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Chamber music concert takes the (birthday) cake

LAWRENCE B. JOHNSON
Special to The Detroit News

Beverly Hills -- The 17th annual Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival opened Saturday night with a birthday chorus. It wasn't exactly "Happy Birthday," but an outpouring of the lyrical and poetic music of Robert Schumann, Frederic Chopin and Samuel Barber.

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of those enduring Romantics Schumann and Chopin, and it's the centenary for Barber, the American master whose lyrical temperament was so instinctive that he once proclaimed he would never write music he couldn't sing.

As this first of 19 festival concerts -- to be packed into 15 days at various Metro Detroit locations -- was devoted strictly to those three composers, the audience at Seligman Performing Arts Center reveled in a full night of music-making from the heart, wordless song in intimate forms.

The Great Lakes festival draws its starry roster of musicians from all over the world, but none ever seems to outshine its founder and artistic director, pianist James Tocco. And it was Tocco's dramatic turn through Chopin's Preludes, Op. 28, that highlighted this concert and indeed set the tone for the festival.

Chopin's 24 Preludes, miniatures variously lasting a few minutes or a few measures, are virtuoso pieces that run the gamut from zephyr-like epigrams to concise little ballades to heroic flights evocative of Bach organ works.

Tocco, a Detroit native who holds a distinguished position at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, imbued each of the Preludes with its own compelling temperament, imagery and life. Here was intensely concentrated playing, precisely gauged and yet rhythmically fluid, at once virile and poetic.

Tocco also proved to be a generous musical collaborator in teaming with the Ying String Quartet for Schumann's Piano Quintet in E-flat, Op. 44.

The Ying Quartet was founded in 1988 while four siblings from Winnetka, Ill., were studying at the Eastman School of Music. The four Yings were Timothy and Janet on violin, Phillip on viola and David on cello. After several years of residency at Harvard, the quartet is now in residence at Eastman. Timothy left the quartet last year to be replaced by Frank Huang as first violin.

They are a thoroughly polished ensemble and their neatly interlaced musicianship told in an exuberant account of the Schumann Quintet. Tocco seemed like another member of the family, so free and vibrant were the exchanges between keyboard and strings in the ghostly scherzo and rocketing finale.

The Ying Quartet opened the program with Barber's String Quartet No. 1. The work of a 26-year-old composer, the three-movement work incorporates perhaps the most-played music ever written by an American classicist: the central Adagio, an essay of deep melancholy made famous in the composer's later arrangement for string orchestra.

But it was the Adagio that felt the least satisfying of the Ying's efforts this night -- rather cool, lean and measured where one wished for warmth, even opulence and a more expansive flow. Yet the outer

movements of Barber's Quartet, inherently economical and taut, came off quite effectively, their concision smartly intact.

This is one of the few programs that will be repeated in the festival's ambitious schedule. Tocco and the Ying Quartet will reassemble at Grosse Pointe Memorial Church to play it again Sunday afternoon.

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Additional Facts

Review

Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

- James Tocco, piano
- Ying String Quartet

Grade A-

When: Program repeats at 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Grosse Pointe Memorial Church, 16 Lake Shore Drive, Grosse Pointe Farms

Tickets: \$32-\$45; students \$10

Call: (248) 559-2097

www.GreatLakesChamberMusic.org

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