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Pianofest sparkles on pigeon lake

Jason cutmore brings sounds of spain to opening recital

Mark Morris, Edmonton Journal
Published: Monday, July 08 2013

It's surprising that Pigeon Lake isn't better known to more Edmontonians as a getaway destination, for a day's visit or a longer stay.

Less than an hour's drive southwest of Edmonton, the oval lake, 22 kilometres long and 11 kilometres wide, feels like a much bigger body of water. To sit on one of its sandy beaches, watching an Albertan thunderstorm scud across the waters in the distance, is worth the journey on its own.

It has, too, become a more sophisticated resort over the last decade. Ma-Me-O beach, on the south side, may still have the feel of an old cabin-by-the-lake getaway, but Mulhurst, built around a lakefront hamlet, is busy sprouting grander lake homes. Pigeon Lake Village is a recent creation and a genuinely chic destination, with its arts and craft shops and restaurants. The lake boasts thriving fishing (walleye), six golf courses, and a provincial park, not to mention sailing and boating. The whole thing still feels homely, rather than overtly commercial, and no wonder those who go there regularly cherish it.

One of those is Jason Cutmore, now a pianist in New York, who used to visit the lake as a child. He has started a new piano festival, Alberta PianoFest, based at the historic Rundle Mission on the west side of the lake. The festival combines two weeks of master classes for 12 young piano students, with recitals by faculty, in Mulhurst and in Edmonton itself.

Like the lake, the festival has the feel of being intimate instead of commercial, about music-

making rather than personalities.

The recitals kicked off on Saturday in the classic little St. James United Church in Mulhurst. It started life as a school, but is now all whitewash and little pews and recent stained glass, with glimpses of the waters of the lake through the trees and down the hill.

Cutmore's specialty is Spanish music, and his recital was one of those enjoyable occasions where less familiar music turned out to be both attractive and entertaining. It was introduced by Rick Philips, former host of CBC's Sound Advice, in a commendably condensed survey of both the festival and of the music in this opening gala concert.

The recital opened with a work more familiar in guitar arrangements than in its original piano version, Albéniz's Preludio from his Cantos de Espana of 1892. Cutmore approached it pianistically, resisting the temptation (usually taken by guitarists) to romanticize the quintessentially Spanish work.

The highlight, though, was a suite of pieces by the littleknown French composer Déodat de Séverac. His home was in the Pyrenees, his musical inheritance straddling southern France and northern Spain, heavily influenced by his teacher Albéniz and by Spanish music, with a touch of Debussy thrown in.

The five pieces that make up Cerdana were completed in 1911. The title refers to a district in this region (shortly to host Stage 8 of the 2013 Tour de France), and are a vivid series of pianistic tone poems, telling a story overall. A group arrive to visit the area, taking in a local festival, and then Font-Romeu (now a popular ski resort). The visiting muleteers worship at the statue of Christ at Llivia, and in the last piece they travel back home over the mountain roads of the Pyrenees.

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The colours are extraordinarily bright, poster-paint vivid, sharp-edged as the Pyrenean sun, and the writing thickly textured, busy, and evocative. Partly disguised in this dense palette are a number of lovely long-breathed tunes, reminiscent of the celebrated folk songs of nearby Auvergne, and looking forward to the melodic style of the Spaniard Rodrigo (of the famous Concerto d'Aranjuez).

In all this, there are overtly descriptive touches - bugles, for example, and surely those final bars are the donkeys braying in delight at arriving home. This was imaginative programming, and there must have been those in the audience who, like me, had not heard these pieces before, and will be seeking them out again.

Cutmore completed the recital with more Albéniz and then a De Falla encore. He is obviously deeply involved with the music of Spain of the early 20th century. Perhaps he is a little too earnest - at times he could have let the music breathe more, and he could usefully develop a lighter, more delicate touch in the right hand, letting the Spanish shades infiltrate the Spanish sun. But the commitment showed.

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The festival continues over the next two weeks. The students now start their master classes, and the faculty will give recitals over the next two weekends, on Fridays in Edmonton and on Saturdays at Pigeon Lake.

Robert Shannon plays Liszt's formidable Dante Sonata at Alberta College's Muttart Hall on Friday, July 12, and Stéphane Lemelin includes Beethoven's last piano sonata in his recital in

Mulhurst on Saturday, July 13. Ursula Oppens plays Schumann, Bolcom, and Ravel at the Muttart Hall on Friday, July 19, and repeats the recital in Mulhurst on Saturday, July 20.

As one of the audience said to me spontaneously after Saturday's recital, while the evening light reflected on the waters of the lake, "What a wonderful way to spend a Saturday evening."

REVIEW Jason Cutmore, piano Presented by: Alberta PianoFest When: Saturday night Where: St. James United Church, Mulhurst Alberta PianoFest continues: through July 20 Tickets: \$5-\$12, albertapianofest.com

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