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Hershey Felder Captivates as Beethoven

Steve Gottfried · Wednesday, August 8th, 2018

If the headline for this article gives you pause, it should. The deaf composer, best known for such concertos as *Moonlight Sonata*, *Für Elise* and his Fifth Symphony, is not the sort of subject matter you'd normally associate with being captivated, mesmerized or enchanted, but that is precisely the spell that Hershey Felder casts during his one-man show, *Hershey Felder: Beethoven*, playing now through August 19th at the Wallis Center for the Performing Arts. Not knowing much about Beethoven besides the fact that it became the title for a motion picture about a loveable St. Bernard, I came to this theatrical experience as a veritable blank slate. These days, immersive is the buzzword commonly associated with virtual reality, but Felder's one-man show is immersive in the old-school vernacular, rendering this 500-seat theater pin-drop quiet. In the space of an hour and a half, Felder melds storytelling with music to draw us in to another world and paint a vivid portrait of a musical genius whose humanity is often eclipsed by his ubiquitous compositions.

Felder takes the stage on a simple yet evocative set. A Steinway piano occupies center stage, against the backdrop of a cemetery. For it's here where the story begins, decades after Beethoven's death amid some controversy over what would become of his remains. Donning various accents, Felder takes us back in time to the summer of 1825 where a boy named Gerhard von Breuning is out for a stroll with his father Stephan when they encounter a short, fat, filthy vagrant on the street. Much to the boy's surprise, this is no ordinary vagrant but the famed composer Ludwig von Beethoven. Gerhard's father later explains to his son how he came to be close friends with the famous composer and the rift that drove them apart for ten years. As Felder dons various personas and accents, we learn that Ludwig was already quite famous by the age of 11. But his gift was clouded by a turbulent home life which was riven by an abusive, alcoholic father. Felder suggests that Beethoven's life was likely saved by the fact that he was hired to tutor Stephan von Bruening which offered a respite from his chaotic home life.

Felder, who is himself an accomplished pianist, intersperses this tale with Beethoven's music throughout the 90 minute production, indispensable since it's quite impossible to separate the man (Beethoven) from his music. The seminal feature of Beethoven's life was the fact that he began to lose his hearing around the age of 26. By 31, he was completely deaf, the period during which his most famous works were composed. Felder drives home the point that Beethoven was, at heart, an iconoclast who broke all the rules and therefore changed the entire world of music.

Beethoven's life doesn't have the inherent drama (or comedy) that made Mozart's life camera ready for stage and movie screens. But Felder manages to recreate a thoroughly researched and compelling narrative from what we know (and don't know) about his life. It's a circuitous journey

with numerous offshoots and tributaries which are anything but linear, but nonetheless have their own sense of coherence. It's what Felder describes as a theatrical impression – an evocation to give you an idea of what Beethoven may have been like. Felder has created and performed similar explorations/excavations with the likes of other musical geniuses: George Gershwin, Chopin, Leonard Bernstein, Franz Liszt, Irving Berlin, Tchaikovsky as well as a non-musical outlier — Abraham Lincoln.

Felder closes out the show with what he describes as an “audience encore” – an impromptu Q&A session with the audience where he (no longer in character) fields questions from the audience about Beethoven's life and legacy. It's a chance to see Hershey Felder, the man behind the mask, free-styling it. A few brave audience members hurl random questions at him and Felder takes them on, one by one, offering the audience a chance to go another layer deeper into the subject and ponder any unanswered questions. Felder fields the questions, demonstrating his complete mastery of the subject, what he knows and what perhaps remains a mystery. Felder ends the evening with a provocative preview of what will be the subject of his next one-man show, a composer who, as Felder claims, paints pictures with music – Claude Debussy. I don't know much about Debussy (or his music), but with Felder at the helm, it promises to be equally enthralling.

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