Bookends and deep ends

Grand piano disc starts with Schubert and sails into the unknown
by Lawrence Cosentino

Sailing off the edge of the map into unknown territory might seem like a quaint idea in the age of GPS. Here there be dragons — ha ha!

That was nervous laughter. Have you seen the news lately? Been to a hospital or a cemetery?

The third part of "The Ends of the Earth," a grand, terrifying and beautiful new work for piano by Honolulu-based composer Thomas Osborne, heaves like ocean swells, shudders like the crack of doom and tolls like a mariner’s bell. It’s a fantastic foretaste of the storms at life’s uttermost margins — part ecstasy, part fever.

Pianist Derek Polischuk, an adventurous professor of piano at MSU, and producer/engineer Sergei Kvitko of Lansing’s Blue Griffin Studios have teamed up to produce an expansive, magnificent recording that gives you the sound of the grand piano at full sail, from icy undertow, to sunlit ripples, to eye-stinging foam and then some.

Pairing a classic work with a new composition is a frequent stratagem in the classical world these days, but this pairing of wistful, charming music by Franz Schubert and dark tumult by Osborne is a success at every level. The two composers don’t seem to overlap at all — yet they resonate with each other in deep and mysterious ways, especially in Polischuk’s unhurried, intrepid hands. The connections bubble up mysteriously if you listen to the whole disc once, preferably more than once.

Schubert’s “Four Impromptus,” D. 935, Op. 142, sail along with stately dignity, lulling the becalmed soul with a hymnlike melody and a set of bittersweet variations on a leisurely theme. Polischuk hits every chord with a sweet weight. Every now and them, a set of notes tumbles down like flecks of snow breezed from a crow’s nest, with no evident human touch. With a warm but not ingratiating touch, he lets the music resound as if it were coming from inside your mind.

In spite of its charms, Schubert’s music always seems to bump up against something big. The edge of the page, where the music stops and the white margin of mortality begins, seems to be the point of departure for the second half of the disc, Osborne’s companion set of “impromptus.”

To make the recital pop, Polischuk asked Osborne, a professor of composition at the University of Honolulu, for a new piece that would go with Schubert’s impromptus. Osborne didn’t try to “bookend” Schubert’s tunes. He pushed them off the deep end.

From the first notes, Polischuk plunges into a series of unorthodox techniques. He strums the strings, hits them with special mallets and drums the outside of the piano. When conventional piano playing surges back, it’s elemental in force. Shudders of repeated notes vibrate in suspension, like beads of rain caught in strobe lights. Overtones float like mist. In one series of rising chords, Polischuk sounds bigger than a full symphony orchestra.

Abrupt transitions from massive chords to tiny gestures take your breath away, although they must have created massive headaches for sound engineer Kvitko. Not your worry. That was his job and he did it superbly. Just crank it up and let the spray hit your face (even when you think you are standing at a safe distance on shore).

An undertow of fatalism runs through most of “The Ends of the Earth.” Polischuk keeps returning to the same leaden murmur of chords in the left hand. As with Schubert, mortality and sadness lie in a queasy green layer under the surface. Brief episodes refer directly to the fate of Osborne’s native Hawaii, including a quote from “Kaulana Na Pua,” a protest song written in 1893 against the overthrowing of the Hawaiian kingdom. At first, the tune is hidden in the watery turbulence. Later, heartbreakingly, Polischuk reaches into the piano and strums it directly on the strings, as if taking one last look at a past that never will return.

“Terra Incognita” is a thought-provoking mix of sensual pleasure and deep reflection. The ancients were on to something with their cartographical dragons and blank spots. Don’t let the familiar sails, timbers and spars of our day-to-day cruise fool you. We are sailing off the edge of the map every minute of our lives.

“Impromptus by Franz Schubert and Thomas Osborne Derek Kealii Polischuk, piano Blue Griffin Studio

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