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2013 Arriaga Competition Winners Concert

admin



Kenari Quartet at Treetops

As I look at a beautiful sky ranging from dark blue above me, to the sweetest baby blue right next to a foggy white line in the horizon, (from my plane back to Charlotte, NC) I feel compelled to write a few lines about the 2013 Arriaga Competition Winners Concert that took place at the Treetops Chamber Music Society yesterday, in Stamford, CT. These past 24 hours have been crazy and deeply rewarding at the same time.

Less than an hour ago I was running through LaGuardia Airport in New York, delivering polite “excuse me”-s as I zoomed by. I had run into traffic, and a little more, on my way to the airport and was

running late. It was 9:15 am by the time I got to Security for a 9:29 am flight. I got a boarding pass for the next flight to Charlotte, but was heading to the gate of my original 9:29 am flight, and I made it.

Just 20 minutes prior to that I was on the M-60 bus from Manhattan to the airport and, on the first stop in Queens a desperate person grabbed my bag and stepped out of the bus. It took me a split second to react. I jumped on to him, pulled my bag off his hand and looked at his face uttering a stern “what are you doing?” I let him go. Then, I let the bus driver know what had just happened and this brought about a very “New York” moment. “That guy is sick,” said the driver referring to the man who tried to rob me, whom we could still see walking away while we continued to drive on. “You should have punched him in the face,” he said. I replied politely to that remark, but then he continued: “you might be right, if you punched him in the face and cracked his head in two, probably some kind of disgusting disease would have come out.” New York is blunt, that’s for sure, and many of its citizens have a very vivid imagination. I lived in Manhattan for 20 years prior to moving to North Carolina and this driver’s reaction to what just happened brought many mixed memories to my mind.

However, this is not at all what compelled me to write this blog. The reason why I am writing is the pure energy shot the 2013 J.C. Arriaga Competition Winners concert gave me last night, which I want to share with all of you. The concert featured the Kenari Saxophone Quartet and the piano-violin Jade Duo. The audience at Treetops CMS is truly knowledgeable and hard to impress, but many “wows” could be heard throughout the evening. One of our

regulars said about the Kenari Quartet that “they are like a shot of heroin.”



Jade Duo at Treetops

J.C. Arriaga was schooled in music by playing chamber music. He started to compose seriously when he was 11 years old, to express his love for a young woman, his mentor’s 15-year-old daughter Luisa, whom he met at the philharmonic society gatherings where he played violin. Arriaga went on to further his studies at the Paris Conservatory and composed three wonderful string quartets and many other works before he passed away at age 19. He is the most important classical composer from Spain, born exactly 50 years after Mozart, on the same January 27th date, in 1806. I thought Arriaga was a fitting name for our annual chamber music competition which, I have to admit, came about from my sheer stubbornness, because I was convinced this was an effective way to mentor future generations of artists, while serving an important part of the mission of the Treetops Chamber Music Society. This year’s Arriaga Competition has been our sixth.

Each year it has become harder and harder to judge at the finals of

the Arriaga Competition because the level keeps getting higher. I am deeply grateful to David Geber, Charles Neidich and Peter Winograd for their continued support as jurors. Their privileged ears and deep knowledge of music are an inspiring mentoring force for all our finalists and myself. David Geber and Charles Neidich also played a key roll in the founding of the Arriaga Competition in 2008.

This past spring the Kenari Quartet (Bob Eason, soprano sax; Durand Jones, alto sax; Corey Dundee, tenor sax; Steven Banks, baritone sax) came on top as the 1st prize winner and Jade Duo (Zhen Chen, piano; Shuai Shi, violin) was the 2nd prize winner. We felt compelled to acknowledge the excellent work and talent of another two groups and offered honorable mentions to the Orava String Quartet (Daniel Kowalik, violin; David Dalseno, violin; Thomas Chawner, viola; Karol Kowalik, cello) and the Noctua Wind Quintet (Kayla Burggraf, flute; Michelle Pan, oboe; Nicolas Chona, clarinet; John Turman, horn; Thomas Morrison, bassoon).

The winners of the Arriaga Competition receive a cash prize and are invited to play a joined concert at the Treetops CMS regular concert season. That is how the Kenari Quartet and Jade Duo came to play the concert at Treetops yesterday. I should also say that the Kenari Quartet almost didn't make it to the concert. Late at night the day before the concert they ran into a deer on the highway on their way from Bloomington, Indiana, to Stamford, Connecticut, and were stranded three hours away from Treetops, in a remote town in Pennsylvania, up until the late morning of the day of the concert. As late as 10:30 am on the day of the concert they still had no means to get to the rental car facility at a small airport 54 miles

away from where they were. There wasn't enough time to go pick them up either. The concert at Treetops was at 4:00 pm. However, somehow, the stars lined up and they got a shuttle service company to give them a ride to the rental car facility, not without being ripped off both by the Inn where they crashed at 1:30 am, which charged them \$200 for a room, and by the shuttle bus driver, who charged them \$250 for a ride in his small SUV. The car they were driving was a total loss.

But there they were, very politely greeting all of us at Treetops as they came in with a nice smile into the Treetops Studio at around 3:00 pm.

The concert was an unforgettable experience. The vitality and polished technique of both groups was a joy to watch and hear. Both winners have a unique talent and I don't intend to compare them in any way. Both are marvelous in their own way.

Jade Duo played with great elegance and refinement. Their performance of Bartok's Sonata No. 2 was particularly engaging, displaying a rich palette of colors and effects, which they bring about as a tight duo.

The Kenari Quartet managed to bring the house down. They played an encore too: Piazzolla's "Adiós Nonino." What struck me most was the great degree of maturity they already display as an ensemble, which comes through as a very natural expressive playing, with a good degree of virtuosic technique too, which one relates more commonly to the playing of a soloist. Here however,

four instrumentalists manage to produce that effect, which is quite remarkable. As I mentioned at the concert when I introduced the quartet, something unique is happening in the saxophone world these days. Many saxophone quartets are coming to the foreground lately and they are just fantastic. Being four instruments of the same family, just like in the string quartet, is certainly an advantage over the traditional woodwind quintet, which needs to cope with different sound productions, articulations and entirely different tone colors. Saxophone quartets today seem to be in the midst of a creative revolution that is just wonderful to watch.

The arrangement for sax quartet of the Kapustin piano Preludes in Jazz Style by Corey Dundee, the tenor sax player in the group, was great in every sense of the word. They played Preludes Nos. 22, 10, 13 and 24, with No. 13 perhaps being the weaker of the four, but still incredibly effective as a set.



Artist Margaret Roleke and Oskar Espina Ruiz during the interview with the artist

For me, year after year, the Arriaga Competition Winners Concert is a high point in the concert season. I can't avoid feeling a profound

sense of accomplishment and pride. All past struggles and difficulties seem to dissipate like the morning fog and everything clicks all of a sudden: the effort was well worth it (the “effort” being to help create a chamber music society and a chamber music competition from scratch, while still concertizing, recording, researching and teaching). The Arriaga Competition and the Treetops Chamber Music Society as a whole have come a long way in less than a decade, and this has been possible thanks to a great team that is capable of working as one, just like a good chamber music ensemble.