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Pianist Alon Goldstein wants audience to really listen

Plays in Keyboard Concerts series at Fresno State.



~ Donald Munro ~ The Fresno Bee ~ Thursday, November 15, 2012 ~

Some people listen to classical music in the car. They listen to classical music while doing household chores. They listen to classical music while reading, working at the computer, playing video games or chatting with friends.

Alon Goldstein is not one of those people.

"Music is not something that fills a void," says the celebrated pianist, who has performed with many of the world's great orchestras. He plays tonight at Fresno State as part of the Philip Lorenz Memorial Keyboard Concerts series.

For Goldstein, classical music takes concentration. It takes work. It isn't something that can be smoothed together with a bunch of other activities in the name of multitasking.

He does not listen to classical music while vacuuming the living room.

"Music requires active listening in a world that is extremely passive," says the Israeli-born musician, speaking from his Maryland home.

If all this sounds a little stern and unbending -- if it makes Goldstein sound a bit like a crank -- nothing could be further from reality. On the phone, he spins a warm, amusing, cerebral cocoon of a conversation, within minutes flying past the usual questions and answers about program notes and steering the discussion into thought-provoking territory. How important, he asks, is the story of a piece of music? Does it matter if we each have a different story for that music? Does that piece have any one "truth"?

Such are the questions that arise when one thinks a great deal about music, an act that seems as natural to Goldstein as eating, sleeping and flying. (He does a lot of that, having spent 290 days on the road last year on tour.)

It should come as no surprise, then, that the pianist, who studied with the great Leon Fleisher at the Peabody Conservatory and made his debut at the tender age of 18 with the Israel Philharmonic under the baton of Zubin Mehta, immerses himself in whatever piece or pieces he's playing at his next concert.

Last weekend, for example, he played the Brahms Sonata in F and the Brahms Piano Quartet in C Minor in Kalamazoo, Mich.

"If someone had asked me that day my favorite composer, what would my answer be? Brahms," he says with a laugh. "I'm so immersed in the music, and I spend hundreds of hours with every piece, that by the time I allow myself to walk on the stage, I want to feel that I own it."

For his Fresno debut, Goldstein moves on to other "favorite composers," shifting to a program of shorter works from varied composers. He'll play Mozart's Adagio in B Minor, Schubert's Two Impromptus, Debussy's Six Preludes, Beethoven's Sonata in E-flat Major and Ginastera's "Three Argentinian Dances." The pianist slipped the last piece in as a tribute to his recent whirlwind Central and South American tour, in which he played 16 times in eight countries in 21 days.

Goldstein shifts the conversation back to the stories that music can tell, finding a way to relate his Fresno program to the discussion. When writing his impromptus, Schubert put the titles of each one not at the beginning where you'd expect, but at the end. The composer's goal, Goldstein says, was to allow the player to experience the piece for the first time without being influenced by the title. In other words, to make up his or her own "story."

Last year at a conference in Frederick, Md., the pianist played a little trick on an audience. Before he started playing Ravel's "Miroirs," Goldstein said the composer had based the music on an expressionistic Goethe poem about a young boy being put to bed with a lullaby from his mother. The boy is afraid to go to sleep because a demon comes to him in his dreams and asks him to follow. At the end of the piece, which shifts from sweet to menacing, Goldstein asked his audience if the boy had followed the demon or had awakened.

Most took the optimistic view and voting for the waking-up option.

Then Goldstein revealed his trick: That wasn't Ravel's story at all. The composer had actually titled the piece "A Boat on the Ocean."

Goldstein related the anecdote on his blog, asking: "Now, was I wrong? Everyone followed the music. They all were so happy. The music certainly supported my made-up story. Ravel's name is definitely the right one for the piece, but I don't think I was wrong with my story. It worked."

He doesn't plan to repeat his experiment in Fresno. But the intellectual bent of the exercise informs his view of classical music: It is what what you make of it. And what a joy to actively engage in the process as listener.

"It takes us to a different world," he says. "We're lucky to visit it."