

**Alessio Bax and Lucille Chung, Duo-Pianists**  
**Farley's House of Pianos**  
**April 19, 2011**

Duo-pianists Alessio Bax and Lucille Chung presented a fascinating and brilliantly played program at Farley's House of Pianos on Madison's west side Tuesday evening, April 19. The program consisted of three large works for piano four-hands, each played on a different Steinway piano restored by Tim Farley.

The close-up, intimate character of the salon setting at Farley's, combined with the inherent intricacies of four-hands playing, lent the program an extra layer of fascination. As though that weren't enough, the contrasts between the sonorities of the three pianos underscored the importance of great instruments to conveying the reality of the music itself.

Many photographs of the composer Igor Stravinsky, including arguably the best ones, show him at a piano. Even his most elaborate orchestral scores were composed at the piano, and he made a number of transcriptions such works for concert performance on the piano, among them the second of three great scores written for Diaghilev's Ballet Russes, *Petrushka* (1911). A hallmark of Stravinsky's early work is the fullness of his lavishly complex orchestrations. One might very reasonably suppose much would be lost in the context of the more limited sonorities of the piano, but as this concert amply showed, not necessarily...

Stravinsky wrote a three-movement solo piano version of music from the ballet, but this duet version presents the entire work. I was surprised and delighted to learn, first-hand, that if you know the orchestral version, this version delivers all of the original's excitement, drama, delicacy, and pathos. In fact, in terms of motivic and rhythmic clarity, perhaps it's even clearer than the original.

Both players have to command very advanced piano technique, in both acoustic and physical space. It's *a lot* of notes, at every dynamic level, with every possible kind of articulation, and not seldom at very high speed. Seated only a dozen or so feet away, I must concede it was a jaw-dropping experience to witness the performance.

The piano was an 1892 Steinway B with a compass of 85 notes, very much the sort of instrument composers and serious players might have had in their own studios. In a room this size, in music with so much thick texture, it was an entirely suitable vehicle.

After intermission, the piano was switched to an 1877 Steinway D (so-called "concert grand" size, even now), one of a limited series of elaborate pianos built by Steinway in 1876-77 to commemorate the centennial of the United States.

The music was Johannes Brahms' *Waltzes*, Op. 39. When this instrument was made, Brahms still had 20 years of life remaining, so its particular qualities might very well have been what he had in mind for this music. Be that as it may, these 16 delightful dances span a wide range of characters, including elegance, ebullience, grace, clamor, energy, poignancy and delicacy. All of that and more was deliciously present in this performance, though I admit being swayed a bit by the fact that the work is a particular favorite of mine.

Thank goodness concert audiences are finally loosening up enough for music of our own time to be offered by outstanding artists. In this instance, a group of four tangos by the Argentinian master Ástor Piazzolla, arranged for piano duet by Bax and Chung. A foreground quality of the dance is -- brace yourself -- sexiness. Whiplash fast or languorously slow, the highly stylized dance requires considerable full-body contact between the couple, even today seen by many as somewhat scandalous.

It was Piazzolla's particular genius to infuse the tango tradition with elements of jazz and classical music, in the process liberating the music from the dance itself and creating a new genre, *tango nuevo*. The four works offered as a suite in this

concert -- Lo que vendra, Milonga del Angel, Verano Porteno and Libertango -- showed how wide an expressive range tango nuevo encompasses. By turns pensive or ebullient, the music is always intimate.

Bax and Chung infused intimacy with spontaneity by both playing from a single solo piano score and improvising their closely intertwined parts on the spot. As they are a married couple, it was endearing to see Bax reaching around Chung's back to play some low notes to her left. As different as the four pieces were from one another, all were typical Piazzola, rhythmically vigorous even in slow sections, and in fast ones very thick with notes.

In keeping with the modernity of the music, the instrument was a restored 1950 Steinway D, with a very large voice -- booming, stentorian bass, lyrical and clear mid-range, and clean, crystalline high notes.

All things taken together, then, this was an outstanding, top-tier concert, presented by two artists of enormous pianistic and musical talent, their amazing gifts showcased in the unusual and original circumstances of a venue that affords ready access to different instruments of the highest caliber. The 1950 Steinway D is at least the equal and arguably superior to today's concert grands in terms of materials and craftsmanship.

I don't really think I need a disclaimer here, but I'll add that I've known Tim Farley since the late 70s, and after 35 years of being exclusively a harpsichordist, I happened to be in his shop in late 2008 and ended up buying a fully restored 1911 Steinway A piano. In addition, almost a decade ago I gave up writing concert reviews, which at that point I had been doing regularly for not quite 30 years. I am not taking it up again, but this concert was so unusual and so much fun, I wanted to share, the more so as bad weather had greatly reduced that evening's audience.

*Jess Anderson, April 22, 2011*