and new, those were flanked by Janáček’s Quartet No. 2 for Strings, “Intimate Letters,” and a rarity from Korngold, the Suite for Piano Left Hand, Two Violins, and Cello.

Janáček’s swan song came from the mind of a man carrying on an unstable infatuation with a much younger, married woman, whom he could never have. “Intimate Letters” is fueled by Janacek’s life experience, and full of beautiful moments, odd moments, and parts meant to slice the heart.

The Schumann Quartet (named after brothers violinists Erik and Ken, and cellist Mark Schumann, with violist Liisa Randalu) played the quartet works Sunday. Like so many other young, polished string quartets these days, the Schumanns have a full, shining sound, and abundant technical resources.

What they didn’t have was a feeling for the music, and Janáček’s quartet came off as flat and dull. The playing, especially in the first movement, was stolid and serious in an over-reverent way, as if each note should be presented as a lecture meant to argue for the greatness of the music. One felt this was a product of the quartet’s lack of seasoning–that the kind of experiences they are yet to have, the kind Frank Sinatra used to sing about, were required to grasp the bittersweet vein in the music.

The Schumanns were vastly better in the “Lento molto” with Copland’s objective style an ideal match for their sensibilities. Here, their deliberateness was a fine way to put together Copland’s sturdy and modern musical architecture.

Pianists Juho Pohjonen and Wu Qian finished the first half with a wonderful performance of *An American in Paris*.

Pohjonen has already impressed at CMS with his scintillating touch, and that was well-paired with Qian's heavier, rounder tone. Their mutual agility meant that the sound of the two pianos was absolutely clear, every single note with a sculpted articulation.

Even better was their swagger, their great handle on the music's rhythms, the back and forth banter across riffs, the jaunty phrasing. Underneath was the sense of fun they brought to the music, the idea that something meant to entertain can be seriously great while doing just that.

Korngold's piece, dated 1930 and so coming just under the 1920's wire, pulled together several unique threads from that era. This was commissioned by pianist Paul Wittgenstein, less famous than his brother Ludwig, but deeply important in that he lost his right hand in WWI, kept playing, and eventually commissioned Ravel's Concerto for the Left Hand, Britten's *Diversions*, and this ungainly quartet from Korngold.

The composer is recognized for his great film scores. But the turgid piano cadenza that began the first, Präludium movement, was a nearly comical picture of an artist trying to prove his gravity through his demeanor rather than his ideas.

Much of the first movement was dramatic gestures and assertions. The committed energy of the players—Qian, violinists Danbi Um and Sean Lee, and cellist Mihai Marica—rather than making a case for the music, merely made it seem overwrought and exhausting.

There were virtues, a Walzer movement that was full of natural charm, and an imaginative Rondo finale. Other than the film scores, Korngold is known for a good Violin Concerto, and occasionally one discusses the issue of why he was not a more prominent composer. This Suite explains why.

Juho Pohjonen

Palm Beach Daily News

January 31, 2018

Trio impresses in Chamber Music Society concert

By Kevin Wilt

An impressive trio took stage at the Rosarian Academy Tuesday night as an installment of the Chamber Music Society of Palm Beach's Young Artist Series. Violinist Danbi Um and pianist Juho Pohjonen were joined by tenor Karim Sulayman in a concert of late-Romantic songs and instrumental works.

Opening the concert were Um and Pohjonen performing Erich Wolfgang Korngold's *Much Ado About Nothing Suite, Op. 11*. Throughout the piece, both violin and piano worked well, with playful changes in texture, balanced unison passages and even tone. Um approached this work with a vocal style that fit the lyrical nature of the opening movement, including expressive, upward leaps. Her intonation was spot on as she dug into the low end of her instrument, drawing out a rich tone.

Next, Sulayman joined the duo in *Ständchen* by Franz Schubert. His voice was light and full, and had the proper power to fill the venue. The trio continued with Xavier Leroux's *Le Nil*, with Pohjonen playing with a well-defined left hand, and Um supporting Sulayman's lead role.

The violin and piano duo returned with Richard Strauss' *Sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 18*. Pohjonen played with a brighter sound in a more prominent role. Um, in an effort to get a rich tone, was not afraid to take some exciting chances. This was music by a young composer — Strauss was in his mid-20s when he wrote it — played by young performers. The melodrama in this music worked under these conditions.

The second movement was darker and lyrical, and probably could have used a little more shaping to sell it. The performance seemed to wander instead of arriving at a clear high point. The finale had several schizophrenic moments that would be heard in later Strauss, such as *Death and Transfiguration*. Overall, this was a weighty piece that bogged down the momentum of the rest of the concert.

When Sulayman returned to the stage, the trio continued with another Strauss piece, *Morgen*. By comparison, this was a simpler, more romantic piece than the sonata. Next was *Elegie* by Jules Massenet, and *O Cease Thy Singing, Maiden Fair, Op. 4, No. 4*, by Sergei Rachmaninoff. This was a bit less consistent than the other pieces. Sulayman's voice was clear, but not overpowering. It would be interesting to hear him sing in a larger hall.

Closing out the concert were three shorter works for violin and piano, starting with Jenö Hubay's *Scènes de la Csárda No. 3, Op. 18*, followed by two pieces by Fritz Kreisler.

There were a lot of similarities in the repertoire of this concert, but everything was played with a beautiful sound and easy control.

Juho Pohjonen

New York CLASSICAL REVIEW

January 20, 2018

An intimate evening of Schubert, among friends, from Chamber Music Society

By George Grella

In Vienna, the Theater an der Wien, completed in 1801, has a capacity of approximately 1,200 patrons for a symphony concert. In Prague, the Spalnesky sal in the Prague Castle has held a little under 800 people for concerts since its completion in 1606.

The measure of seating capacity is not trivial in classical music. So much of the music heard was either conceived with the size of the ensemble and the venue in mind, or else based on the scales of the 18th and 19th century, even though so much is different in the 21st century.

Scale was the real, though unintended, theme of Friday night's Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's concert in Alice Tully Hall (which was close to it's capacity of 1,086). The music was almost entirely from Schubert, with some lieder, the Sonata in A Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 162, and the Op. 100 Piano Trio. The exception was one song from Isak Albert Berg, a now-forgotten Swedish composer with whom Schubert was friends.

What impressed about this concert, other than the typically fine playing, was how convivial and intimate it was; Alice Tully Hall was effectively collapsed into a small room filled with a tight-knit group of people who came just to enjoy music together. That was true to history.

The musicians—violinists Arnaud Sussman and Sean Lee, cellist David Finckel, baritone Nikolay Brchev, and pianists Gilbert Kalish and Juho Pohjonen—wore tuxedoes. But the playing established an unobtrusive and enveloping warmth that collapsed the formal distance between musicians and audiences.

This experience developed immediately, in great part due to the simple selection of the Op. 162 sonata. This is intimate music, sitting right in the sweet spot of the public-private balance in expression that is so special to Schubert.

Sussmann and Pohjonen played this with relaxed assurance, the performance glowing with an amber light. The duo brought great charm to their musical conversation, and had a lovely way with Schubert's long lines. There was a lack of certainty about the rhythm of the secondary theme in the first movement, but amongst friends this was inconsequential.

Pohjonen is carving out a presence on the New York classical scene, and his touch was something special–delicate and precise and through that carrying musical and expressive weight with each attack and change in dynamics.

His sound and musicality were in line with that of Kalish, who was concise and full of sparkling energy accompanying Borchev in five Schubert songs—"Der Musensohn," "Ganymed," "An Schwager Kronos," "Wandrers Nachtlied," and "Willkommen und Abschied."

These were a display for both the singer and the composer. Borchev has a lovely, high baritone, warm, soft, and rounded.

His vocal foundation is strong and allowed him to modulate colors and dynamics with smooth expertise. His contrasts between the three middle songs of the set were stimulating, from the vivaciousness of “Ganymed” to the undisciplined youthfulness of “Kronos,” and then the tenderness of the “Nachtlied.”

Pohjonen accompanied him in Berg’s “Se solen sjunker” to open the second half. The composer’s main mark in history is that he was Jenny Lind’s voice teacher, but this inclusion showed he could really write a song. Or at least arrange one; the music has a strong folk song foundation, while Berg’s harmonies were gorgeous.

Lee, Finckel, and Pohjonen finished with the great Op. 100 Trio. Here, the salon touch seemed for a while a misstep; tempos struck one as slightly off, with the Allegro too slow and the Andante too fast.

But then one was assured this was part of the design, and that the design was wise. The tempos kept the music’s footprint light, the parts intimately interactive, and by the end one was won over. Schubert was once again among friends.

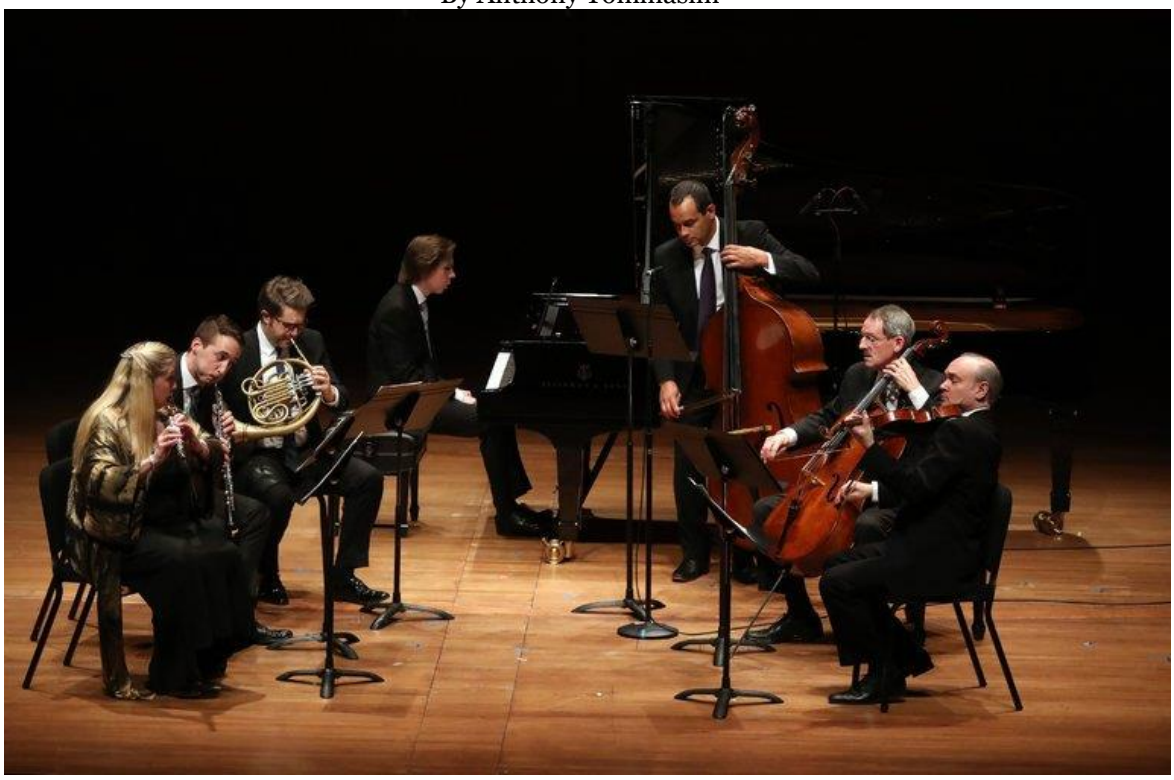
Juho Pohjonen

The New York Times

November 21, 2017

The Quietly Cosmic Sound of Desert Stillness

By Anthony Tommasini



"Flute Affair" was the lighthearted if somewhat misleading title of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's program on Sunday afternoon at Alice Tully Hall.

Yes, the concert featured two fine flutists, Ransom Wilson and Tara Helen O'Connor, in works ranging from Bach to Henri Dutilleux. But the program was dominated by two substantive pieces which did not particularly highlight the flute, and which could not have been more different.

Very little happens in John Luther Adams's "there is no one, not even the wind" (2016), a quietly cosmic piece for nine players. But in Johann Nepomuk Hummel's Septet in D minor (1816), almost every moment is animated by fleet, virtuosic writing for the piano. This 36-minute, four-movement septet became a signature piece for Liszt; here Juho Pohjonen dispatched the piano part with effortless brilliance.

Mr. Adams, who lived for nearly 40 years in Alaska, often explores environmental themes in works like "Become Ocean," a hypnotic orchestral piece that evokes the surging immensity of the sea (and won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Music). Since 2014 he has divided his time between New York City and a desert region of Mexico. His "there is no one, not even the wind"

comes directly from his experience of the “space and solitude, the stillness and light of the desert,” as he writes in a preface to the work.

Scored for flute, alto flute, piano, two percussionists and four strings, the piece begins with eerily soft, sustained high string tones gently buttressed by chiming percussion chords. Mr. Adams stacks up tones to create wondrously strange and alluring harmonies. Sometimes the music reposes on what seems a soft, lushly diatonic chord, except certain instruments play nearly inaudible high pitches that lend sting to the sonority.

But the time-stands-still pacing and subdued atmosphere just continues — for 26 minutes. Now and then a short bass drum roll suggests that something ominous might be stirring. Not so. Occasionally you detect an embryonic melody. But it disappears into the wash of sounds.

If the aim was to create a contemplative mood, the music had the reverse effect on me: I kept getting impatient, wondering when some shift or turn might be coming. The performers played with impressive concentration and nuance.

Hummel and Beethoven were rival pianist-composers for some years in Vienna. Like a de facto piano concerto, Hummel’s septet bustles with rippling passagework, decorative scales, cascading arpeggios and, in the rustic finale, bursts of dancing octaves.

Schubert Fantasy in C major for Violin and Piano - Benjamin Beilman and Juho Pohjonen Video by Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

Mr. Pohjonen, who still has the boyish look of the 23-year-old from Finland who impressed 13 years ago in an exciting New York debut recital, conquered every challenge of the piece. I only wish the players had conceded primacy to the piano and placed Mr. Pohjonen in the front of the group rather than at the back, however unorthodox such an arrangement would have been. As it was, Mr. Pohjonen was mostly blocked from view by the others.

Still, during the ovation Mr. Pohjonen’s colleagues all turned to him and applauded. Rightly so.

Juho Pohjonen

SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL
MusicWeb International's Worldwide Concert and Opera Reviews

August 23, 2017

Fabien Gabel Leads Cleveland Orchestra in a Schmitt Rarity

By Mark Sebastian Jordan

Results matter. So what if I closed my eyes at times during the Cleveland Orchestra's performance of *Iberia* so that I wouldn't be distracted by conductor Fabien Gabel's sweeping gestures—he delivered the goods.

