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Hershey Felder Brings Debussy to Life

Steve Gottfried · Wednesday, June 5th, 2019

Hershey Felder is a rock star. Not in the literal sense, of course. But in the figurative sense, to be sure. It was evident in the way he was swarmed by audience members and press photographers following his one-man show *Hershey Felder: A Paris Love Story*. Unusual for a man who's created a cottage industry playing famous (dead) composers whose works most people would be hard-pressed to identify by name.

Felder brings his unique one-man show back to the Wallis Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills, this time recreating the life and work of French composer Claude Debussy. Last year, he brought famed composer Ludwig van Beethoven to life. Last year's show was my first exposure to Felder's work and I was mesmerized by his masterful one-of-a-kind performance which melds biography, storytelling and consummate piano concertos in a way that's captivating. Felder, mercurial at 50, has a knack for fully inhabiting these composers regardless of age or country of origin. Over the past 20 years, Felder has performed as Tchaikovsky, Irving Berlin, Leonard Bernstein, George Gershwin, Beethoven, Franz Liszt and Fryderyk Chopin. His latest show is perhaps his most striking and personal because of the effect Debussy had on Felder's own life, and that of his mother, who died when he was thirteen. As Felder describes it, their lives were intertwined and it makes for a fascinating, and incredibly moving, night of theater.

In *Hershey Felder: A Paris Love Story*, Felder melds two time periods, assuming the persona of Debussy to describe Felder's own pilgrimage to the City of Lights at the age of 19 to explore the birthplace of the composer who had a profound impact on his life, as well as his mother's life. Felder describes in methodical detail how he chose to arrive in Debussy's birthplace (Paris) the day before Debussy's death on March 25 so that he could be there to fulfill a promise of sorts to his mother who found solace in Debussy's music during her own illness which led to her death at the tender age of 35. Like the most imaginative musicology professor you will ever have, Felder explains what made Debussy's approach to music so groundbreaking. Not only does he explain it, but then he demonstrates it by masterfully performing selected works which illustrate it sonically.

Admittedly, some of the terminology (like an augmented 4th or harmonic invention) went over my head. But the effect is mesmerizing and the result is pin-drop silence amongst the audience, aside from some well-chosen moments of levity throughout which bring out the foibles of the characters he portrays.

In retracing famous Parisian landmarks and monuments associated with his musical idol, Felder sought a connection. He begins at Point Zero, the literal geographic marker designated as the center of Paris, and makes his way methodically from the great Paris landmarks — the Pont Royal,

the Louvre Palace, the Arc de Triomphe, the Tuileries Garden, the Place de la Concorde, the Champs Elysees—and ultimately to Debussy’s former residence where he encounters a woman in her 90s who currently resides there. Desperate to forge a connection with his musical idol, Felder rings the buzzer and asks to come inside. The woman obliges, giving the young Felder a chance to see for himself where Debussy lived and worked.



Hershey Felder as Claude Debussy at the Wallis Center for the Performing Arts.

Over the course of the show, Felder helps place Debussy’s life in context—the financial strain of trying to support himself and his art, his womanizing ways, the string of relationships and extramarital affairs, the nay-sayers who thought he would never amount to much, and the eventual recognition earning him France’s highest distinction, the Legion of Honor. It was only toward the latter part of Debussy’s life that he found true happiness with his wife Emma and their daughter whom they nicknamed Chou-Chou. Though Debussy had proven many of the critics wrong and had achieved a level of success which was his due, he had grown tired of the fight and devoted his energies during what would be his final years to musical compositions about children, inspired by his daughter and her imaginary conversations with her beloved doll. Ironically, it was during this time of personal fulfillment which had eluded him most of his life, that Debussy became seriously ill from colon cancer. He and his wife resolved to keep this from their daughter to protect her. And it was during this visit that the 19-year-old Felder experienced the spiritual connection he was seeking. On viewing Debussy’s daughter’s bedroom, Felder was overcome with the terrifying vision of the pain Debussy experienced during his final years following a failed surgery to treat his cancer which mirrored his mother’s suffering from a mastectomy in the days when such surgeries were last resorts with savage and tragic outcomes.

It’s this climactic moment which becomes strangely cathartic for the 19-year-old Felder. Felder artfully takes this heart-rending epiphany and segues back to the piano, performing Debussy’s most evocative compositions, many of which were inspired by nature. Felder underscores the distinction that Debussy didn’t merely endeavor to recreate what he saw in nature through music, but more importantly what he felt. As Felder’s journey nears its end, Felder makes his way back to Point Zero, where he steps onto the star at its center, recalling his mother’s final words to him, “Always remember the moonlight.” Felder retreats back to the piano one last time to perform his mother’s favorite composition by Debussy, the “Clare de Lune”—the song which, in Felder’s words, allowed her to feel less pain and enter a world of dreams.

Following each performance, Felder brings up the house lights and invites the audience to shout out questions which he fields like a professor in a university lecture hall filled with captivated grad students hanging on his every word. Perhaps what’s so refreshing about Felder is that he conducts his performances with mastery but without pretension. There are no lofty pronouncements from on high. He has a reverence for his subject matter, to be sure, but what he does so well is that he humanizes them. And Claude Debussy was no exception. Felder is perfectly candid about Debussy’s serial womanizing ways which led not one, but two of his wives to shoot themselves (with different outcomes). As he’s done with previous subjects, Felder dives right into Debussy, giving an honest appraisal of a musical genius with human shortcomings and failings. And in this way, it humanizes him, allowing us to appreciate his legacy and understand the obstacles and challenges he faced. But Felder leaves no doubt as to Debussy’s unique contribution to the musical landscape, acting as a bridge between classical music and jazz, influencing some of the jazz world’s greatest musicians including George Gershwin, Duke Ellington and Miles Davis.

Photo credits: Christopher Ash

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