

THE ARTIST AS RUSSIAN musicians part one

By Bernardo V. Lopez, UPSHOT for THURS nov 27, 2008

There are two types of artist. One extols one's self as singer, as artist. The other extols the song, the artwork. They are diametrically opposed. One is grabbing, the other giving. And there is a wide gray area in between. We feature here a Russian pianist who recently graced the CCP for the first time, Katya Grineva.

Prior to her CCP stint, when I first met Katya at a presscon at the Best Western on Makati Ave. (reputedly “the World’s largest hotel chain”), I had not heard a single note from her, but I knew instinctively she was the artist of the second kind for some strange reason. My first question was how many concerts had she done in Moscow. She said ‘one or two’. My disappointment was instant. Later, she said she was based in New York City. So I asked how many concerts had she done at Carnegie. She said ‘a dozen or so’. My disappointment turned into awe, a bias based on, not her rendition of Debussy’s Claire de Lune, which I would hear later, but on just pure track record. No one just plays in Carnegie ‘a dozen times’. You play for the snobbish vicious New York classical music community. If you have a tint of imperfection, the critiques pounce on you with pleasure.

Then, Katya started talking like a child who could not contain herself, baring her intimate self. You do not normally do that in a press conference amongst people with powerful pens. It was as if she was talking to friends. And quite spontaneously the artist of the second kind emerged. Katya said she would get depressed if she failed to play the piano even for just a few days. The listeners were her obsession. She could not contain her obsession to convey her music, her message to the world. Her passion was music as a

message to all, as a reflection of her inner self. I told her Ernest Hemingway killed himself when he discovered he could no longer write. Before I could ask if she would do the same if she discovered she could no longer play, she said casually, ‘Same here’.

Katya said what drives the artist is the listener. An artist must get involved and share God’s gift. She recounts her greatest euphoria playing, not for the snooty well-dressed crowd, but for rowdy kids. As an ex-New Yorker, I know that this global melting pot breeds the rowdiest most aggressive kids in the world. She gave for free a quick 40-minute concert for 400 kids (their attention span is shorter), and they all fell silent and in awe. It was like a non-oral sedative. When she got her first standing ovation from children, she was on the verge of tears. Soon after, another school asked her to play for 250 kids. A teacher reported that when she played ‘Ave Maria’, some kids were in tears. That drove Katya to give free tickets to children at her Carnegie concerts where tickets cost an arm and a leg.

Excited to play in the Philippines, Katya practiced for six months pieces she would play with the Manila Symphony Orchestra at the CCP under the baton of an Armenian conductor based in Ecuador, David Arutyanyan. A week before the concert, the conductor had passport problems and could not come. For a moment, Katya was in shock – six months practice for nothing. But she refused to give up the chance for her first Asian concert. After all, it was easy for her to prepare for solo piano pieces. She had been playing these all her life. She even included in her repertoire an intricate piece, Ravel’s Bolero. This piano concerto was originally for four pianos. Someone reduced it to two pianos. It was never played in a solo piano until Katya dared to.

Katya started to play the piano at the age of six at her neighbor's house because they did not have one. Soon, her parents could no longer stand the torture. They brought her a Zimmermann baby upright. Because classical music had been in her veins for so long, it was easy for her to shift to unrehearsed piano solos at CCP at the blink of an eye. What drives her are the music pieces themselves. "There are pieces of deep emotion like Rachmaninoff or Mozart", she commented.

At CCP, Katya began with Schubert-Lizst, then moved to de Falla's moving 'Fire Dance' with ease. For her encore, she played my favorite, Claire de Lune. I could imagine the moon over Manila Bay. After receiving three standing ovations at CCP, Katya resolved to come back here for more concerts.

The concert was graced by Fidel and Ming Ramos and General Alex Yano. It was to raise funds for a training center in Camp O'Donnell in Capas, Tarlac, and for the benefit of retired soldiers. It was spearheaded by Manoling Morato and Offie Bakker of the Friends of Overseas Filipinos, Inc. (FOFI). The event was in cooperation with the National Commission on Culture and Arts (NCCA) and the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office (PCSO). Please come back, Katya. I can organize a concert for kids for you. Please look into her website www.katyagrineva.com (Next week, part 2, Filipino jazz icons).

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