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Great Strides at the Piano: Stephanie Trick re-ignites interest in Ragtime, stride and jazz piano



Stephanie Trick performed stride, ragtime and jazz piano at Clairbourn School.--Photo by Bill Peters

Stephanie Trick is a phenomenon in many ways. A classically trained pianist (University of Chicago), a busy touring performer (19 scheduled appearances this year), young (she received her BA in Music last year), and a challenge she has touted since her teen years, dedicated to reprising piano styles that range from the turn of the 20th-century to the 1940's. At an hour-long concert at the Clairbourn School in San Gabriel on Thursday evening, Ms. Trick more than adequately demonstrated her skill and enthusiasm for stylings known as stride piano, ragtime piano and jazz.

The crowd, a combination of students, faculty, parents and friends of the 84 year-old Christian Science-based institution, were treated to the perky Trick's program of 13 tunes that provided a sampling of music from the 50 year period demonstrating piano composition and performance styles to distinguish between stride, ragtime and jazz piano. Trick has an engaging smile and warm personality that engaged the crowd immediately. She introduced each number with remarks about the composer's background giving a historical note of its place in the American musical heritage prior to delving into some of the fastest playing by nimble fingers we have heard in quite some time.

Trick takes her classical training to play with unusual clarity. She still retains enough youthful energy to give a syncopated bounce or sophisticated touch to some of the era's tunes, some well-known, others artifacts or re-creations of the era.

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Her eclectic program included songs by “Fats” Waller, George Gershwin, Matt Dennis, Scott Joplin, Eubie Blake, James P. Johnson, Donald Lambert and newer tunes by David Thomas Roberts, Trick and Kendall Roclord. The Roclord piece was quite a surprise as it is a contemporary number. Composer Roclord, whose tune “Zig Zag Zoe” is a freshly minted ragtime piece, was acquired by Trick from a parent family whose two sons, Troxell and Rex, attend the Clairbourn School. The family: the boys, and Roclord’s wife, Suzana, cheered Dad’s music.

Trick moved from one style to the next seamlessly, making the well-known and popular tunes come alive in “I Ain’t Got Nobody”, “Wee Small Hours of the Morning” and “Liza” while introducing the crowd to lesser-known music such as “Troublesome Ivories”, “The Mule Walk” and “Shout for Joy”. Trick’s playing never flagged in spite of the rigorous fast-moving stride. “Liza”, playing her own arrangement in stride-to-ragtime style, was one of her best. She remained right on target with the left-hand stride syncopation against the brilliant melody line. A heavy pedal on some tunes muted her over-all clarity, but those issues melted away in her encore piece, “Harlem Strut” by James P. Johnson whose 1925 composition “Charleston” is still a recognized anthem that best brings to mind the flapper era.

The crowd voted acceptance of Trick’s performance not only by sustained applause but by depleting the inventory of her CD albums she had set out for purchase. Audience members lined up to have her autograph the albums where Trick proved at ease both on stage and talking to the crowd.

The performance was sponsored by the Dr. Robert T. and Jane A. Cheatham Family Music Endowment Fund for Clairbourn School.

Text and Photo By Bill Peters

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