

JACK LONDON PARK PIANO CLUB

REVIEW of CONCERT, MAY 4, 2014

It was a beautiful day for the eleventh piano concert at the House of Happy Walls – with an offering of diverse music from various centuries and in a myriad of styles, played by enthusiastic and talented musicians.

The concert began with a stunning first-time vocalist, Laura Benward, accompanied by Deborah Knapp. Laura was appropriately dressed in a lovely white linen dress that could have come from Charmian's closet. She sang *Recompense*, a 1850 song mentioned in Charmian's diary (now in the Library of Congress) as being Jack's favorite. Laura sang it like the wistful 19th century love song that it is, in an intimate and gentle way. She also sang two modern crowd-pleasers, *Over the Rainbow* and *I Could Have Danced All Night*, encouraging the audience to sing along. Her performance was a visual and vocal treat.

Introducing the spring theme of the concert, club member and perennial favorite Jim Wittes ("the piano man") began with his own arrangements of two songs from musical theater greats Frank Loesser and Rodgers & Hart – "*Spring Is Here (Then Why Do I Feel so Blue)*" and *Spring Will Be a Little Late This Year*, sweet but melancholy odes to spring and lost love. He also played a Latin, tango beat-piece called *Tico Tico*, which captured the sound of a songbird in spring.

Zinaida Milyavsky, a newcomer to the Piano Club, played a rousing 18th century classic, Haydn's Sonata in D Major. She lamented the fact that we don't hear much from Haydn these days because he's considered a "dinosaur." She then proceeded to show us what we are missing, with an exuberant, confident performance that really showed off the dramatic bass register of Charmian's piano, as well as the lightness and crispness of the high register. As Jud Goodrich said, she really brought the music to life.

Another charming newcomer, Larissa Migachyov, ended the first half with music that Jack and Charmian London would probably have listened to and danced to. The first was a lesser-known 1914 Scott Joplin piece called *Magnetic Rag*. She played it with a lovely light touch and a toe-tapping beat. She also played *Bohemia*, a 1919 composition from Joseph Lamb, a Joplin protégé. She made the piano sing as she invited the audience to visualize Charmian dancing to the piece. Finally, she played her own "ragtime-like" composition, *Blueberries of Metabechuan*, written for a children's music camp orchestra, a song she described as "bright and spirited, like children."

After intermission, Piano Club founder, Jud Goodrich, charmed the audience with his rendition of *When It's Springtime in the Rockies*, a 1923 song made popular in 1937 by Gene Autrey and 1943 by Roy Rogers.

Deborah Knapp, who has become a great addition to the Piano Club in the last year, romped through three popular tunes from the early/mid 20th century – ‘S Wonderful by George Gershwin, plus ragtime versions of *Four Leaf Clover*, and *Honeysuckle Rose* by Fats Waller, who was a classically trained jazz pianist influenced by Count Basie. She truly captured the spirit of the times and showed off the piano with spirited versions of tunes from Charmian London’s era.

Another newcomer, Rubina Mazurka, a student from the Bay Area, and a talented new Piano Club volunteer, impressed everyone with her poise and expertise by playing two pieces (by memory) from her school concert. They were *Sonata Op. 2 no. 2 (1st Movement)* by Beethoven and *Prelude no. 2 in C minor* by J.S. Bach. She played both with great confidence and particularly made the Bach piece “sing.”

Last but not least, perennial Piano Club and audience favorite Esfir Ross again captivated the audience with her exquisite music and entertaining stories. First, she played *White Nights*, from *The Seasons* by Tchaikovsky, lamenting that Tchaikovsky is seldom played these days, even though his music is so emotional and lyrical. She also introduced the audience to pieces by one of the premier composers in Russia today, Leonid Desyatnikov, who writes for the theater, opera, ballets, and movies. The first was *Little Bells*, a sad, atmospheric piece that made the piano sound like bells. The second was *The Obsession of Giselle*, from the ballet “The Red Giselle,” a dramatic and passionate piece with a lot of discordance. Finally, she played *Chaconne in G* by G.F. Handel, whom she described as one of the greats in classical music, with the same feeling for the music as the Romantic composers.

Nancy Watson-Tansey