His performance of the second of Claude Debussy's *Images* for orchestra was bright in color, deftly layered in texture, and bold in phrasing. No misty impressionism here, but rather a vital and confident clarity that showed this young French conductor, making his debut with the orchestra, knew exactly what he wanted. Perhaps the performance could have been a little more in-the-moment if Gabel were less choreographed and flying more on the cusp, but it is hard to argue with the fine and idiomatic results, reminiscent of Monteux or Previn. Daniel McKelway's important clarinet solo was bright and riveting.

Gabel threw himself wholeheartedly into collaboration with guest soloist Juho Pohjonen for a buoyant account of Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No.1. Pianist and conductor kept a close eye on each other to coordinate the numerous tempo changes, which they did flawlessly. Pohjonen played with brilliance and flair, without short-changing the insistent lyricism. His attacks had power, but each note was sculpted so that there was always plenty of air. Prokofiev's modernist strutting would lose its edge if done too lightly, but Pohjonen found that sweet spot, honoring the composer's intention to be a little spiky, while revealing the heart beneath the glitter. It's a pity that no encore was offered, for the crowd clearly wanted one, bringing the pianist back for numerous bows.

The most intriguing fare was a rare outing of Florent Schmitt's *The Haunted Palace* (*Le Palais hanté*), a "symphonic etude" inspired by the poem of the same name by Edgar Allen Poe. Schmitt was a fine composer of the same period as Debussy and Ravel, but is mostly forgotten today. It is rare to hear any of his works now, at least in the United States, aside from once in a great while, his colorful *The Tragedy of Salome*.

But *The Haunted Palace* is almost never played. Though no forgotten masterpiece, it was nonetheless well worth reviving, just to deepen the listener's grasp of the early twentieth-century French style.

It's not a literal tone painting of Poe's poem, which progresses from joy to the eclipse of madness. Schmitt starts with the decay in place (led by Kevin Schempf's unsettling bass clarinet solo), then flashes back to better times with a gentle, lyrical section. From there, the darkness returns and accelerates into a mad whirl in the closing pages. Gabel made more sweeping gestures than needed, but the performance was effective—a different flavor of French impressionism than the usual suspects.

In over 30 years of concertgoing, I have avoided hearing Ravel's *Bolero* live. "Dislike" is too strong a word. But Ravel's strangely obsessive experiment in minimalism is too often treated as something like pops concert light fare, a showpiece, a lowbrow chestnut not to be taken too seriously. I have heard dozens of recordings, but only actually like a handful.

Intrigued by the Schmitt, I decided to take a chance on Gabel, a conductor whose work I had not previously heard. He did not disappoint, though Gabel's back-row-pleasing acrobatics made me nervous. Sure enough, Gabel knew exactly what to do with the early pages of *Bolero*: set the tempo with Mark Damoulakis' rock-solid snare drum rhythm, then simply get out of the way and let the soloists characterize their parts. Particularly of note were Joshua Smith's quiet yet richly seductive opening flute solo, Jeffrey Rathbun's warm oboe, Robert Woolfrey's cool B-flat clarinet, Daniel McKelway's masterful control of the keening E-flat clarinet, Joseph Lulloff's jazzy soprano and tenor saxophone, and Massimo La Rosa's aristocratic trombone. All played gloriously as each entered first one by one, then in groups, growing Ravel's mad crescendo from a tremulous start to a full-throated roar.

Gabel chose a shrewd pace—perhaps around sixteen minutes—and then let the piece grow slowly but inexorably more powerful, running the full dynamic range from whispering opening to resounding collapse at the end. The brief moment of stunned silence before the audience roared showed that the conductor and the orchestra had rightly hewed to Ravel's esthetic line: *Bolero* is not a happy piece. But a perceptive performance in an ideal acoustic is a happy occasion, and the large audience was delighted by the catharsis.

Juho Pohjonen

TIMES UNION

August 7, 2017

Danish quartet provides rousing kick-off to SPAC's chamber season

By Joseph Dalton

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's summer season at SPAC got off to a rousing start on Sunday afternoon. The concert was anchored by the Danish String Quartet, which will also be performing in Tuesday evening's program at the Spa Little Theater.

The opener, Beethoven's Quartet in G Major Op. 18, No. 2, was an ideal vehicle to showcase the Danish Quartet. Their sound was crystalline, finely polished, pristine yet not precious. Early in the first movement, they seemed to operate at two dynamic levels, resulting in a gorgeous layering of sounds within sounds.

As an early work of Beethoven, the piece owes a debt to Haydn, which came through in that opening movement. The composition and the playing took on more weight as it progressed with the Scherzo taking on real vigor. Even here, the quartet's sound was striking, with a tactile presence, like grains of sand. Cellist Frederik Schøyen Sjölin played with an unabashedly strong presence, adding an appealing breadth to the overall sound.

Next up was Grieg's Sonata in A Minor for Cello and Piano, Op. 36. Cellist Jakob Koranyi started with a lean and wiry sound while pianist Juho Pohjonen showed an ever present gift for legato phrasing. Grieg's music is so wedded to the Norwegian landscape that it's hard not to go for a nature metaphor. From that mindset: the cello was the toiling river and the piano the mighty mountains and cliffs. Together they make a perfect picture.

This contrasting mix reached its climax in the Andante movement. In ever louder and more agitated playing the cello seemed to ask questions, to demand answers. The piano was un-phased, never rising to the bate, but always giving the same serene answer: beauty, beauty, beauty.

Schubert's Quintet in C Major Op. 163 brought Koranyi into the fold of the Danish Quartet and delivered to the wildly enthusiastic audience a treasure of the chamber music repertoire.

The Adagio had a striking sense of stasis. Within that calm came an extended duet between first violin and first cello, whose melodies had a slow melodic and dynamic convergence.

The work's most famous melody comes in the Scherzo, which was rollicking and winning. In the final Allegretto the secondary theme was given a consoling quality but things ended in high spirits.

After prolonged ovations, the full quintet returned with an encore, a transcription of a song by Carl Nielsen.

Juho Pohjonen

THE BALTIMORE SUN
LIGHT FOR ALL

May 5, 2017

Atmosphere, virtuosity in BSO program with Markus Stenz, Juho Pohjonen

By Tim Smith

The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra is on quite a roll. Concert after concert finds the ensemble operating at impressive levels of technical poise and, above all, expressive ardor.

Last weekend, the BSO hit a new peak in this peak season when music director Marin Alsop led an enriching program that concluded with a big, lush Russian work — Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2.

This weekend, BSO principal conductor Markus Stenz has the orchestra nimbly climbing another peak in an enriching program that likewise ends with a big, lush Russian work — Stravinsky's complete ballet score "The Firebird."

Ballet scores often get condensed for concert use. The suite Stravinsky fashioned from "Firebird" is how we usually encounter the music. It's a sweet suite, to be sure, but this version leaves out an awful lot of wonderful music.

This 1910 work represents the pre-"Rite of Spring" Stravinsky at his most exuberantly lyrical. No wonder the music has always been popular — too popular for the composer, who referred to it as "that great audience lollipop." But who can resist another lick, especially when you can taste all of it?

Played complete, "Firebird" reveals more of the spice that suggests where Stravinsky would soon be headed stylistically. And throughout, the score's structural ingenuity can be felt as strongly as the prismatic orchestration.

Although ideally heard with a ballet depicting the eventful folk-tale plot (there's a magical bird, a prince and princess, an ogre), a good performance of the whole score in concert is just as satisfying. That was the case Thursday night at Meyerhoff Symphony Hall.

Stenz drew from the BSO no end of sonic atmosphere. Stravinsky's endless melodic and harmonic inventiveness emerged as fresh as ever. The tension the conductor achieved right at the start was followed by masterful timing and nuanced phrases that evoked each incident in the scenario tellingly.

Some of the most impressive moments were the quietest and eeriest, with Stenz drawing superbly shaded pianissimo playing. Each climactic point was reached tellingly, leading to a truly terrific release in the finale, with the orchestra pouring on the tonal sheen.

The strings excelled, especially in the gentle, gossamer passages. The woodwinds exude character at every turn. Spot-on work from the brass and percussion completed the vivid sound-picture.

Among the many excellent solo efforts, the radiant, spacious phrasing at the

start of the finale by principal horn Philip Munds earned pride of place.

Earlier in the evening, Juho Pohjonen made his BSO debut delivering a suave, technically impeccable account of Ravel's Piano Concerto.

In fast and fleet fashion, Pohjonen zipped through the outer movements, producing a good deal of color and subtly underlining the score's jazz elements. The sublime Adagio inspired refined playing from the pianist, though I would have welcomed an even warmer touch.

A little wilder approach from Stenz would have been nice in the finale; he held down the jazziest edges from brass and winds. Otherwise, his supple conducting yielded a finely nuanced response from the BSO and soloists within.

The program opened with Mendelssohn's "Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage," which Stenz shaped beautifully. He paid particular care to the conclusion, when Mendelssohn unexpectedly shifts from rousing land-ho music — the BSO trumpets rang out with pearly tone here — to something less exultant.

Juho Pohjonen

bachtrack

February 11, 2017

Robert Spano leads a resplendent Mahler 1 in Atlanta

By William E. Ford

Early in my career, the joke was “Here comes the boss… look busy!” The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's Music Director, Robert Spano, returned last evening to conduct *his* Orchestra. Not only did the ASO musicians look busy, but they played superbly, sounding ever so much like a “world-class ensemble”, an appellation to which they aspire. With Spano on the podium, it seems to have a focus and shared sensibility about the music being played, and all sections of the orchestra are on their best musical behavior. The Maestro seems to inspire a respect and an obligation to perform well among the musicians that sometimes is not always apparent with guest conductors. Furthermore, Spano never seems to provide less than a fully competent interpretation of most works, and often he is inspired, as in this performance.

The piano soloist in the Beethoven Fourth Piano Concerto was 36-year-old Juho Pohjonen, a native of Finland, in his third solo turn with the ASO. This frequent pairing may explain why conductor and pianist seemed so in sync. The first movement of the concerto, which is about half of the length of the entire work, is a wonderful example of the composer’s ability to create a theme and develop it so that it returns in various creative and compelling ways. The second movement is a heartfelt and deeply moving dialogue between the strings of the orchestra and piano. The third movement arises directly out of the second without break and develops into a bold and energetic rondo section. Pohjonen is not prone to histrionics and he coaxed a wonderfully clean and clear sound from the piano, which underscores the music’s structure. His playing was refined and controlled, without producing a large sound which was not required in this elegant and refined performance. The soloist and conductor were thoughtful in their choice of tempi in the second movement; they resisted the temptation to slow it down simply to heighten drama and melancholy. The finale was sharp and generated plenty of excitement, but it was never excessive, in keeping with the thoughtful and greatly appreciated restraint of this performance. As an encore, Mr Pohjonen played the challenging and whimsical *Butterfly* from Grieg’s *Lyric Pieces*.

The final work on the program was Mahler’s First Symphony, sometimes called “Titan”, a title quickly discarded by the composer. It’s difficult today to fully appreciate the effect the first performance of the symphony had on Austrian audiences in 1888. Mahler originally described the work as a symphonic poem in two parts, but discarded the Blumine movement to

create a traditional four-movement symphonic form. Mahler wanted his music to portray events of daily life – the sounds of nature, bird calls – yet by 1900 the composer chose to eliminate any programmatic descriptions for the symphony because he felt that by having them, he was misleading the public. At the time, critics and audiences were perplexed by this new approach to the symphony and some wanted the notes, others did not. The score calls for a very large orchestra, and the orchestra was augmented with contract musicians to bring it to the required size. As has been the case in other programs, the ASO under Maestro Spano seems to thrive on Mahler. In this performance, every section of the orchestra was focused, intonation was almost perfect, and the precision of playing, especially in the strings, was remarkable. The extraordinary woodwinds were exceptionally strong, as was the brass section, including six French horns. The off-stage trumpets at the beginning of the symphony were well-rehearsed. Spano paid careful attention to each movement's dynamics as well as those of the entire work so that the overall arc of the music was never lost.

This was a grand performance of a grand work by an orchestra and conductor that proved they are a grand Mahler ensemble. This may have been their best concert so far this season.

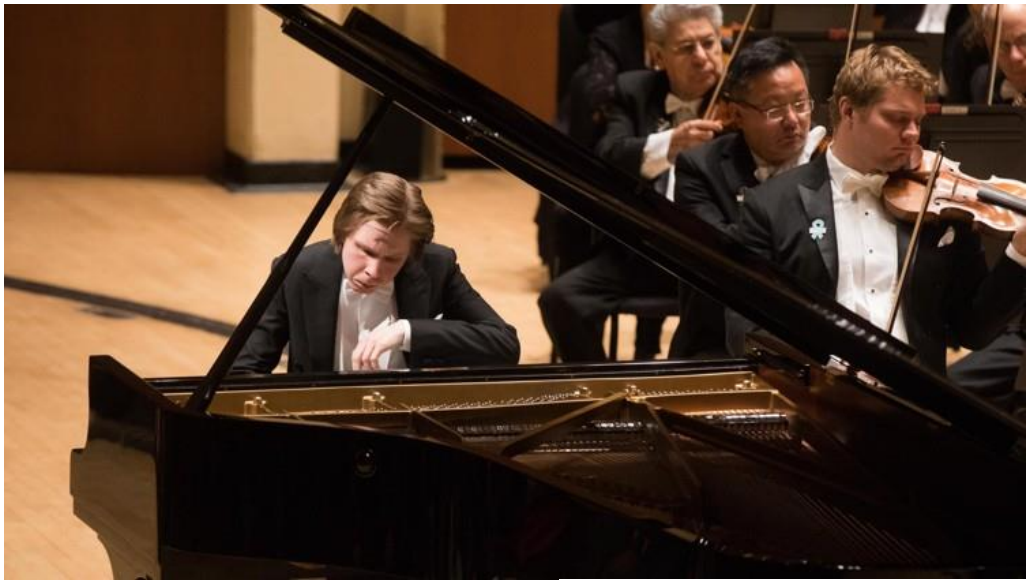
Juho Pohjonen

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
ajc.com

February 10, 2017

ASO's performance of Beethoven outshines Mahler work

By Jon Ross



At the tail end of the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, which had been playing with intense passion under the baton of music director Robert Spano, stopped short. Guest artist Juho Pohjonen, with his fingers seeming to barely touch the keys, then launched into a dizzying cadenza. He produced bubbly strings of sixteenth notes, ranging up and down the keyboard with an effortless technique.

After a breathtaking array of notes, the ensemble cautiously entered, with light pizzicatos from the strings. The pianist continued his keyboard explorations, even as the orchestra swelled to a moderate roar. These finger-wangling runs were florid but not ostentatious; they seemed like something that could be written down in a challenging etude book — one of those tricky passages to be studied over and over to develop finger speed and dexterity — but performed by Pohjonen, the long strings of notes had a deep, engaging musicality.

