

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Music: Review

André Laplante's piano holds audience captive

Plays Liszt's 'Second Year of Pilgrimage (Italy)' with gleaming authority

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André Laplante, piano **Via Salzburg Quintet**

- *Toronto Summer Music Festival*
- *MacMillan Theatre, in Toronto on Aug. 3*

Of all the established Canadian pianists – and we have currently some humdingers, of which an offhand shortlist would include Anton Kuerti, Louis Lortie, Marc-André Hamelin and Janina Fialkowska – André Laplante is the one that never fails to give me an out-of-body experience. He did it again Tuesday night at his sold-out Toronto Summer Music Festival Concert at MacMillan Theatre.

Although Laplante's is a formidable virtuosity guided by a rare musical intelligence, his art is not intellectual so much as visionary. When he takes on Franz Liszt's *Second Year of Pilgrimage (Italy)* he doesn't fall into its traps or founder in its longueurs, because he dares to inhabit Liszt's whole dramatic vision, holding its seven disparate sections in thrall – and us, too.

The strong appeal of Liszt's music for a pianist like Laplante is that it frees his re-creative inspiration. In the other romantic composers – Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Schumann, Mendelssohn – the music is in the notes, the forms, the prescriptions and dynamics of scoring.

In Liszt, the music is in the spaces, the fragmentary motives, the pauses, the timing, the curve of the rhetoric, all things which this looser discourse allows the player to choose, and, with his intuition on constant alert, must justify. Laplante's strength, and the fount of his unfailing vitality, is that he does justify his Lisztian choices with gleaming authority.

I'm fond of the three central episodes of the seven outcomes of Liszt's Italian pilgrimage – those inspired by three Petrarchan sonnets. But the opening three, prompted by Raphael's painting *The Marriage of the Virgin*, Michelangelo's sculpture of Lorenzo de Medici, and a Canzonetta by Salvator Rosa, have always seemed dull to me; and the big culmination of the work, the *Fantasia*, inspired by Dante, has struck me as more bombastic than enthralling.

But Laplante's playing, taking the whole work's risks and challenges into his – and I think Liszt's own – dramatic vision, held me captive and changed my mind. I was riveted.

He opened the evening, however, with music closer to my own heart – Frederic Chopin's *Piano Concerto in E Minor, op. 11*, in the composer's own chamber version for solo piano and string quintet. His five young collaborators were the valiant Via Salzburg Quintet drawn from Toronto's Via Salzburg Orchestra.

Here, even more than in the Liszt, Laplante's playing, by turns glittering and incisive in its virtuosity, and tender and confiding in its lyricism revealed afresh what a work of genius this concerto is.

At the concert's end, the overwhelming applause won from Laplante a single encore: the artless opening number of Robert Schumann's *Scenes from Childhood*, played with heart-stopping simplicity.

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