

MUSIC REVIEW

An organist with clarity and charm

Engaging Hungarian László Fassang brings out the best in Bach while having fun with the audience at his Disney Hall recital.

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László Fassang, a young organist from Budapest, has clean-cut boyish looks and a warm smile. For his Los Angeles debut at Walt Disney Concert Hall on Sunday night, he made a point of his nationality. The first half of his recital was Bach, Brahms and then one of those wild Liszt pieces, all flashy Hungarian fire and rapture.

For the second half he added vibrant colors of his own in his transcriptions of Bach and Brahms and wound up with an improvisation on themes suggested by the audience and with exciting Hungarian folk music as an encore.

But Fassang is a Hungarian of a particular and special sort. The flash sounded like something added to the top to charm; pleasing, meaningless musical small talk. The essence of his playing is clarity. He doesn't so much tint as strip away paint and glory in the original colors. He has a soul closer, I think, to Bartók than Liszt or Ligeti. I predict great things for him.

Fassang's Bach is of particular interest. He began with the Toccata, Adagio and Fugue in C. The Toccata was fluid, the Adagio soulful and the Fugue theatrical. There are a lot of notes, and Fassang is a slick, quick player, and I thought I heard every one.

The Toccata has ticks, little breaks in the flow, which Fassang managed with a cool naturalness. The Fugue is powerful oratory; a fugue subject is a series of rhetorical bouncing balls, its function is like that of a rocket's liftoff. Fassang did not play it with insistence or with force but relied on gravity to supply propulsion. There was no mud, no mess. It was, in a word, the most satisfying and inspiring Bach organ playing I've heard in years.

Five Chorale Preludes by Brahms followed, and the performances were understated. These are gray, drab pieces that admit no sunlight. Fassang's effective way of dealing with them was to try to make them disappear. Two were played so softly that the audience had the opportunity to simply cough over them.

A full organ meal can be made from Liszt's Prelude and Fugue on B-A-C-H, with its roaring arpeggios and earth-shaking bass notes. Fassang made it into vibrant music. He chose registrations colorful but not vulgar. The fugue on notes of Bach's name is hero worship that can be tasteful or tasteless. Here it sparkled with magic.

An organ arrangement of Bach's famous Chaconne from the D-Minor Partita for Solo Violin is a more oddball homage. Why make faux Bach organ music when the real thing includes some of the most amazing cathedrals of sound ever created and there is a huge amount of it? But Fassang isn't the first to fashion an organ extravaganza out of the Chaconne, and he is far from the worst. In fact, he brought out the repeated bass line in a spectacular way that the solo violin cannot. Disney shook without Fassang ever losing his natural finesse.

The organist's arrangements of four Brahms Hungarian Dances were charmers more than foot-stampers. Circus, skating rink and church were evoked. Fassang used his wondrous soft touch to make drama. This was dreamlike Hungarian dancing, feet afloat and superhuman leaps into the air.

The 10-minute improvisation at the end was cute. The audience was handed a sheet with nine choices and asked to pick one or write one in. Eyes closed, Fassang picked three from the pile and got the opening of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, Gershwin's "Summertime" and Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2. He had the most fun playing around with the opening of "Summertime" and the Toccata, finding they fit in a P.D.Q. Bach sort of a way.

I have a sneaking feeling he's done this before. But it's a good party trick to make Bach swing and to show Gershwin's underlying Bachian qualities. Liszt gave him all he needed for a winning big ending. But it was almost redundant. He had won us over from the start with his Bach.