When Pohjonen finally stopped playing, it seemed like the perfect point for fulsome applause, but the initial movement of the concerto hadn't even come to a close.

While Pohjonen, who has made the trip to Atlanta as a guest artist twice before, was the evening's main attraction, the ASO has never sounded better than it did that initial performance Thursday night at Symphony Hall. The ensemble filled phrases with dynamism, perfectly playing off the effusive piano part. The musicians paid careful attention to blend and dynamics, creating a luxurious base for Pohjonen's pianistic feats, then swelling sublimely when called upon to take the spotlight.

After intermission, the ensemble confronted Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 1, a sprawling, tricky work. The first movement started at a whisper, with a slow, sustained note of ominous caution from the high strings supported by a pedal tone in the bass. Soon, a coterie of off-stage trumpets sounded a hunting call, contrasting this noble-sounding phrase with the relative unease of the onstage music. But these opening phrases of the hourlong symphony sounded uninspired, in contrast to the Beethoven, and proved a bland introduction to the composition.

The second movement, a scherzo, seemed to revive the players. With the cellos sawing away at a staccato musical figure, full of driving downbeats that propelled the music forward, the violins brought forth a folk-tinged melody. Modeled after a popular Austrian folk dance, the second movement righted the ship; the musicians no longer seemed to be playing challenging music, but sounded to be having a bit of fun in the midst of performing a daunting work.

The ensemble performed ably during the rest of the piece, producing passages of pure joy and sublime music that suitably masked intonation issues in the horn section.

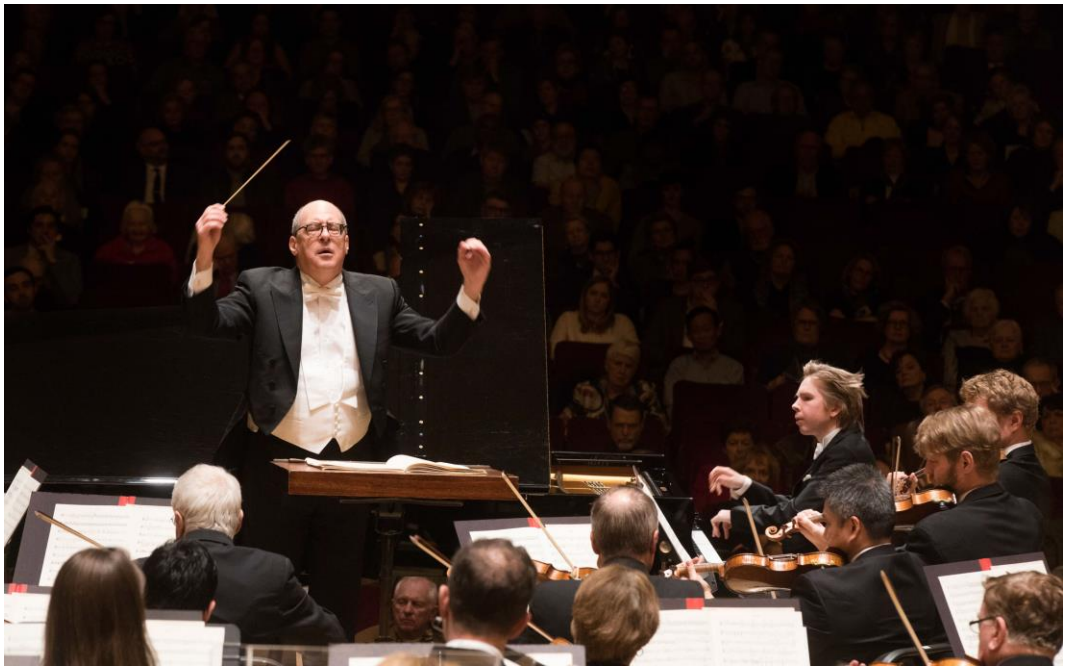
On a night where Pohjonen's guest appearance was billed next to Mahler's "Titan" symphony, the ensemble's emotional performance of the Beethoven, coupled with the pianist's exciting playing, could have easily stood on its own as a fulfilling and complete night of music.

Juho Pohjonen

February 10, 2017

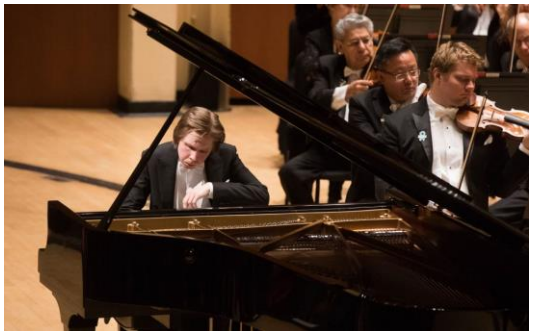
ASO gives strong versions of Mahler, Beethoven with pianist Juho Pohjonen

By Mark Gresham



On a chilly Thursday night at Symphony Hall, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra performed a concert led by music director Robert Spano with Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen as guest soloist. The ASO will offer an early-evening, shortened version of the program as a "Casual Fridays" concert tonight at 6:30 p.m. The complete program, as heard on Thursday, will be performed again on Saturday at 8 p.m. Both will take place at Symphony Hall.

The concert opened with Beethoven's *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 4*. This was Pohjonen's third appearance as soloist with the ASO, though only his second as part of a subscription concert at Symphony Hall. In July 2009, Pohjonen made his ASO debut at the Verizon Wireless Ampitheatre, the expansive outdoor venue in Alpharetta, with Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3* as part of an all-Beethoven program led by guest conductor Hugh Wolff. Pohjonen returned in January 2013 for a subscription series performance of



Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No. 5,* conducted by Spano.

Granted that Beethoven is a far cry from Prokofiev in compositional style, but just as with his previous ASO appearance, Pohjonen's performance was crisp and clear, unflappable, confident in execution. While its opening five bars of solo piano quietly invoke a song-like mood for the orchestra's entry, overall, the solo part is filled with florid figuration that demand dexterity. It is the most lyrical of all of Beethoven's five piano concertos, and is a staple of the repertoire.

Spano and the ASO deftly underscored Pohjonen's playing, in a way that was passionate but not overbearing. Together they seemed to balance the classical and emerging romantic aspects of this middle-period work, allowing the effervescent runs of Pohjonen's piano parts, ranging the keyboard's gamut, to stand out and sparkle effortlessly without undue force.

Pohjonen returned to the stage for an encore with equal floridness, if at a more modest scale: "Sommerfugl" ("Butterfly") — the first of Edvard Grieg's four *Lyric Pieces, Book III (Op. 43)* for solo piano.

For the second half of the program, Spano and the ASO offered up an inspiring, if at times less than perfect, performance of Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 1*. It is the most immediately accessible of Mahler's symphonies. Yet, given how much Mahler's music is now seen as a late-Romantic harbinger of the coming modern era, it is a striking thought that this work had its premiere only four years after Brahms' *Symphony No. 4*. Mahler would come to make multiple major revisions to this symphony over the next half-dozen years before it took its final form.

The symphony opens slowly, with an eerie, gossamer "A" played as harmonics in the strings, barely heard, except for the lowest third of the contrabasses — simply because they play the lowest "A" available on the instrument, so a harmonic is not possible. Fans of popular culture may sense evocation to the opening of the *Star Trek* theme, but that is only a momentary mental spookiness, as the music immediately moves in a different direction, with fanfares in the distance.

The second movement, a scherzo in the manner of a *ländler*, a popular folk-dance in German lands, takes the momentum of the piece forward. The third movement, perhaps the work's most famous, is a funeral march based on the round "Bruder Martin" ("Frère Jacques") in a minor key — something actually not of Mahler's innovation but the way the tune was commonly sung in Austria at the time. Mahler brings into the mix a small Bohemian wind band, recalling imagery of the folkloric "Hunter's Funeral" where such a band accompanies a procession of animals bearing the hunter's body to its grave.

It was, however, the stormily agitated final movement which clinched the deal, giving the audience a darkly roiling, energized ride in F minor before climaxing in a full-bodied, triumphant D major. Despite a few pockmarks along the way, the hour-long work proved a fine sonic adventure. Whether one preferred the Beethoven concerto or the Mahler symphony is likely a matter of individual temperament, but together they made for a rather well-balanced program.

Juho Pohjonen

Oberon's Grove

February 28, 2017

Mendelssohn's Sorrow @ Chamber Music Society

Following last week's Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's program centering on joy-filled music by Felix Mendelssohn, we were back at Alice Tully Hall to experience the great composer's more melancholy moods. With music of Bach and Schumann also on offer, we became acquainted with Schumann String Quartet, and could admire once again three artists whose CMS performances to date have given particular pleasure: violinist Danbi Um, cellist Jakob Koranyi, and pianist Juho Pohjonen.

Mr. Pohjonen opened the evening with Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue* in D minor for Keyboard, BWV 903. The Finnish pianist's elegance of technique and his Olde World mystique always summon up for me visions of pianists from bygone days performing in the drawing rooms of Paris, Budapest, or Vienna. But for all those dreamworld allusions, Mr. Pohjonen's playing has vibrant immediacy and is very much of our time.

Mr. Pohjonen, in a program note, describes the *Chromatic Fantasy* as "labyrinthine", and that it most surely is; but it's a wonderful work to get lost in, and as the pianist drew us along the music's sometimes eccentric, almost improvisational pathways, we could only marvel at the gradations of both subtlety and passion in his playing.

The Schumann Quartet intrigued us from the very opening notes of their rendering of Mendelssohn's Fugue in E-flat major. From her first phrase, violist Liisa Randalu drew us in; the three Schumann brothers - Erik and Ken (violins), and Mark (cello) - take up the wistful melody in turn. The music becomes gently animated, with the four voices blending serenely. Poignant colours from the rising violin and the honeyed resonance of the cello frame Ms. Randalu's expressive playing. These textures will become key elements in the Schumann Quartet's performance of the composer's Quartet in F-minor, which followed immediately.

Mendelssohn's last completed major work, the F-minor quartet was composed in 1847. On returning to Frankfurt from a tiring stay in London in early May, the composer soon learned that Fanny, his beloved sister, had died of a stroke. Mendelssohn struggled that summer with work on numerous projects, but was only able to complete this final quartet, dedicated to Fanny's memory. On November 4th, he died following a series of strokes. He was 38 years old.

The F-minor quartet opens with scurrying attacks and a sense of restless energy. The music softens to a nervous pulsing as the cello sings from lyrical depths, with the luminous violin overhead. The movement then accelerates to a striking finish. The "*scherzo*" ironically mixes passionate

phrases with delicate commentary. Viola and cello rumble darkly in the brief trio passage, then the tempest stirs up again before a little coda vanishes into thin air.
A simple song that Mendelssohn and Fanny had shared in happier times memorializes their bond in the touching *Adagio*, which commences with a descending cello passage. The recollections evoked by the song, which is a sweet melody in its own right, are now tinged with sadness. Superbly controlled tone from Erik Schumann's violin was most affecting; the pulsing cello then heralds a surge of despairing passion.
The finale is restless, at times verging on dissonant. Passing notions of lyricism are swept away, and wild passages for the violin warn of an impending disaster. This is a composer on the brink.
The Schumann Quartet's very impressive playing of this disturbing yet strangely beautiful piece earned them a very warm acclamation from the Tully Hall crowd. It is pleasing to know that they will be back with us next season in this same lovely space to share other aspects of their artistry - music from *The Roaring Twenties* on March 4th, 2018, and a full Schumann Quartet evening on April 29th, 2018, when they'll play works of Haydn, Bartok, Reimann, and Schumann.
Following the interval, Mr. Pohjonen offered Robert Schumann's *Arabesque* in C major for Piano, Op. 18. This episodic piece has a narrative aspect, though none is stated or even implied. Mr. Pohjonen relished the melodious themes that rise up, veering from major to minor as the *Arabesque* flows forward. Subtle passages become treasurable in this pianist's interpretation, and the poetic finish of the work was lovingly expressed.
Juho Pohjonen returned with his colleagues Danbi Um and Jakob Koranyi for Schumann's Trio No. 1 D minor for Piano, Violin, and Cello, Op. 63.
Ms. Um, lithe and lovely in a fair burgundy-hued gown, displayed the sweetness of tone that makes listening to her so enjoyable; Messrs Koranyi and Pohjonen are masters of dynamic nuance, and thus the three together delivered page after page of radiant, colorful playing.
The D-minor trio's opening movement calls for rippling *arpeggios* from the pianist, expertly set forth by Mr. Pohjonen. Ms. Um and Mr. Koranyi harmonize and converse in passages which switch from lyrical yearning to emphatic declamation. A pause, and a new theme emerges: delicate at first, then turning passionate. A sense of agitation prevails in this movement, despite 'settled' moments: the three musicians captured these shifts of mood so well, and they savored the rather unexpected ending.
Marked "*Lebhaft, doch nicht zu rasch*" ('Lively, but not rushed'), the *scherzo* has the feel of a scuffing, skipping dance. Rising and falling scales glow in the calmer interlude; but the dance soon strikes up again...and comes to a sudden halt.
The trio's third movement embarks on a disconsolate violin passage, played with affecting expressiveness and lovely control by Ms. Um. When Mr. Koranyi's cello joins in, this simple melody becomes increasingly touching. A gently urgent central section reverts to the slow, sad gorgeousness so evocatively sustained by our three musicians, the cello sounding from the depths.
The tuneful finale seems almost joyous, but shadows can still hover. The playing is marvelously integrated, becoming tender - almost dreamy - with smoothly rippling piano and the violin on the ascent. The themes mingle, developing into a big song. This simmers down briefly before a final rush of energy propels us to the finish.
I had felt pretty certain the Um-Koranyi-Pohjonen collaboration would produce memorable results, and I was right. We must hear them together again - soon - and let's start with my favorite chamber works: the Mendelssohn piano trios. The audience shared my enthusiasm for the three musicians, calling them back for a second bow this evening.

