

## RECITAL REVIEW

## Pianists John Cobb and Alexander Schwarzkopf Team Up in a Rare Duo-Piano Extravaganza

By [Laura McDowell](#)

May 18, 2014 - Hendersonville, NC:

Duo piano concerts are rare in our area. One is far more likely to find chamber music concerts of woodwinds or strings, with piano, perhaps an addition to the mix. So this concert was a celebration of sorts by virtue of its very nature, and moreover because master players [John Cobb](#) and [Alexander Schwarzkopf](#) had selected a fascinating program of works by Mozart, Debussy, and Shostakovich, with the premiere of a short work by Schwarzkopf. The sanctuary of First United Methodist Church was supplied with two matching 6'1" [Perzina](#) grand pianos (a German brand), compliments of [Freeburg Pianos](#) of Hendersonville. As their master technician Keith Freeburg explained, each instrument was tuned to equal beating Victorian temperament, a tuning system popular in the 1800s now enjoying a comeback. Certain keys (such as C, G, and F) sound relatively "calm" (due to the purity of their fourths and fifths) and other more remote keys sound more "active" due to the series of different beats that are generated within the same intervals. The result is a veritable palette of sonic colors differentiated by key alone, an effect which is lost in standard equal temperament tunings. The program was streamed live on WTZQ Radio 1600 AM and therefore proceeded without pauses or intermission.

Dr. John Cobb is well known to concert goers in our area. His concert activities are global in scope, including a broad array of chamber music collaborations with renowned artists such as Joel Smirnoff, former first violinist with the Juilliard String Quartet, and most recently with Jason Posnock, concertmaster of the Asheville Symphony Orchestra. Among his orchestral appearances was a performance of the Samuel Barber Piano Concerto with the Asheville Symphony. He has performed solo recitals, more recently an all-Liszt program at the Asheville Art Museum. He conducts master classes on piano technique and literature and frequently serves as an adjudicator for competitions and music festivals. He has private studios in Fairview and Hendersonville.

Dr. Alexander Schwarzkopf earned his doctorate from the University of Oregon and is active internationally as a recitalist, clinician, and composer. His doctoral work was a study of Falko Steinbach's *Figures: 17 Choreographic Etudes for Piano*. An advocate for new music, he currently teaches private piano lessons and facilitates music exploration with children at the University of Oregon Spencer View Coop Family Center.

The program began with Mozart's Sonata in D for Two Pianos, K. 448 (revised later as K.375a). Composed in 1781 for a performance with Josepha von Aurnhammer, one of his pupils, this is Mozart's sole duo piano work. Its opening Allegro con spirit began with a declamatory fanfare, then a series of bustling Mozartean scales and figures exchanged at lightning speed, including a nasty lick in the low bass with several grace notes. No matter the amount of capering arpeggios or rocketing scales, the texture was always transparent and the parts, equally balanced in difficulty between the two instruments, exposed. The performance was clean and crisp, with never a let up in intensity or musicality. The second movement Andante in which Cobb played the melodic first piano part to Schwarzkopf's accompaniment was performed in rather more strict time than one might perhaps use if playing alone, though there were slight relaxations at cadences. The whole was characterized by elegance and grace with some beautifully coordinated trills in thirds and phrase exchanges. The third movement rondo Allegro was a full-on romp with each player attuned to the joyful spirit of Mozart's writing.

Right on the heels of this brilliant showpiece came *Circle Games*, a three-movement piece Schwarzkopf composed in 2014 and dedicated to his wife Becky Schapira Schwarzkopf. The first movement is in two parts. "Looking Up" is a programmatic exploration of a single drop of water suspended from the tip of a tree branch, the play of light within it, and its inevitable fall to earth. Motivic cells of a narrow range repeated in close proximity to one another, coupled with a rhythmic concentration, cast a hypnotic effect upon the listener. This morphed into "Fantastic Dance," a more complex and technically taxing exploration of the rhythmic and harmonic possibilities of "Looking Up" which served to be a highlight of the whole piece. The second movement "The Circle Game," inspired by Joni Mitchell's song, is sweetly reflective of some memories from his wife's childhood with its direct, though syncopated melodies and underlying harmonies. The third movement "Moorish March" is a colorful piece that begins as etudes composed for his students and evolves into a stylized and appealing march in two distantly related keys.

Following this was Debussy's *En Blanc et Noir* (In White and Black), composed in 1915, just three years before his death. Using the exploration of the black and white keys as his modus operandi, Debussy encrypts the meaning of each of the three movements within epigrams, the first of which was drawn from the libretto of Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*: "Whoever remains seated/And does not dance/Makes a quiet confession/Of some misfortune." Musically, this translates into an expansive and formally fluid movement with sweeping arpeggios, fluttering figures, use of extreme registers of the pianos, and accented chords. The second movement (and my personal favorite of this concert) is overtly nationalistic, its epigram railing against France's enemies: "...For whoever wishes to harm the kingdom of France, Does not deserve to have virtues." For this, two quotations – the Reformation hymn "Ein feste Burg" and the French national anthem – reference the Great War ravaging Europe and the composer's soul. Dissonance was freely explored, sometimes overtly and other times just simmering below the surface of this imaginative and magnificent music. The third movement was dedicated to Stravinsky, with the epigram "Winter, you're no better than a rascal." What the composer meant by this is unclear, but the music is full of chromatic scurrying, light and as playful as finger painting, with tonal color at the forefront.

The concert closer was Dmitri Shostakovich's Concertino for Two Pianos in A Minor, Op. 94, from 1954, a single movement work in six sections differentiated by tempo. In this enormously appealing work, the performers maintained a strong forward trajectory, underscoring the rhythmic insistency and sweeping melodic scope so embedded within the score, bringing an audience that had sat rapt for over an hour to their feet in a well deserved ovation.

## EVENT INFORMATION

Hendersonville -- ( Sun., May. 18, 2014 )

[Freeburg Pianos: "Masterwork Performance - A Rare Duo-Piano Extravaganza"](#)

Performed by Dr. John Cobb and Dr. Alexander Schwarzkopf  
 Free and open to the public -- The First United Methodist Church , Dr John Cobb: (828) 551-3810; First UMC: (828) 693-4275 -- 4:00 PM