



Winging it with Beethoven and Bach

By Leslie Friday, Staff Writer

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NEWTON - A light sweat shone on Igor Tkachenko's forehead as he hunched over the black baby grand piano. Across from him sat frizzy-haired Jakov Jakoulov at his own espresso-colored instrument, his long fingers dancing gracefully over the ivory keys.

The duo melded snippets of classical music in fluid performances. Neither used sheet music. If they flashed some sort of signal, the audience would have never known.

The hour-and-a-half classical performance was complete improvisation.

"Many people, including musicians, forget that music is about freedom," Tkachenko said in a later interview.

Dozens of spectators jammed into a side room of Newton Centre's Café St. Petersburg on Wednesday, Nov. 28 for Tkachenko's and Jakoulov's third performance last month of what the restaurant pegged "the neglected world of classical improvisation."

Each paying \$15 apiece, audience members balanced wine and martini glasses on their laps as they sat in folding chairs for the accomplished composers to arrive. Two baby grand pianos, positioned so that one abutted the other, stood as the centerpiece to the packed room.

Shortly after 8 p.m., Tkachenko and Jakoulov entered with confident strides. Men, women and virtuosos-in-training immediately applauded.

Tkachenko explained that, back in the 18th and 19th centuries, musicians were required to improvise. Classical pianist Ludwig van Beethoven, he said, once improvised for two to three hours.

"We're expecting two-three hours," one woman teased from the audience.

Joking aside, the two settled at their pianos and launched into their performance. Jakoulov, 49, sat ramrod straight, occasionally bending his lanky form forward as he shook his head side to side. Tkachenko, 46, rocked back and forth, his fingers magnetized to the keys, as his eyes focused on some unseen place in the distance.

Their music was a playful mix of classical composers, with a twist of tango or folk thrown in to pleasure the listener with a fine-tuned ear. No musician was sacred. Beethoven was mixed with Mozart, Schubert blended

with Wagner, and Stravinsky was tossed about with Bach.

Music flowed from a soft start to a throbbing crescendo. Then, miraculously, the song would stop with the same simultaneous explosion as it had started.

“Unbelievable,” one man whispered from the crowd, surrounded by a sea of applause.

The duo stood, bowed and then returned to their pianos for the next piece.

In a later interview, Jakoulov described their improv performances as a kind of “free talk.” He said they do follow a sort of abstract musical pattern, but nothing is concretely established beforehand.

For audience members, “everybody feels like it’s born in the same minute,” he said.

Tkachenko said the two primarily communicate by ear. They do have a couple of signals (for example, eyes up is major shift and eyes down is minor), but mostly know where to go with the next musical passage by listening to their partner.

The two meet once or twice a week to “rehearse.”

“We just talk, we actually never touch the keys,” Tkachenko said.

Not many classical musicians are capable of improvisation. Then again, not many musicians have personal histories like that of Jakoulov and Tkachenko.

His father a violinist and mother a singer, Moscow-native Jakoulov trained as a pianist since he was 5 years old. He graduated from the Moscow Music Academy and later obtained his PhD in composition from Boston University.

Composing is Jakoulov’s way of life. His work has been played throughout Europe. In the United States, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra has performed his compositions and the Tanglewood Music Festival featured his work.

The West Roxbury resident is currently finishing up a piece for Greensboro, N.C., which is celebrating its bicentennial this year.

Tkachenko followed a similar path in life. The Odessa native started studying the violin at the age of 3. He switched to composing three years later and continued in that stream.

The Allston resident came to the United States 30 years ago and plunged into the music scene. He formed the Cambridge group, Cast of Characters, which performed local jam sessions with as many as 30 musicians.

After a medical condition with his hand slowed him down, Tkachenko started a computer company (Interactive Classics) that produces music games for kids. Another company, pano.fm, will be launched this week.

The two met in 1990 and became fast friends. They first played together at a mutual friend’s piano shop in Newton and later took up a couple of gigs at Café St. Petersburg, then located in Brookline.

Restaurant owner Natan Slezinger invited them back for a series of winter performances. The crowd reaction has been impressive.

Milana Stavitsky, a pediatrician and Newton Highlands resident, said Wednesday was the third performance she had attended. This time, she brought along three friends.

“I don’t think anyone has done anything like this,” she said. “It’s like a sophisticated conversation going on.”

Renowned classical dancer Anna Myer said she burst into tears the first time she heard the duo play. She wiped away more as she listened to them Wednesday.

“It just takes me away,” she said. “You shut your eyes and you go to another world.”

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Upcoming performances at Café St. Petersburg

Who: Jakov Jakoulov and Igor Tkachenko

When: 8 p.m. Dec. 26

Where: 57 Union St., Suite 1, Newton Center

How much: \$15/ticket

Contact: 617-467-3555

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