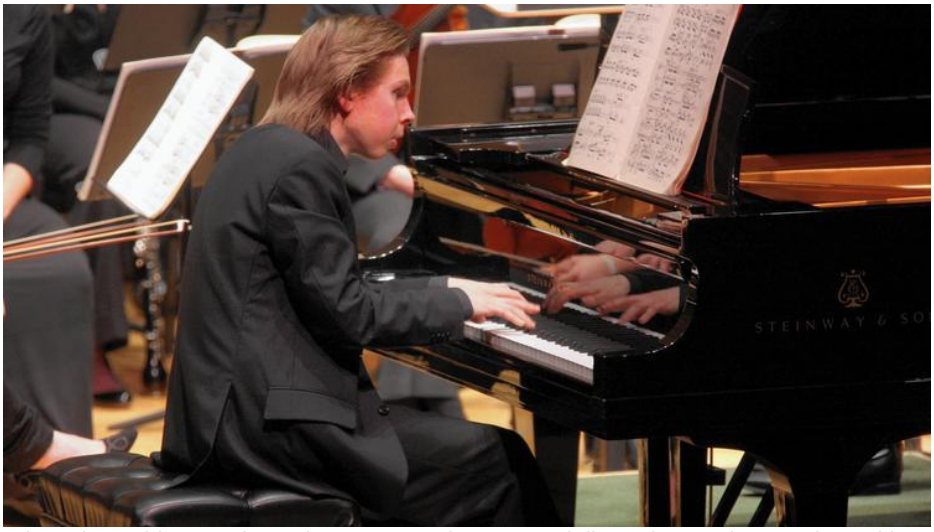
Juho Pohjonen

Chicago Tribune

June 30, 2016

Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen brings poetry, sensitivity to Grant Park debut

By John von Rhein



Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen, shown in a 2013 performance, delivered a gracious and sensitive Chopin on Wednesday evening with the Grant Park Orchestra.

The concert by the Grant Park Orchestra under Carlos Kalmar on Wednesday evening at Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park was a textbook reflection of the musical tastes and programming philosophy of the Grant Park Music Festival's artistic director.

Kalmar began with a worthwhile if seldom-heard 19th-century Russian orchestral suite and ended with a rousing piece of American music, the latter an area of the repertory he champions more systematically than any other local conductor.

Between these works he fulfilled another essential function of the festival, which is to introduce to the Grant Park faithful gifted soloists on the rise. On Wednesday night, that artist was the young Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen, who delivered a gracious and sensitive account of Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Opus 21.

Chicago has heard Pohjonen in recent seasons with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center at the Harris Theater and, in 2014, when he made his Ravinia recital debut. Slim and slightly built, he was all business at the keyboard, playing with an unmannered style that called attention to the music more than himself. But what he did to illuminate the familiar Romantic concerto was remarkable.

Pohjonen's pearly tone, articulate touch and supple legato phrasing gave pleasure to the ear despite the somewhat glassy treble register of the Steinway as

rendered by the Pritzker sound system. His sensitivity in unfurling Chopin's intimate musical grammar was always evident. He maintained a vigorous pace in the first movement, yet detail was always clear and finely meshed with the orchestral accompaniment.

The larghetto slow movement was the beating heart of the pianist's reading. His unmannered rubato gave the melodic filigree a poetic significance beyond a merely decorative function. And Pohjonen was able to tease the mazurka rhythm of the finale with a becoming lightness and sparkle. Kalmar was ever the discreet collaborator, despite Chopin's reducing the orchestra to a mostly subsidiary role.

Nobody much plays Rimsky-Korsakov's "Antar" anymore, which is a shame, since this attractive symphonic suite (inspired by the exploits of a legendary 6th-century Arabian warrior-poet) signals the Russian composer's emergence as a master of exotic orchestral coloration. What's more, its programmatic elements anticipate those of his popular "Scheherazade," written 20 years later. Repetitious the piece surely is, but a skilled conductor can "sell" the piece despite that drawback.

Kalmar's flexible pacing balanced the surges of dramatic narrative with the more lyrical, reflective pages, while the orchestra's sturdy responses pointed up the young Rimsky's already pronounced skills as an orchestrator.

Christopher Rouse wrote his "Thunderstuck" (yes, that's the correct spelling) as a curtain-raiser for a 2015 New York Philharmonic program. But this amiably noisy, rhythmically charged romp for full orchestra — a compact homage to the pop music the American composer grew up with — worked perfectly well as a slam-bang finale to Wednesday's concert.

The piece, all nine minutes of it, began with itchy percussion licks before settling into a chugging rock riff and culminating in a slam-bang quote from Jay Ferguson's 1978 hit "Thunder Island." Rouse has said that he meant "Thunderstuck" to be "engaging and fun," and it certainly was that in this spirited performance.

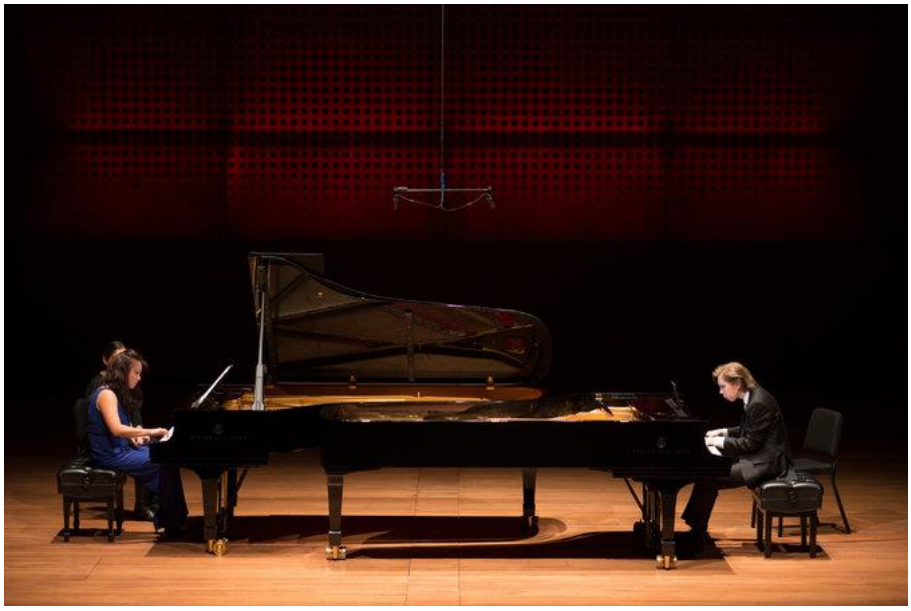
Juho Pohjonen

The New York Times

January 26, 2016

Young Pianists Offer Rich Duos

By Zachary Woolfe



Wu Qian, left, and Juho Pohjonen performing a duo at Alice Tully Hall.

Music may not offer a better mixture of grandeur and intimacy than the piano duo. Just two people on stage, yes, but each playing this instrument of fearsome potency. In range of colors and sheer volume, the combination surely has no equal in the chamber repertory.

On Sunday at Alice Tully Hall the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Centerfielded four excellent young pianists, two at a time, in a rich, satisfying program, a warm respite from the mountains of snow piled up outside. The highlight was Bartok's 1925 arrangement for four hands of his "Miraculous Mandarin" ballet (1918-19); paring the work down from full orchestra bared its architecture and emphasized its ingeniously vibrant, bristling rhythms.

On a single keyboard, their hands constantly crossing each other's, Juho Pohjonen and Orion Weiss played this kaleidoscopic music fairly straight, adding little extra to Bartok's sardonic edge. But their restraint allowed for tension even in the less driving moments. And this performance had metallic bite in its passages of industrial-strength mechanical motion: This was truly piano as percussion.

The concert's other three selections featured two pianos — less claustrophobic for the players, no doubt, but no less musically dense. Lutoslawski's "Variations on a Theme by Paganini" (1941) packs 12 variations on

a violin caprice into just five minutes; it was given a crystalline account by Mr. Pohjonen and Wu Qian, a member of the society's CMS Two roster.

Ms. Wu and Alessio Bax phrased as a pair with endearing naturalness in Anton Arensky's "Silhouettes," his Suite No. 2 for two pianos (1892). In "Le Rêveur," the subtlest suggestion of light-flowing passagework gave body to the tender melody rising over it.

The program closed with Rachmaninoff's 1942 arrangement of his "Symphonic Dances" (1940). Mr. Bax and Mr. Weiss steered clear of schmaltz in the first movement's poignant folk melody, and kept the sense of danger fleet-footed in the second-movement waltz. The energy might have tipped a bit more toward the demonic in the finale, but there was something to be said for these two players' aristocratic reserve.

Juho Pohjonen

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March 11, 2016

Dvořák's Greatest Chamber Work? Three Young Musicians Make the Case

By Bernard Jacobson

Haydn, Janáček, and Dvořák: Juho Pohjonen (piano), Karen Gomyo (violin), Christian Poltéra (cello), Perelman Theater, Kimmel Center, Philadelphia, 9.3.2016 (BJ)
Haydn: Piano Trio in E major, Hob. XV :28
Janáček: *Pohádka,* for cello and piano; Violin Sonata
Dvořák: Piano Trio in F minor, Op. 65

A passionate and rich-toned account of what is perhaps Dvořák's greatest chamber work formed a rousing conclusion to this enjoyable Philadelphia Chamber Music Society concert. It was preceded before intermission by a relaxed and sufficiently stylish performance of Haydn's irrepressibly tuneful E-major Trio, after which, in two Janáček pieces respectively showcasing the cello and the violin, the performers vividly captured the composer's characteristic blend of the deeply serious with the refreshingly quirky.
Emanuel Ax and Pamela Frank just the previous evening may have been a hard act to follow, but in that challenging context all three of these young musicians demonstrated technical skill and artistic talent not to be sneezed at. Juho Pohjonen's piano playing was full of color and imagination: he was discreet when appropriate, and impressively incisive, without harshness, when the instrument was called on to take the textural lead. Cellist Christian Poltéra's warmly eloquent and cleanly focused tone furnished a firm foundation for the ensemble sonority. And Karen Gomyo is a highly gifted violinist. (I wish, by the way, that artists' alleged program biographies—usually mere career-ographies—would actually tell us where they come from. That Ms. Gomyo was born in Japan and subsequently moved to North America is a fact I am glad to be possessed of, and I shouldn't have to Google her to discover it.) I did feel that she occasionally pressed her line a little hard, producing some fierce notes that stuck out obtrusively, but her tone was otherwise delectable, her intonation spot on, and her phrasing admirably expressive.

Juho Pohjonen

DAILY ECHO

December 3, 2015

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra at Poole Lighthouse

By Stephanie Hall

A SCANDANAVIAN musical feast was on offer from the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra on Wednesday night.

Music from composers Jean Sibelius and Edvard Grieg delighted the sold out audience at Poole Lighthouse, conducted by Kirill Karabits, now in his seventh year as BSO chief conductor.

The show opened with The Tempest by Sibelius, written to accompany Shakespeare's play during 1925-6.

Reviewers at the time noted: "Shakespeare and Sibelius, these two geniuses, have finally found one another", and the orchestra's music did ample justice to the Bard's great work.

The work contains such depth and richness that it used the orchestra to its fullest.

While short in length, the work is full in body, power and drama. It was a wonderful live experience and thoroughly enjoyed by all.

While more work from Sibelius awaited in the second half, we were first treated to Grieg's Piano Concerto, his only concerto work, written in 1868 at the age of only 24.

The concerto was masterfully handled by young soloist Juho Pohjonen from Finland who was simply outstanding.

This very humble young man just dazzled with his incredible talent and thoughtful interpretation of such a beautiful concerto.

While the soloists who work with the BSO have all been of immense calibre, Pohjonen really stood out for me as one of absolute best.

Described by an American newspaper as "a beast, a daunting player", and by another as "utterly delightful", I can only echo this. We all saw something very magical in his performance tonight and for me it was the evening's highlight.

The second half returned us to the masterful Sibelius with his tone poem Tapiola and then Symphony No 7 in C Major.

Written as one continuous movement, it breaks with normal four-part symphonic style and has been described as "completely original in form". Ably handled throughout, and with much deserved applause on completion, it had moments of pure grandeur, passion and tumult.

If you haven't made it to one of the BSO's 2015/16 season of concerts, you are really missing something very special.

Juho Pohjonen

THE BUFFALO NEWS

October 4, 2015

BPO's tribute to Finland is a sparkling triumph

By Mary Kunz Goldman

This weekend's unseasonable cold snap was good for one thing. It set the stage beautifully for "Northern Lights at Kleinhans," the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra's tribute to the music of the North, and to Finland in particular.

How could you listen to this music while wearing sandals? That would be wrong.

Saturday's sparkling concert, repeating Sunday, is part of FinnFest USA, taking place in Buffalo for the next week in a variety of venues. The festival is tied to the 75th anniversary of Kleinhans Music Hall, which was designed by Finnish architects Eliel and Eero Saarinen. In a nod to our visitors, the music Saturday began with the Finnish national anthem. Several folks in the large crowd, presumably Finns, rose to their feet. The orchestra musicians stood as they played. It was unusual and moving.

After that came a novelty: the American premiere of "Isola," by Finnish composer Sebastian Fagerlund. The piece was inspired by an island with a sinister past. Fagerlund reveled in ominous and riveting orchestral effects, mixing brisk counterpoint with frantic fanfares. There were booms from the percussion, a lyrical descending line on the cello, and blasts of stately harmony.

There was no melody, and after a while you felt its absence. The piece's unrelenting darkness, too, made it seem longer than its 15 minutes. But the orchestra played this thorny music admirably, and it left the audience with an impression that will linger. When Fagerlund took his bow, the applause seemed heartfelt.

For the concert's centerpiece, the ever-popular Grieg Piano Concerto, the BPO and Music Director JoAnn Falletta welcomed a Finnish soloist, the pianist Juho Pohjonen.

If you missed Lang Lang a couple of weeks ago, catch this concert. You won't feel shortchanged. Pohjonen, who is in his early 30s, is every bit the virtuoso. As my husband said, he is like Lang Lang without the schmaltz. He radiates a different kind of excitement.

He has a 19th-century look, with old-fashioned tails and over-the-collar hair that made him look like Robert Schumann or the young, girlish-looking Johannes Brahms. He sat down with a flourish and flung the tails over the bench. He began with the utmost confidence.

That confidence never wavered. This is how you have to play a big, wide Romantic concerto like this. At the same time, though, he played with melting expression. In the first movement there were wonderful call-and-response interludes between Pohjonen and various orchestra musicians – first the cello, now the flute. The music was spacious and natural. The cadenza was a highlight. Pohjonen filled it with power and dash, and the other musicians came in perfectly on its quizzical concluding note. The audience couldn't help a round of illicit between-movement applause.

The magic continued. In the Adagio, the cellos and violins were rich and warm, and the pianist delineated the lines with sweetness and care. The last movement was wild. You knew Falletta and the BPO would take this to the wall, and they did. There were crashing crescendos from orchestra and pianist and just the right breathless, suspenseful pace. What a performance! At the end, everyone went wild – pianist, orchestra and, finally, audience. Pohjonen gave us a charming encore, Grieg's whimsical "Bridal Procession." We don't hear salon pieces like this nearly enough.

Bravo to the BPO for being able to follow that act, with the Sibelius Symphony No. 5.

This is the kind of "big music" we are always hearing, with reason, that the BPO does well. Though it's just a half-hour long, it's a big-scale piece, suggesting epic landscapes and wide washes of color. It must pose a challenge to the conductor, with its tricky, sometimes disorienting rhythms. But it radiated into that hall with confidence.

