

Furtwangen

World Class Stride Piano

By Siegfried Kouba, updated 11.3.2010 around 17:30



She sparked storms of enthusiasm: Stephanie Trick. Her stride piano performances exceeded all expectations.
Photo: Kouba

According to Jacques Barthillat, new directions were taken when the clock was turned back to bring musical culture from a former era to Furtwangen. Through the introduction of Siegfried Mohr and Hansjoerg Kern from Vöhrenbach, Stephanie Trick came to town for a performance of rarely-heard stride piano music.

She had just come from Switzerland where she joined a number of great international pianists in concert. She is from the U.S. and studied in Germany and Austria. With her pleasant and natural appeal, the 23-year-old captured the hearts of her audience. She has mastered stride piano par excellence.

The style is an "invention" of about 100 years ago, a pairing of ragtime and jazz piano. In the swinging alternation, the bass notes are played on beats one and three, while chords sound on two and four.

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Between the deep bass note and chord lying above it is a further step – the stride. Prominent figures at the time when the music first became popular were James P. Johnson, Willie "The Lion" Smith, Duke Ellington, Fats Waller and Luckey Roberts, who often played at the "rent parties" or "cutting contests" of Harlem night life. Thrilling rhythms and chordal variety were preserved and found new followers in Furtwangen.

What the young pianist presented was simply stunning. She works in an uncomplicated, masterful manner. Her piano skills are huge. She plays everything by heart. One feels she must practice a lot because while she makes what she plays sound easy, it cannot be mastered without many hours of practice.

Her commitment is remarkable, her youthful joy of music, and the precise use of her hands and fingers. Without fail, she can play the bass figures, even when there's a difference of three octaves. With the right foot on one pedal, the heel of the left foot is tapping like a rhythmic pendulum. Her body is slender and erect as she vigorously strikes the black and white keys.

She controls the melodic phrasing and her fingers fly through the octaves. And she offers a wide range of feeling, from a slow blues, a charming ballad (Frank Sinatra), jolly playfulness (Nothin'), racy ragtime, to rousing jazz.

A whole train steams through one song; in another she performed an original composition in the style of the great masters – a number dedicated to her bunny rabbit, "Blues for Alfie." She plowed through scales, struck chords with trills, and dominated difficult runs (Viper's Drag).

She worships Waller and Johnson, whose "Caprice Rag" was one of the highlights. There was no doubt that the Romance was inspired by the theme of Russian pianist and conservatory director, Anton Rubinstein!

Furtwangen lay at the pianist's feet.

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