

his son Soulima, is firmly in his neo-romantic style and made for as smooth a transition as possible from 1781 to 1931. Hamelin and Nissman were in their element with the complex rhythms and acerbic harmonies in Liszt's favorite of his compositions.

Nissman's *En Blanc et Noir* finished off the program in a very different harmonic and textural idiom. Again, the pianists' performance was remarkable, especially in the resolute single line played by both pianists simultaneously in the first movement. I have heard studio recordings where these two pianists do not always as perfectly together as they do in this concert. With an exceptional

tempo flexibility, the two-dimensional sound was strongly influenced by World War II. The second movement's imposing march based on 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God' won over at the end by a subtle 'La Marsellaise,' all carefully and delicately danced. Debussy's third movement is dedicated to Stravinsky, and, in a nice programmatic touch, I discovered that the first recording of the piano version of *The Rite of Spring* was played by Debussy and Stravinsky.

Although almost all ballets first appear in the piano version so that choreography and music may begin while the orchestration is being prepared, Stravinsky's four-hands version of *The Rite of Spring* has taken on a life of its own. At the core of the duo piano program, Stravinsky noted that this first publication (1913) could be played at one or



promises have to be made since the score cannot be played as written. At two pianos, with pianists of this caliber, there are still some choices to be made, but nothing important is missed, and the sonic effect of two pianos is better suited to the music, especially in a large place like Carnegie Hall.

Two seasons ago I was very impressed by Martha Argerich and Daniel Barenboim, who recorded this in concert. Andsnes and Hamelin gave a performance that I would have expected from the elder duo about 25 years ago; it had more overt virtuosity and plenty of on-the-edge-of-your-seat excitement. The final Sacrificial Dance built to a tremendous climax and brought the audience immediately to its feet.

The encores were all lighter Stravinsky: 'Madrid' (one of Four Etudes for orchestra, transcribed for two pianos by Soulima Stravinsky), plus 'Circus Polka' and 'Tango' (both arranged for two pianos by Victor Babin). The audience wore itself out with curtain calls. As I walked out into a very warm New York evening, the memories of pagan Russia lingered.

JAMES HARRINGTON

## Barbara Nissman, piano

Troy NY

Ginastera, Bartok, and Prokofiev were the enticements for the March 19 recital of pianist Barbara Nissman, presented by Troy (NY) Chromatics at the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall. But it was Liszt's Sonata that anchored the afternoon and proved the most surprising piece on the program. Nissman's interpretation of the Liszt revealed rich, overlooked passages and thereby emphasized her extraordinary talent.

Most readings of the Liszt seem to be exercises in weight and speed by overeager virtuosos. Nissman, 72, clearly felt that she had nothing to prove. She certainly knows the piece well enough, having recorded it several times over the course of her long career. In brief opening remarks to the audience, she described the sonata as a touchstone in her life and "a barometer that gives me an idea of where I'm headed." For the next 30 minutes or so, she headed to a heavenly place.

Nissman certainly held her own in terms of sheer volume and velocity, but she was unusually generous with calm and serenity as well. Midway she displayed a joyful sense of abandon. For the audience it was a journey of continual discovery. Besides the familiar stormy dialogues, the music contained suggestions of hymns, marches, and lullabies. Where have those things been hiding?

Though the Liszt wasn't the concert opener, everything else seemed to follow in its path. First up was Ginastera's Sonata No. 1. This was also familiar ground for Nissman, who knew and worked with the composer. In fact, his last piece, the five-minute long Sonata No. 3, was dedicated to her. As for the No. 1, most of its four movements are raucous, driving, and very Latin. Inside the countless percussive chords with their blunt modern harmonies, Nissman brought out an inner cavern of sound.



After intermission came two short works by Bartok. The explosive *Allegro Barbaro* was a tour de force. But by this point we were already familiar with Nissman's grand technique. Again, the gentler music was the most captivating. In the 'Musiques Nocturnes' from the *Out of Doors Suite*, which Nissman described as a kind of orchestra of insects, there were tender flecks of color and beautiful fragile textures. She certainly never plucked or stroked any of the piano strings, yet she somehow produced incredible moments of buzzing and vibrating.

Prokofiev's Sonata No. 6 was the finale to the ambitious program. The oversized counterpoint in the opening Allegro was complex but also clear. It felt like Nissman was driving simultaneously in three or four divergent and interlocking lanes of traffic. (There were no collisions.) The closing movement was big on display but had the familiar and relentless

feeling of being on trial with little chance of salvation. After the hope and beauty that came earlier in the concert, it was a bit of a downer.

Two encores made up for that. Liszt's Consolation No. 3 is a ravishing tribute to Chopin and finally gave Nissman a chance to play some sustained legato. After that, she returned to where she started with a little song transcription by Ginastera.

JOSEPH DALTON

## Emanuel Ax, piano

Rochester NY

Emanuel Ax, like Murray Perahia, is a pianist I view through a "before and after" perspective: Perahia's fulcrum was a hand operation in 1992, after which he couldn't play for several years; Ax's was a later-in-life interest in newer music. "Before," both artists seemed restricted, contained, reserved in their breadth of expression; "after," they seemed set free. Their range of colors and emotions have made them far more engaging and, indeed, personal.

On April 17 at the Eastman School of Music's 444-seat sold-out Kilbourn Hall, it immediately became clear that form and flow were Ax's sine qua non concerns; the structure of every work he played was never in doubt. How puzzling, then, that he sounded distinctly like the pianist of yore.

From Schubert's second set of Impromptus, D 935, to Chopin's four Impromptus and Sonata No. 3, his characteristic mellow tone was immediately familiar, but this time its source became clear: chords and arpeggios exquisitely balanced for his purposes (to produce absolutely clear, even arpeggios), a light use of rubato, and a constant use of pedal with lifts that articulated the melody line (but nothing else—no bass notes, no counter-melodies in the arpeggios). He never varied this basic approach; his balances emphasized nothing in particular, and, in fact, the one basic tone color never varied all evening. (While listening the next morning to the DG recording of Mikhail Pletnev's 2000 Carnegie Hall recital, I said, "We didn't hear tone colors like that last night"; to which my spouse replied, "No, we didn't.") Even near the end of the 'Grand Valse Brillante' (one of his two encores), he brought out only the melody line, failing to project its par-