The Saarinens must have looked down with pride, seeing how their handiwork magnified the drama of this music by their countryman. The first movement built to such a volume, its harmonies shining forth in primary colors, that you had to smile in naive amazement. The abrupt ending was a shock, just as it should be.

The whirling last movement has a similar feeling to the finale of the Grieg concerto, leaving you with images of gods and monsters and mountain kings. Falletta's arms swept in wide circles, shaping the majestic themes. The music built to a great height and ended with glory and wit.

How often do you get an orchestral encore? The audience got one Saturday. The BPO rewarded the applause with Sibelius' "Valse Triste."

The BPO dedicated this concert to the memory of longtime timpanist Jesse Kregal. The beautiful, bombastic program repeats Sunday at 2:30 p.m.

Juho Pohjonen

THE DAILY GAZETTE

August 10, 2015

Exceptional musicians make chamber opener magic

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center wows at Spa Little Theater

By Geraldine Freedman

You can't do better than the best, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, which opened its second season Sunday afternoon at the Spa Little Theatre, had it. It was a concert of incomparable music making.

Part of the appeal for the large crowd was the interesting and varied program: Ligeti, Barber, Mozart and Hummel. Mostly, though, it was the exceptional and sensitive playing from the musicians, which went beyond virtuosity into the realms of magic and intuitive ensemble work.

The artists were clarinetist Ricardo Morales, French hornist Jennifer Montone and bassist Joseph Conyers — all from the Philadelphia Orchestra; oboist Stephen Taylor and bassoonist Marc Goldberg of the New York Woodwind Quintet; flutist Sooyun Kim, violist Richard O'Neill and cellist Nicholas Canellakis — all with noteworthy credentials; and Finnish pianist supreme Juho Pohjonen.

The program opened with Ligeti's "Six Bagatelles" (1953) for woodwind quintet. Catchy, toe-tapping rhythms, a carnival feel, some long lines, a little dissonance, and coy motifs were done with a carefree nonchalance, great style, and perfect balance.

Barber's "Summer Music" (1955) is a woodwind quintet staple and technically very difficult, but these musicians played with a seductive brilliance in seamless connections and found nuances and colors in the music that few quintets discover. It was an unusually effective performance.

Mozart's Piano Quintet in E-flat Major for oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, and piano (1784) was solid, blissful chamber music in which every phrase was finished, balances were exact, melodies were sung, tempos were just right, and everything flowed.

After intermission, it was Hummel's extraordinary Septet in D minor for flute, oboe, horn, viola, cello, bass, and piano (1816). Although rarely performed because of its unusual instrumentation, it is a joy. Romantic, with offbeat and unexpected rhythms and modern sounding motifs, the music swirls with laughter. Instrumental parts are equal except the piano, which is both the glue and the star with an almost concerto-like part. Pohjonen was superb. Besides a light, facile touch, he played with a clarity, consistency and precision that brought goosebumps and smiles. His fast octave studies in the finale were remarkable. His colleagues were brilliant, too.

The crowd roared its approval and jumped to its feet. In appreciation, the musicians gave Pohjonen a solo bow. A champagne reception followed. The next concert tonight also features Pohjonen in a program of Mozart, Brahms and Dvorak.

Juho Pohjonen

SAN FRANCISCO CLASSICAL VOICE
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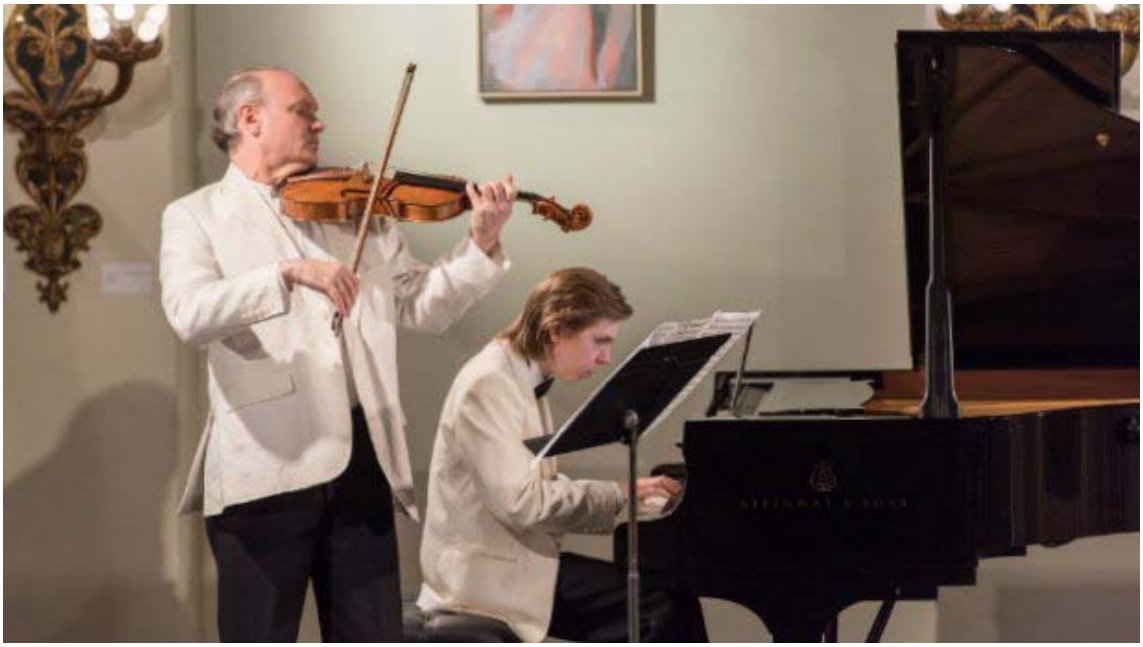
July 29, 2015

Schubert@Menlo: The Mature Composer Emerges

By Niels Swinkels



In the ongoing Schubert celebration that is the 2015 edition of the Music@Menlo Festival, last weekend's fantastic concert, "Metamorphosis 1822 - 1824", focused on the period in which the composer created three seminal works: the "Arpeggione" Sonata; the "Wanderer" Fantasy; and the Octet for Winds and Strings.

Schubert wrote the Sonata in A Minor for Arpeggione and Piano, D. 821, in 1824. The arpeggione — a cross between a cello and a guitar, with six strings and played with a bow — had just been invented by a Viennese guitar luthier, and it remained popular for about a decade before falling into obscurity.

Schubert's sonata is the only substantial piece written for the arpeggione. In modern performances the solo is often transcribed for viola, as was the case last Sunday evening at Stent Family Hall on the Menlo School campus in Atherton, when Paul Neubauer gave a blistering rendition of the piece together with Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen.

In complete harmony, Neubauer and Pohjonen navigated the virtuosic score and its rapid succession of moods and

expressions, which sometimes change from one bar to the next.

Pohjonen also accompanied Russian baritone Nikolay Borchev, who sang two of Schubert's lieder: "Abendstern," in which the protagonist addresses a star in the evening sky, and "Der Wanderer," which describes a lonely hiker contemplating life in general and his own existence in particular.

Borchev's voice is a wonderfully resonant and powerful instrument, and the performance was very impressive (and much loved by the M@M audience), but with Schubert and his lieder, a lighter voice and more intimate vocal gestures seem more natural.

Pohjonen switched sensibilities for the "Wanderer" Fantasy. As a soloist, he left part of his musical refinement as accompanist behind to meet the technical demands of the piece, a piano sonata in all but its name.

Legend has it that Schubert himself wasn't able to play the "Wanderer" Fantasy to his own satisfaction, but Pohjonen pulled it off more than admirably, getting increasingly more lyrical in the variations of the Adagio and gaining expressive momentum throughout the lively Presto and the powerful Allegro finale.

And then there was the Octet for strings and winds, played by eight gentlemen-musicians: Alexander Fiterstein, clarinet; Peter Kolkay, bassoon; Kevin Rivard, horn; Sean Lee, Arnaud Sussmann, violins; Pierre Lapointe, viola; Scott Pingel, bass; and festival co-director David Finckel sitting in on cello for the injured Dmitri Atapine.

As an ensemble, the octet is the smallest possible reduction of a symphony orchestra, preserving the range of dynamic and tonal expression of its larger counterpart.

As a score however, there is nothing 'reduced' about the Octet. Its six movements span about an hour, and when it comes to complexity, and dramatic and emotional scope, it is certainly on par with the eight symphonies that Schubert had finished by the time he wrote the piece in February/March of 1824.

Attending the performance of Schubert's Octet at Music@Menlo was not only an acoustic and musical pleasure, but also a very close theatrical experience.

It was fascinating to watch the musicians' concentration while constantly shifting their focus, musical relationships and loyalties, making eye contact, finding each other to jointly execute a certain phrase or motif, or passing solo melodies back and forth.

It was truly magnificent.

Juho Pohjonen
The New York Times
March 10, 2015

Roller Coasters of Emotion, but Keeping a Tight Grip

Juho Pohjonen Joins Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

By Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim

"Emotion Unbound" was the title of a program of works by Dvorak, Schumann and Ernst von Dohnanyi that the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center presented on Friday at Alice Tully Hall. The society has grown fond of such Harlequin Romance-like titles (up next: "Russian Twilight"), and no doubt a certain amount of simplification is inevitable in marketing.

Even so, I found myself irritated by the glibness of that title, which bore so little relation to either the painstakingly written compositions, in which temperamental outbursts and deep sentiment are very much bound by formal and technical considerations, or to the evening's fine playing, which was a model of judiciously calibrated expression.

Take Schumann's Trio No. 2 in F, for instance, in which the thoughtful Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen was joined by the dark-toned violinist Arnaud Sussmann and the cellist David Finckel, one of the society's artistic directors. The work draws much of its vitality from the seamless interchange of energies: striving, relaxing, then suddenly surging ahead again. The musicians showed impressive control and an ability to make their respective sounds translucent when needed so that another line could shine through.

The final movement features a warren of ascending scales that function like stairs in an M. C. Escher print: They seem to only ever go up and yet always lead back to the starting plane. Here, too, the players mastered the art of graduating the dynamics so that even though the momentum was always forward-pressing, the effect never grew noisy.

In Dohnanyi's Piano Quintet No. 1 in C minor, which also featured the violinist Kristin Lee and the violist Paul Neubauer, such efforts became doubly important.

The quintet, which drew admiring comments from Brahms, was written in 1895 when Dohnanyi was an 18-year-old student at the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest and it has a certain hormonally charged brashness. Mr. Pohjonen brought remarkable clarity to the concertolike piano part, while the four string players showed off a unity of purpose and sound that would be the envy of many a fixed ensemble. Within the overall breathless rush of the music, there was an evident effort to make the most of the occasional moments of quiet, for example in Mr. Pohjonen's painterly iteration of the theme in the final movement.

Dvorak's "Terzetto in C" for two violins and viola became a vehicle for the gorgeous, rich blend of Ms. Lee's glossy and bright violin, Mr. Neubauer's warm and robust viola, and, linking the two, Mr. Sussmann's violalike deep violin. They gave the trio a slightly tipsy motion, and there was the tiniest dose of ironic exaggeration both here and in the dramatic last movement. It was a gentle sendup of the notion of unbound emotion — and a good thing, too.

Juho Pohjonen
Los Angeles Times
September 23, 2014

A little traveling music for the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra

By Richard S. Ginell

If you had to pin a theme upon the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra's season-opening program at the Alex Theatre Saturday night, it wouldn't be "Beethoven 5," as the program book simply called it. A more fitting one would have been "Travel."

First came a journey to Australia with Brisbane-born, now L.A.-based composer Cameron Patrick, then a rarely-performed piano concerto from that inveterate traveller Camille Saint-Saëns, and finally a trip back home, as it were, to the very core of the classical repertoire, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

Beethoven was there to pull the people into the tent, but the other pieces found music director Jeffrey Kahane creatively refreshing the usual overture/concerto/symphony agenda.

Patrick's piece, "Lines of the Southern Cross" – a world premiere LACO commission – was a fascinating 19-minute tone poem for strings and percussion. Framed by a prologue and an epilogue, the three linked interior movements were supposed to evoke the topography and atmosphere of Lake Cootharaba and the K'Gari Coast on the eastern shore north of Brisbane and the barren Nullarbor Plain in the southern outback.

At the pre-concert talk, Patrick said that he considered using a didgeridoo in the score, but owing to the shortage of available virtuosos on that aboriginal instrument, he settled for a drone motif for cello and double bass. That turned out to be the key to the piece's appeal; the drones drew the listener in for long stretches of stillness as the strings worked out and sparingly applied percussion instruments rattled, sizzled and boomed.

From the perspective of someone who has never been to the outback, "Southern Cross" succeeded in evoking the vast spaces, loneliness, danger, and weirdness of what one imagines it to be like. Patrick works in film, and it shows here, yet this piece can serve both as background music and something to get absorbed in.

Then Kahane and Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen took on Saint-Saëns's Piano Concerto No. 5, subtitled "Egyptian" because the composer wrote it while vacationing in Luxor. Barnstorming virtuosos who like big Romantic showpieces are overlooking a beauty here because this concerto is flashy, tuneful, ultra-lush, and toward the end of the second movement, offbeat, as Saint-Saëns suddenly ventures eastward to Asia.

With an excellent Steinway under his fingers, Pohjonen shaped and floated his part with clarity and point, and the distinguished chamber-scaled backing kept Saint-Saëns's more sentimental impulses under wraps. Pohjonen added Couperin's "Les Chinois" as a French-Asian encore.

It remained for Beethoven's Fifth to rush by in brisk, brusque jolts – made even more abrupt by the Alex's dry acoustics – as the LACO managed to stay with Kahane's lightning tempo at the end.

Juho Pohjonen

The Washington Post

March 13, 2013

Finnish pianist exemplifies Scandinavian cool — and fire — at Kennedy Center

By Stephen Brookes

Young Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen played Tuesday night at the Terrace Theater.

Never mind the title: There's been plenty of fire in the Kennedy Center's "Nordic Cool" series this past month. But it's been a particularly Scandinavian kind of fire — calm on the surface, explosive underneath — and on Tuesday night at the Terrace Theater the young Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen showed just how searing "cool power" can really be.

The evening was steeped in the classical tradition, with two works by Mozart bookending largely neoclassical works by the Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg and the Dane Carl Nielsen. Mozart's stately Prelude and Fugue in C, K. 394, opened the concert, and it was quickly apparent that Pohjonen has both impeccable technique and a cleareyed approach to music, unleashing the fugue with stunning clarity and precise dynamic control, if also a certain formality and distance. Cool, yes; clinical, maybe a bit; but powerful, absolutely.

Grieg's "From Holberg's Time" Op. 40 followed — a pleasant suite built on 18th-century dance movements, with an agreeable sense of nostalgia but not much else. Far more interesting was Nielsen's 1917 Chaconne, Op. 32, also steeped in classical traditions but with a

much sharper bite than the Grieg. Pohjonen seemed to warm up and become freer as he played, even bringing a welcome touch of madness to the manic, discordant, and fantastically exciting climax.

Mozart's dark Sonata in A Minor, K. 310, closed the program, and Pohjonen seemed to find a kind of serenity in the melancholy drama that runs through the work. But it was Grieg's Ballade in G Minor, Op. 24, that formed the real heart of the evening. This is a dark, confessional work from 1876 that seems to swarm with Grieg's personal demons, and Pohjonen dived into it with complete confidence, a superb performance of a subtle and complex work.

Juho Pohjonen

The New York Times

March 21, 2013

Canyons, Inspiring to the Eye, Capture the Ear, Too

Messiaen's 'Des Canyons,' by Ensemble ACJW at Zankel Hall

By Vivien Schweitzer

Ensemble ACJW, conducted by Robert Spano, performed Olivier Messiaen's "Des Canyons aux Étoiles" on Tuesday at Zankel Hall. The work was inspired by Messiaen's visits to Utah's parks in the early 1970s.

The visionary French composer Olivier Messiaen and the citizens of Utah had a mutual appreciation. Messiaen, inspired to write his glittering "Des Canyons aux Étoiles" ("From the Canyons to the Stars") after visiting the state's parks in 1972, declared southern Utah the most mystical landscape he had ever seen. In gratitude, a mountain was renamed in his honor.

Many composers have been inspired by nature, resulting in famous aural depictions like Strauss's "Alpine Symphony." But Messiaen's musical language, with its alluring harmonies and shimmering textures, is unique. "Des Canyons," a 12-movement orchestral suite, was commissioned by Alice Tully in honor of the American bicentennial in 1976. It received an excellent performance at Zankel Hall on Tuesday evening, with Robert Spano, music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, conducting Ensemble ACJW.

Messiaen scored the work for chamber orchestra and four soloists: piano, French horn, xylorimba and glockenspiel. Some movements evoke a particular setting, like Bryce Canyon. The composer's transcriptions of

birdsong are woven throughout the work, with varieties of orioles represented by the piano, xylorimba and woodwinds. Alongside the fanciful birdcalls the work incorporates the composer's other trademarks: Greek, Hindu and Balinese rhythms; contemplative interludes; shimmering cluster chords; and striking dissonances. Messiaen, a synesthetic, sensed colors when he heard particular harmonies or sounds. A Roman Catholic steeped in religious mysticism, he described "Des Canyons" as "an act of praise and contemplation" that "contains all the colors of the rainbow." It is those kaleidoscopic shades that render this music so dazzling, and they were beautifully conveyed here by these excellent musicians. (The ensemble consists of current fellows or alumni of the Academy — a fellowship program of Carnegie Hall, the Juilliard School and the New York City Department of Education.)

Juho Pohjonen played the fiendishly difficult piano part brilliantly, conquering its technical challenges and highlighting myriad colors, as well as contrasting the exuberant elements with moments of introspective clarity. Laura Weiner deftly explored the varied textures and sonic effects of the challenging French horn solo. Throughout, the playing was enlivened by the sparkling contributions of Ian Sullivan on xylorimba and Jared Soldiviero on glockenspiel.

Mr. Spano conducted a dynamic performance that built to suitably ecstatic heights during the final two movements, which end with the brass chorales and rapturous bells of "Zion Park et la Cité Céleste."

Juho Pohjonen

San Jose Mercury News

July 30, 2014

Beethoven and his chums at Music@Menlo

By Richard Scheinin

ATHERTON -- In 2010, the Music@Menlo chamber festival found itself down a star performer, the pianist Jeffrey Kahane, who was suffering with mononucleosis. As an emergency replacement, the call went out to a 29-year-old Finnish pianist with a hard-to-pronounce name: Juho Pohjonen. He flew in from the home country and turned out to be a beast of a player, dazzling his audience with an ambitious recital in his festival debut.

Now 33 and a familiar face at Menlo, Pohjonen (whose name his pronounced YOO-ho PO-ho-nyen) dazzled again Tuesday, as the festival offered one of its intriguing back-story programs. Titled "Beethoven's Friends," it surrounded a Beethoven quintet with works by two of the titan's long overlooked chums, Anton Reicha (a friend from school days in Bonn) and Johann Nepomuk Hummel.

Hummel was both friend and rival to Beethoven; they were widely viewed as the top two piano virtuosos in Vienna, and what a hot-and-cold relationship they had. When Hummel created a four-hand piano adaptation of Beethoven's "Fidelio," a disapproving Beethoven tore the manuscript in half. But while history has pushed Hummel into the shadows, it was his Septet in D minor for Piano, Flute, Oboe, Horn, Viola, Cello and Bass that dominated Tuesday's concert at the Menlo School's Stent Family Hall.

It's a demanding work, functioning much like a concerto for the pianist, who bridges the mini-orchestra of low strings and higher winds. At the same time, it's almost as if Hummel has created a vast set of etudes for the pianist, weaving

them into a seamless ground upon which the composer builds this 40-minute opus, composed in 1816.

Pohjonen elegantly dispatched its many technical hurdles. He was fleet and feathery in the work's showiest stretches, laced with the sorts of satin-ribbon effects that would become commonplace in the Romantic era. His dynamic sense was spot-on, as he seamlessly shifted between foreground and background, always sensitive to his surroundings, a team player. His rhythmic sense was incisive and motor-driven.

Hummel's unusual wedding of Classical form and Romantic spirit, of dark and light sonorities, of ethereal and majestic rock-solid textures -- it was pleasurably dished up by the ensemble, which also included Sooyun Kim, flute; Stephen Taylor, oboe; Kevin Rivard, horn; Paul Neubauer, viola; Keith Robinson, cello; and Scott Pingel, bass.

The group momentarily struggled with the second movement (dubbed "minuet or scherzo"), especially its tricky rhythmic surges and retreats. On the other hand, just to hear this unusual movement, with its splashing piano figurations (like stones skipping across a lake) and its floating waltz-like interlude (with humorously extended notes for the horn, like long pours of champagne) was a treat.

Cellist Robinson sang through the finale, and the overall work, not often performed, felt unique -- even a revelation. No wonder Schubert, who dedicated his last three piano sonatas to Hummel, was inspired by the piece (actually Hummel's revised version of it for piano, violin, viola, cello and double bass) to compose the "Trout" Quintet.

This year's Menlo festival is titled "Around Dvorak," since it explores the Czech composer's relationship to various musical traditions, including the Viennese classical school in which he was grounded. "Beethoven's Friends" was shoehorned in on a pretense: Reicha was Czech (as a boy, he moved with an uncle to Bonn), and Hummel was born in what is now Slovakia. Both came to the attention of the Viennese musical community, as would Dvorak. The program was a stretch, but it fascinated, nonetheless.

Reicha's Quintet in B-flat major for Clarinet and String Quartet, composed 1809-1820, marked the return of clarinetist Anthony McGill, a Menlo favorite who missed last summer's festival -- and who recently was named principal of the New York Philharmonic.

His tone was constrained in the opening movement, but it soon opened into that familiar sound of his, which is unusually pure and never shrill, almost like a wooden flute, or like a bird. His articulation was clear and fluid, shaping phrases with a mind to the ensemble.

Reicha's quintet -- elegant and ornate, sometimes rhapsodic, too often cloying -- had its best group moment during the minuet, which is marked by wide intervallic leaps in the clarinet and a subdued, melancholy mood through the ensemble. Its other members (Nicolas Dautricourt and Arnaud Sussman, violins; Sunmi Chang, viola; and Robinson, cello) also conjured lovely and quiet pizzicato effects during the finale, as McGill's lines fell like moonbeams.

Beethoven's Quintet in E-flat major for Piano and Winds, Op. 16, from 1796, was more substantive and absorbing.

Pianist Gilbert Kalish was the key here. He isn't so refined a player as Pohjonen. On the other hand, his lifelong immersion in and understanding of the chamber literature often results in richly idiomatic performances, like this one, in which he instantly established a comfort zone for his ensemble mates. With McGill, oboist Taylor, bassoonist Peter Kolkay and hornist Rivard, Kalish led a performance of striking poise and dark beauty.

Juho Pohjonen
The New York Times
March 9, 2014

Roller Coasters of Emotion, but Keeping a Tight Grip

Juho Pohjonen Joins Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

By Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim

"Emotion Unbound" was the title of a program of works by Dvorak, Schumann and Ernst von Dohnanyi that the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center presented on Friday at Alice Tully Hall. The society has grown fond of such Harlequin Romance-like titles (up next: "Russian Twilight"), and no doubt a certain amount of simplification is inevitable in marketing.

Even so, I found myself irritated by the glibness of that title, which bore so little relation to either the painstakingly written compositions, in which temperamental outbursts and deep sentiment are very much bound by formal and technical considerations, or to the evening's fine playing, which was a model of judiciously calibrated expression.

Take Schumann's Trio No. 2 in F, for instance, in which the thoughtful Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen was joined by the dark-toned violinist Arnaud Sussmann and the cellist David Finckel, one of the society's artistic directors. The work draws much of its vitality from the seamless interchange of energies: striving, relaxing, then suddenly surging ahead again. The musicians showed impressive control and an ability to make their respective sounds translucent when needed so that another line could shine through.

The final movement features a warren of ascending scales that function like stairs in an M. C. Escher print: They seem to only ever go up and yet always lead back to the starting plane. Here, too, the players mastered the art of graduating the dynamics so that even though the momentum was always forward-pressing, the effect never grew noisy.

In Dohnanyi's Piano Quintet No. 1 in C minor, which also featured the violinist Kristin Lee and the violist Paul Neubauer, such efforts became doubly important.

The quintet, which drew admiring comments from Brahms, was written in 1895 when Dohnanyi was an 18-year-old student at the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest and it has a certain hormonally charged brashness. Mr. Pohjonen brought remarkable clarity to the concertolike piano part, while the four string players showed off a unity of purpose and sound that would be the envy of many a fixed ensemble. Within the overall breathless rush of the music, there was an evident effort to make the most of the occasional moments of quiet, for example in Mr. Pohjonen's painterly iteration of the theme in the final movement.

Dvorak's "Terzetto in C" for two violins and viola became a vehicle for the gorgeous, rich blend of Ms. Lee's glossy and bright violin, Mr. Neubauer's warm and robust viola, and, linking the two, Mr. Sussmann's violalike deep violin. They gave the trio a slightly tipsy motion, and there was the tiniest dose of ironic exaggeration both here and in the dramatic last movement. It was a gentle sendup of the notion of unbound emotion — and a good thing, too.

Juho Pohjonen

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
ajc.com

January 11, 2013

ASO premieres feature dazzling technique

By James L. Paulk

Thursday was a big night for the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, featuring the world premiere of a clarinet concerto by Michael Gandolfi as well as the company debut of a fast-rising Finnish pianist, Juho Pohjonen.

Gandolfi, from Boston, belongs to a select group of composers chosen by Robert Spano, ASO's Music Director. Members of this "Atlanta School" are regularly commissioned by the orchestra. In the program and in interviews, he explained that the new work, "The Nature of Light," grew from his work on a recent choral work, "QED: Engaging Richard Feynman," also an ASO commission. Gandolfi said he realized that the material in "QED" could go in a different direction, and began thinking especially of the clarinet. The availability of Laura Ardan, ASO's principal clarinetist and one of its superstars, was surely a big factor in this choice.

Gandolfi's writing is neo-Romantic, thoroughly American, jazz-inflected, and tonal. He lacks the originality of, for example, Osvaldo Golijov, a fellow Atlanta School composer. No new ear muscles are engaged. Still, "The Nature of Light" succeeds, and may be both the composer's finest work and the one most likely to enjoy popular success, because of its fine haunting melodic beauty.

Gandolfi's work often involves scientific metaphors, and this one deals with light. The first movement (of two) expresses the "wave shape" of light and is a chaconne. Here the themes are explored using elaborate variations in tempi. The work uses a string orchestra, and takes on a sensuous texture reminiscent of Samuel Barber. The second movement focuses on "light particles," and much of it is a virtuosic high speed chase, with the players getting quite a workout.

The demanding work was written with Ardan in mind, and her performance clearly enhanced its appeal. Her performance showed both technical wizardry and a fine feel for the feelings it expresses. ASO fans are used to seeing her half-hidden in the orchestra, dressed conservatively in black. In this case she was up front, in a shimmering gown. She has a wondrous way of expressing, with her face and body, the joy she finds in the piece. Spano and the strings were attentive and supportive.

Pohjonen, in his 30's, is slightly built, painfully shy and deadly serious, without the sort of personal charisma other artists employ to seduce the audience. But his playing is simply extraordinary.

He performed Sergei Prokofiev's Concerto No. 5 in G Major, which apparently never been played here. The fourth concerto was famously written for the left hand only, and the composer decided, for what became his last concerto, to let the soloist use both hands again. It is a tough, complex piece. Prokofiev's works have a bright, chilly edge, and that is the feeling here. Pohjonen captures it well. It's a work that calls not for interpretive genius, but for the ability to play with great precision and, for lack of a better word, grace. It's also extraordinarily demanding, and Pohjonen clearly has no deficits in this area. Both hands work nicely: wildly percussive when that is required, and gently coaxing in the gentle Larghetto movement. This was a night when a good view of the soloist's hands was worth extra money. It was a performance worth recording of a work worth hearing.

The longest piece on the night's program, Rimsky-Korsakov's "Sheherazade," was almost an afterthought, given the importance of what had happened before it. But Spano, a man of great enthusiasms, tackled it with ferocity. Concertmaster David Coucheron channeled his inner "orientalist" in the violin solos, and the woodwinds conjured images of "A Thousand Nights."

Juho Pohjonen

SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL
MusicWeb International's Worldwide Concert and Opera Reviews

November 7, 2011

A Poet Returns: Juho Pohjonen's Recital at Zankel Hall

By Stan Metzger

Hall, New York City. 3.11.2011 (SSM)
Beethoven: Sonata No. 15 in D Major, Op. 28, "Pastoral"
Debussy: Estampes
Chopin: Twenty-Four Preludes, Op. 28

In a review of Juho Pohjonen's performance of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23, I referred to him as a poet whose playing is "delicate, graceful and effortless." I can add more adjectives for his recital here: "intense, committed and thoughtful" would be a start. If his choice of works was meant to show all sides of his talent, he made wise decisions, and opened his recital with a limpid and affable performance of Beethoven's Sonata No.15. The gentle first movement with its softly played staccato bass line leads into a poignant theme that sets the pattern for the rest of the sonata. Even the Scherzo, usually in Beethoven's hands the most frenetic form, is tempered here. This sonata is one of Beethoven's least showy works, and it confirmed that Pohjonen is one of the least showy pianists around. One need only compare his style to that of a contemporary, Lang Lang, to make the point clear.

One of the most impressive of Pohjonen's skills is his ability to create subtle gradations of color through a masterly control of the keyboard. With his demand for complete dynamic control of the piano, Debussy would seem to be an ideal composer for this young man, and he is. Pohjonen's fingers seemed to barely touch the keyboard, yet he was able to draw out sounds awash with shadings. The concluding measures of the first movement of Debussy's *Estampes* entitled *Pagodes,* with its cascading thirty-second notes, were played with ethereal lightness. He forcefully carried forward the strong Spanish dance pulse of the second movement, *Soirée dans Grenade*, and was adept at imitating the sound of rain in the concluding *Jardin sous la Pluie*.

The concert concluded with the demanding Twenty-Four Preludes of Chopin. Not since Pollini's classic recording of this work in 1990, have I heard such a strong and convincing performance. From the fleet Agitato opening to the concluding "Storm" Prelude, nothing seemed difficult or demanding. Some might question the tempi of many of the these miniatures: the entire twenty-four pieces clocked in at around twenty-five minutes, an exceptionally fast pace compared to Pollini's thirty-six and Ashkenazy's thirty-nine. But I never sensed any Prelude was rushed, and if anything he may have lingered on some of the slower pieces. The warhorses like numbers four and seven never sounded clichéd, an accomplishment in itself.

Much has been made of Pohjonen's cool manner. But why should he or any artist betray his nature just to please the audience? One could instead be thankful that a musician is willing to share his or her amazing abilities in a concert hall and leave the smiling to chorus lines.

Juho Pohjonen

THE VANCOUVER SUN

October 31, 2011

Rich and diverse classical offerings brighten the dark days of fall

By David Gordon Duke

Sunday afternoon saw a showcase for young Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen in the Vancouver Recital Society's Next Generation Series at the Vancouver Playhouse. His recital began with Beethoven, a crisp, fresh, and above all playful reading of the Sonata in D major, Op. 28 (Pastoral). Next came Debussy's Estampes, three impressionistic pictures beautifully rendered in ultra-evocative music. Pohjonen's approach was clear, aristocratic, and wonderfully effective.

Following the interval came a performance of Chopin's complete Preludes, Op. 28 - an epic journey couched in aphoristic increments. While Pohjonen created appropriate enchanting sound-worlds for each segment, he well understands the complex interrelationships between the pieces and their almost overwhelming emotional potential. That his technique was more than up to the enormous demands of this complex music was a given; that a performer this early in his career should play with such confidence and insight is remarkable.

Juho Pohjonen

straight.com
Vancouver's Online Source

October 31, 2011

Juho Pohjonen brings sense of peril to his piano playing at Vancouver Playhouse

By Lloyd Dykk

In what was probably the truest description ever written of Frédéric Chopin's *24 Preludes, Op. 28*, Robert Schumann likened them to "eagle feathers". In being weightless, strong, and superbly designed, this is as apt as you can get for music so suggestive of flight. Their eloquent concision—not a note in excess—makes them a revolutionary addition to the piano's voice. If Chopin had written nothing else for the instrument, this would be enough of a claim on immortality. In several ways, this music is the ultimate.

Hopes were high when the young Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen took the stage on Sunday afternoon at the Vancouver Playhouse for the Vancouver Recital Society in his second visit to the city. Previously, I'd only heard him on recordings, but he more than lived up to live expectations. It's not the first time I've felt that there's something strange about the Finns' amazing aptitude for music and their ability to make it as bracing as a shot of ice-cold vodka.

One of the major essentials that a pianist has to conjure from these preludes is the illusion that they're being improvised; otherwise, they're not really conceived in the Romantic spirit. Pohjonen brought that distinct immediacy and a sense of peril to his playing, and there is a very real danger to this work, as is clear from at least the third prelude in G major, the technically treacherous 12th in G-sharp minor, the virtuosic tour de force of the 16th in B-flat minor, and the brief 22nd in G minor, with its stormy left-hand octaves. The wonder is that he pulled them all off so adroitly. He made an event of the preludes, and this is just what they should be.

Some may have found it surprising, even disappointing, that Pohjonen included the Ludwig van Beethoven piano sonata that very few pianists even glance at, the *No. 15 in D Major, Op. 28*, subtitled "Pastoral". People tend to look down on it for all the wrong reasons, but I

admired Pohjonen for including this unpretentious, immensely gentle sonata, because I think it said a lot about him, just as it says a lot about Beethoven, who wasn't only dark clouds and epic turmoil.

Finally, in a program that was composed of a thoughtful balance of pieces, Pohjonen turned to another work of revolutionary status, Claude Debussy's three-part *Estampes*, making it shimmer and giving it a ravishing evenness of touch.

In a nice addition to the program, the audience was invited to stay behind after the concert for an informal Q&A with the serious but affable 30-year-old Pohjonen. Asked what music he preferred, he said, "I really like to play everything—except for Liszt."

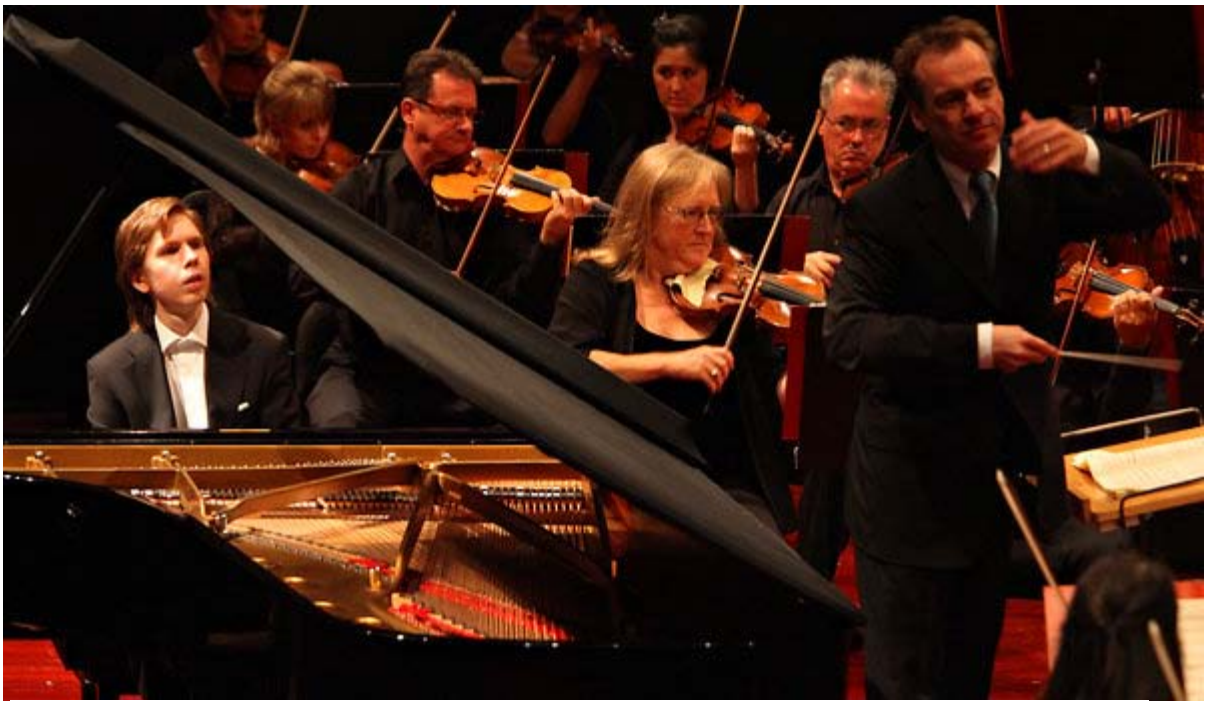
Juho Pohjonen

The New York Times

August 17, 2011

A Workout for Winds and Brasses

By Anthony Tommasini



Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra, conducted by Jonathan Nott, with the Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen at Avery Fisher Hall on Tuesday night.

The British conductor Jonathan Nott, who has been thriving as the principal conductor of the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra in Germany since 2000, and the gifted young Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen, who has been steadily gaining intentional attention for his thoughtful artistry, both made their debuts with the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra on Tuesday night at Avery Fisher Hall. The highlight of the program was their collaboration on Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23 in A, a gracious and elegant performance.

Mr. Nott arrived at the festival amid considerable expectations. In 2009 he presented two outstanding concerts with his Bamberg orchestra at Avery Fisher Hall, programs that included all three Bartok piano concertos in scintillating performances with the pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard. I had high hopes on Tuesday for his take on Stravinsky's "Symphonies of Wind Instruments," a score of just 12 minutes written in 1920 and revised in 1947, one of the composer's most original and wondrously strange works.

But the performance was disappointingly sluggish. Perhaps this elusive, challenging score is just not right for these players in this festival context, which involves rehearsing a lot of pieces during a crowded schedule. As its unusual title ("symphonies") implies, the piece is Stravinsky's exploration of myriad ways that woodwind and brass instruments can sound together. The score is a daring patchwork of fleeting episodes that variously evoke reedy pastoral music, somber organ chorales, skittish dancing and eerily syncopated chord patterns. But as played here the episodes lacked continuity and forward thrust. Mr. Nott drew some richly textured sounds from the players. Still, the performance was tentative.

Mr. Nott and the orchestra came together much better for a vibrant account of Beethoven's ebullient Symphony No. 4, which ended the program. The winds and brasses had shaky moments. But the strings overall played with élan and, in the jaunty finale, nimble articulation.

The Mozart concerto was rewarding from start to finish. I have been eager to follow the gifted Mr. Pohjonen's development ever since hearing his American debut in 2004 at Weill Recital Hall. On that night, fresh from the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, Finland, looking skinny and shy, Mr. Pohjonen played a superb program capped by a fearless account of Esa-Pekka Salonen's stunningly difficult piano piece "Dichotomie" (2000). He was also impressive in January in a varied program at Walter Reade Theater, as part of Lincoln Center's Sunday Morning Coffee Concerts series.

Now and then during his Mozart concerto on Tuesday, Mr. Pohjonen could have cut loose a little more. His performance was almost too refined. Still, he played with beautiful colorings and articulate touch, especially in the rousing, high-spirited finale. Every note spoke, and he had a musical idea about every phrase. After the gracious, buoyant opening movement the concerto has a halting, almost tragic adagio in a siciliano rhythm. Here Mr. Pohjonen, backed by the sensitive playing of Mr. Nott and the orchestra, conveyed the music's aching tenderness without descending into despair.

In a preconcert recital Mr. Pohjonen gave an exceptional performance of Mozart's Sonata in A minor (K. 310), bringing out the pensive elegance and gossamer passagework of this dark, moody piece. After these two warmly received performances, tickets may be hard to get for Mr. Pohjonen's late-night appearance on Friday as part of the informal Little Night Music series at the Kaplan Penthouse, a 60-minute program of Haydn and Mozart.

Juho Pohjonen

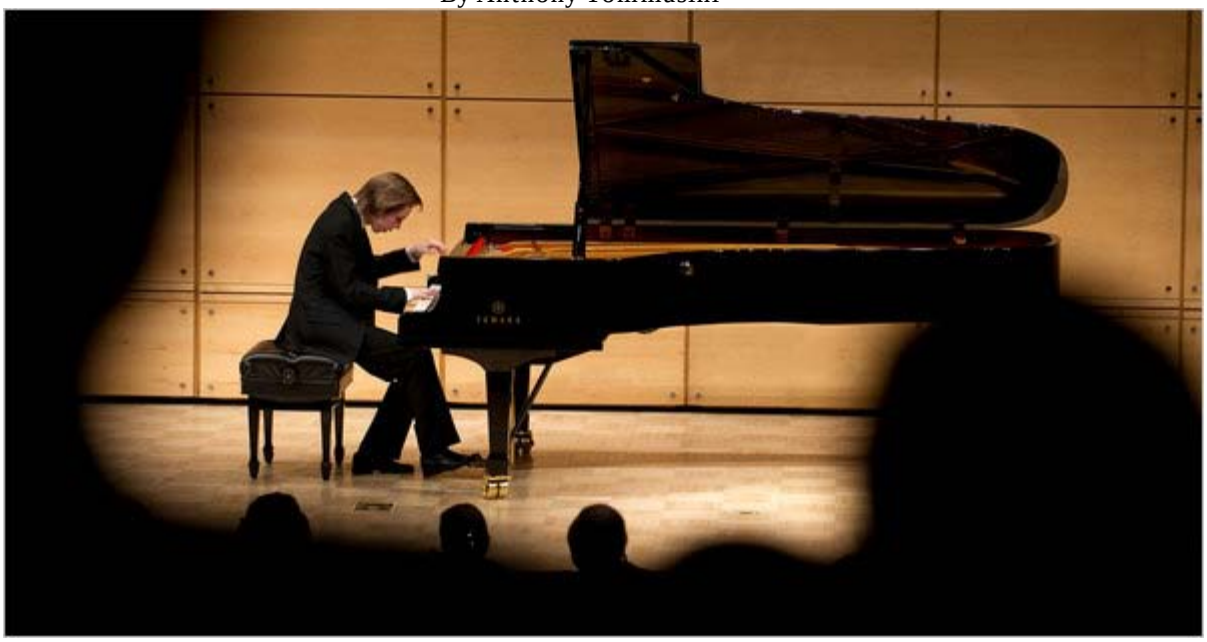
The New York Times

January 18, 2011

MUSIC REVIEW

Exploring Complex Works, Before You've Even Had Your Coffee

By Anthony Tommasini



Sunday Morning Coffee Concerts: The Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen chose a series of challenging pieces for the fourth of six concerts in this series, at the Walter Reade Theater.

Informal concerts at unconventional times are increasingly popular with audiences. One such series, the Sunday Morning Coffee Concerts at Lincoln Center, presents 60-minute programs at the Walter Reade Theater at 11 a.m. The audience gathers afterward for coffee and muffins and a chance to meet the artist.

But what music is appropriate for a Sunday morning concert in New York? The brilliant young Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen, who played the fourth of six concerts in this season's series on Sunday, decided that some less familiar pieces were in order: a seldom-heard Mendelssohn prelude and fugue, an unusual suite by Sibelius, Grieg's overlooked Ballade in G minor. He ended with Bartok's gnarly, engrossing 1926 Sonata. The auditorium was packed.

There is a certain built-in audience for this popular series. But word may also be spreading that Mr. Pohjonen is an exceptional pianist. I was impressed by his New York debut recitalin 2004 at Weill Recital Hall, capped by an exhilarating performance of a stunningly difficult piece by Esa-Pekka Salonen, "Dichotomie." More recently he has appeared in New York with Chamber

Music Society Two, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's roster of rising younger players.

Now 29, Mr. Pohjonen, slight of frame and all business at the piano, still does not fit the image of a dazzling virtuoso. He plays with such lack of display that audiences may not realize how comprehensive his technique actually is. That he has matured as a musician was immediately clear in Mendelssohn's Prelude and Fugue in E minor.

This work begins with rolling, rippling arpeggios through which a wistful melody threads. The fugue opens with a slow, richly chromatic theme, builds into complex webs of counterpoint and culminates with a stirring chorale tune supported by a walking bass line, all played with a judicious blend of musicianly reserve and Romantic sweep by Mr. Pohjonen.

Sibelius's Five Pieces (1914; "The Trees") are like songs without words. "When the Rowan Blossoms" has a Chopinesque melody and watery accompaniment, though the harmonic language is elusive in the way of Sibelius the symphonist. In "The Lonely Fir" a fanfare tries to assert itself but keeps dissolving into misty counterpoint, played here with myriad colorings and a textural clarity that revealed the music's curious elements.

Grieg's Ballade in G minor, a work of nearly 20 minutes, is cast as a set of 14 boldly diverse variations on a mournful Norwegian folk tune. I grew up loving Arthur Rubinstein's Romantic yet unmannered recording. Mr. Pohjonen's cooler, articulate approach revealed intriguing quirks in the music.

Bartok's Sonata is thick with feisty harmonies, leaping chords and pummeling rhythms. In the slow movement, a dirgelike theme tries to emerge from dense cluster chords. The finale is ablaze with a meter-fracturing folk melody in octaves. Mr. Pohjonen's performance had punchy power and crystalline sound.

Afterward, mingling with audience members in the lobby, Mr. Pohjonen said that he wanted to end with the Bartok to make sure that his Sunday morning program would not seem "too sentimental." Mission accomplished.

The next Sunday Morning Coffee Concert presents the cellist Nicolas Altstaedt on March 13 at the Walter Reade Theater, Lincoln Center; (212) 721-6500, lincolncenter.org.

Juho Pohjonen

examiner.com

July 31, 2012

Review: Juho Pohjonen in Atherton

By Elijah Ho

Sunday morning at the Menlo School in Atherton, Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen delivered a recital of works by Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt and Scriabin. The common theme behind the offerings was fantasy, and it was the third Carte Blanche performance of the Music@Menlo festival, which is currently in its tenth season.

From Mozart, Pohjonen gave in succession the Fantasy K. 475 and the Piano Sonata K. 457, both in C minor. Pohjonen's right-hand sang melodic lines with savvy hand-positions, offering color and differentiation, and he appeared all the more comfortable in the dazzling runs interspersed with fantasy.

The morning's finest moments, however, were found in an exquisite reading of Alexander Scriabin's Second Piano Sonata (Op. 19). Here, Pohjonen's mind and modern palette were perfectly suited, revealing gradations of sound, fastidious control of simultaneous lines, and impeccable pedaling. The lyricism of the first*ben marcato il canto* section was given a nostalgic treatment, and the clarity of Pohjonen's pianism proved remarkable by any measure.

After the intermission came a reading of Franz Liszt's *Après une lecture de*

Dante. The work rarely fails to impress, even at the conservatory level, and the pianist indeed delivered octaves at a high rate. Accurately and in-tempo, Pohjonen's offered a clarity that is altogether rare for the piece. But there lacked a certain conviction, the demonic element that comes from a passion for the literature, the work, and the composer. The dramatic *Presto agitato assai* was ordinary in its treatment, and while the pianist's mechanism allows him to perform the demanding piece with rare efficiency and ease, there was a notable hesitation to let loose in the pairs of sixteenth notes, to relinquish that remarkable control and explore the Faustian nature of Liszt.

Pohjonen, 30, has received laudatory reviews of his music-making, and he is the prototypical modern pianist. A polished musician, his musical planning is meticulous, piercing and objective; the phrasing is also sharp, like his mind. The pianist gave one encore, Debussy's *La soirée dans Grenade* - the second piece from *Estampes,* and received three curtain calls for it.

Juho Pohjonen

The Mercury News
MercuryNews.com

July 30, 2010

Young Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen shines as last-minute sub at Music@menlo

By Richard Scheinin

The Bay Area is home to any number of world-class pianists. So when the great keyboardist Jeffrey Kahane gave word last week that he was forced by illness to cancel his recital at the Music@Menlo chamber music festival, one might have expected its organizers to bring in a locally grown heirloom replacement.

But no, word began circulating that a 29-year-old Finn named Juho Pohjonen was being flown in — all the way from the home country — to perform Thursday at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto. He is "a beast," one festival insider whispered, with a knowing nod. This was just before Pohjonen's performance of four works, each in the theme-and-variations format — a gigantic program to be played from memory, spanning the Baroque, Classical and Romantic eras.

I can now report that this young man, who shambles to and from the piano bench with the Benjamin Button air of someone much older than he, is indeed a beast, a daunting player. This newcomer (whose name is pronounced YOO-ho PO-ho-nyen) has quietly been building a reputation on concert stages around the world (and will make his debut with the San Francisco Symphony, performing Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 Jan. 20-23 at Davies Symphony Hall).

Meanwhile, there's the matter of Pohjonen's sudden debut at the Menlo festival: It began modestly, with a beautifully turned performance of Mozart's Sonata in A major, K. 331. Especially in the first movement, his trademark emerged: an absolute balance between the hands and within each phrase — and chord. One could hear every note. Pohjonen's near-perfect sense of proportion, his ability to weigh each note against those surrounding it, made St. Mark's not-great acoustics irrelevant.

Following Mozart's work, which spins variations on a theme the composer may have derived from a German folk song, Pohjonen brought equal clarity to Edvard Grieg's Ballade in G minor in the Form of Variations on a Norwegian Folk Song, Op. 24.

With the opening theme, the pianist conveyed a clean, powerful loneliness, then took off through this large work's set of 10 formal variations. Tonal colors had brilliance — gleaming lines tripped along like bubbling streams. In one slow, almost jazzy variation — a real ballad — little squeezed-out flourishes casually adorned the ends of phrases. Elsewhere, cross-hatched thickets of notes were re-groomed as high-speed networks of byways.

Pohjonen was emerging as a player of keen intellect and passionate reserve. His best efforts, though, came after intermission with Handel's Suite in B-flat major, Vol. 2, no. 1, HWV 434. The internal motion of the music — all its moving parts — were so cleanly

delineated that it was like listening with the equivalent of 3-D glasses.

Cleverly, Pohjonen segued from Handel's closing variations to the piece they inspired more than a century after the suite was composed: Brahms' Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel. This was the showstopper: Now the beast emerged, a lion batting aside one massive challenge after the next and not even breaking a sweat. Here and there, Pohjonen smudged some notes, but it was an impressive and fearless performance.

It also grew wearying, like watching a marathon. Around Mile 19, you're ready for Mile 26 and the finish line.

Still, no complaints, especially after a pair of exquisite encores, by Grieg and Couperin. I'm eagerly looking forward to seeing more of Pohjonen down the road. (His Thursday program isn't being repeated.) This elegant player is among a group of young pianists mentored by pianist Wu Han, Menlo's co-artistic director. She also co-directs the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in New York, where Pohjonen has been selected to join a prestigious two-year residency for outstanding young performers.

It would be great to hear him branch into some less predictable repertory — some Stravinsky? Some Scriabin? Or something entirely new? Still, after hearing him Thursday, one understands why Wu Han reached all the way to Finland to find Kahane's replacement.

And to wrap up, here's some good news. Kahane, fighting a bout of mononucleosis, is expected to be ready to perform again in a matter of weeks. Too late for Menlo, but there's always next year.

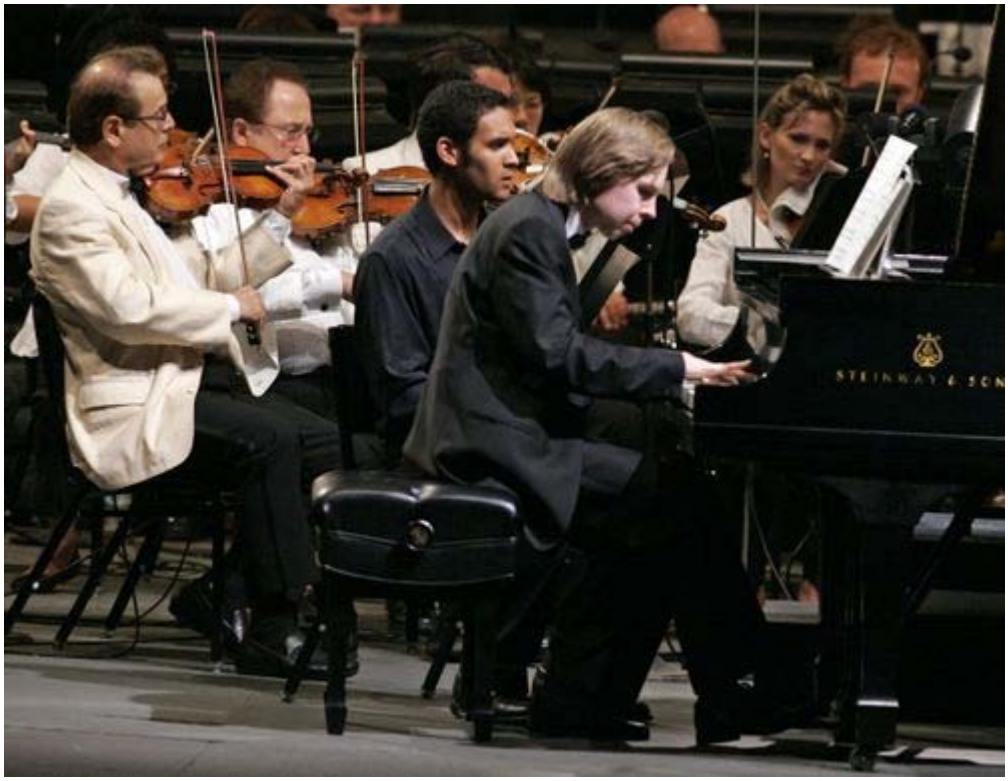
Juho Pohjonen

Los Angeles Times

CULTURE MONSTER
ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

July 22, 2009

by Mark Swed



Music review: Salonen Piano Concerto at Hollywood Bowl

Esa-Pekka Salonen's Piano Concerto received a brightly confident performance at the Hollywood Bowl on Tuesday night. The date marks the first day in the rest of the life of a major work.

The concerto's first performance was early in 2007 by the New York Philharmonic. Salonen conducted and Yefim Bronfman, for whom the concerto was written and to whom it is dedicated, was soloist. Salonen and Bronfman recorded the concerto in Los Angeles last year at Walt Disney Concert Hall, and the CD was released in the U.S. in April to coincide with Salonen's final

concerts as Los Angeles Philharmonic music director. They play it next month in Scotland, at the Edinburgh Festival.

But for all the excitement a stellar composer/conductor and stellar pianist bring, the concerto needs a ready supply of fresh blood in order to survive in the repertory. The first transfusion was the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Tuesday Bowl concert, when a 28-year-old Finnish pianist, Juho Pohjonen, became the first pianist after Bronfman to tackle the concerto. He was accompanied by Lionel Bringuier, the orchestra's 22-year-old associate conductor. The combined age of both young men is a year less than Salonen's, who turned 51 in June.

There were many striking things about this performance. Salonen and Bronfman are cool customers. Yet the New York premiere was so tense and the new score such a technical challenge, they and the orchestra sweated bullets as they paved the way for future performances.

The concerto already has become, at least in Los Angeles, something that can now be taken in stride. At the Bowl, the small, slim Pohjonen, who is a fraction of Bronfman's size and who still looks like a gawky teenager, knocked off this incredibly difficult solo part with calm, almost cavalier confidence. His fingers flew and occasionally his long hair flapped. But otherwise he remained unflappable, displaying little expression other than determination. He was deadly accurate.

The Bowl's video cameras give no performer a place to hide. If Bringuier and the L.A. Philharmonic players, long expert in the Salonen idiom of complex rhythms and intricate solos, appeared excitable, they were in the certain exciting way they are when they play familiar Beethoven or Stravinsky.

The concerto has won over audiences more consistently than critics. The British press objected to a derivative quality, hearing warmed-over Prokofiev, Ravel, Rachmaninoff and even a touch of — heaven forbid from a 21st-century modernist -- Gershwin. Open-minded Americans (with the exception of the Chicago critics) have enjoyed all that, finding not imitation but admirable absorption.

Perhaps on encountering a new work, listeners latched on to what they already know. Or maybe Bronfman, who is so strongly associated with powerful performances of Prokofiev and Rachmaninoff concertos, sent some thinking about those composers.

Pohjonen, who appeared once before in Los Angeles as a soloist with a visiting Finnish youth orchestra in Prokofiev's Fifth Piano Concerto, doesn't have Bronfman's burly sound or strong personality, so brings no such baggage. Both he and Bringuier, moreover, are Salonen protégées. They honored the notes they found on the page. What I heard Tuesday was all-Salonen all the time.

The concerto begins as with a stately gallop as it rides into many strange territories. Salonen writes in his program note that for the second movement, he imagined a post-biological culture of cybernetic systems inventing their own folklore. Mechanical music and freely expressive music are in continual play. The piano part is written in fits of fistfuls of notes.

Amplification this time added a glare to the huge palette of Salonen's orchestra color. Certain details were lost; I didn't hear the harp. But others got a helping hand, say by boosting the melancholy saxophone solo near the end of the first movement. Loudspeaker punch also benefited a pianist and conductor who don't quite have the brawn of Bronfman and Salonen but who contributed their own personal sparks and sparkle.

The audience was not, by Bowl standards, large -- adamant picnickers may feel a modern concerto is an inappropriate *digestif*. Still, enthusiasm from 5,815 -- more than double Disney Concert Hall's seating capacity -- is indication enough that a concerto lives.

Bringuier began the program with Dukas' "Sorcerer's Apprentice" and ended, as Salonen did in New York after the concerto's premiere, with Ravel's orchestration of Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition." The young French conductor is growing rapidly. In both descriptive scores, he was very French in the musical sense of being understated and tasteful.

Even with the amplification, you could easily sense that textures were crisp and that instrumental colors were vivid. Each Mussorgsky picture had its own satisfying flavor. The "Sorcerer's Apprentice" didn't need any assist from Mickey Mouse to fire the imagination. Bringuier will, one day, have a major orchestra of his own. Any opportunity to hear him, while we are lucky enough to keep him in the L.A. Philharmonic's midst, should not be missed.