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An Evening of Folk Transformation and Elgar

by JULIE INGELFINGER



Perusing the program in anticipation of the first astronomical- summer concert at Shalin Liu, I wondered whether the selections might come across as contrived. Happily, that was not the case! From the first notes of the well-known Schubert Fantasie for four-hand piano to the last note of the Elgar Piano Quintet, the Piers Lane and Friends plan delighted.

If anyone wondered why the not-particularly-English Schubert Fantasie in F Minor (D940) was part of the vaunted “rich traditions of British music,” their doubt should have been dispelled by the fact that this work was extremely popular in Great Britain during Schubert’s brief lifetime and remains so. Lane and Michael Stephen Brown, executed it with panache, clearly focusing intent through its interconnected sections, from the initial lyrical F minor Allegro molto moderato, through the unexpectedly pensive yet brooding transition to F sharp minor in the Largo, thence to the spirited, tempo-driven Allegro vivace, and the reprise of the first section in the Finale with its impressive fugue. The delight of Lane and Brown as

they played this work, familiar to many in the audience, was contagious.

Next, a startling collection of folk adaptations as art songs delivered by Toronto-based soprano **Adrienne Pieczonka** with violinist Danbi Um for the first and Lane as collaborating pianist for the rest, spanned powerful topics of various provenance. First, Holst’s Four Songs for Violin and Voice offered churchly overtones, which Pieczonka presented with the chaste religiosity of the titles of each and their lyrics. Pieczonka’s lyrical and sweet voice captured the hall with the opening “Jesu Sweet;” then, in “My soul has nought but fire and ice,” she established a range both of emotion and depth. “I sing of a maiden” was coloratura, and “My leman is so true,” which connotes sweetheart or lover being perhaps the opposite seemed fetching.

The English folksong, “The trees they grow so high” inspired Britten (as it has many others including Vaughan Williams, contemporary folk singers and bands) to craft an evocative piece based on the tale of an arranged marriage of a woman to the young son of a powerful lord, in which one can

almost see the boy becoming a youth and then a father, but tragically dying in his late teens. In this version, within four brief sections, the story unfolds—first, with unaccompanied voice, nostalgically evoking young innocence. Pieczonka’s tones wafted dulcet and nostalgic; then two sections with piano described the child growing into a youth, a husband and father before the complexities of life arrived; early death ensued in the solo voice of the widow’s solitude.

In Vaughan Williams’s, “Silent Noon from the House of Life, the voice becomes more profound. Here, Pieczonka’s phrasing and lyricism prevailed. Next, a song by Rebecca Clarke, the Seal Man, (written in 1922), set to a John Masefield poem embodied the powerful draw of tales of selkies and their recurrent metamorphoses from sea creature to human with consequent mystery and tragedy. The piano imparted urgency and doom, while Pieczonka’s clear soprano embodied enchantment, fear, impulsivity and obsessive love. The set concluded with cheerfulness with “I have a bonnet trimmed with blue,” by the late Herbert Hughes. In all, this span of these songs provided a virtuosic opportunity for a duo suited to it.

Violinists Danbi Um and Aaron Boyd, violist Barry Shiffman and cellist Nicholas Canellakis joined pianist **Piers Lane** to entrance the audience with an admirable performance of Elgar’s vaunted Piano Quintet in A Minor (1918-19T). This gem of English chamber music conjures dark forms, wistfulness yet moments of exuberance. The initial Moderato-Allegro was led off by the strong chords in the piano and the Gregorian chant-like initial melodies in the upper strings and then the cello line, aptly played by Canellakis. All performers helped create the ghostly mood that Elgar himself described. They transmogrified it with Elgar’s juxtaposition of a march before imparting strains that seemingly include hints of Spain, and later, a Viennese cafe, interspersed with otherworldly essence. The gorgeous Adagio second movement seems more British, with nostalgia and wistfulness, supported by the strings, particularly Shiffman’s masterful viola. And then Um and Boyd swept through with the expressive yet entwining melody that set the emotional for the bedrock of whole piece. The final Andante — Allegro starts slowly with ghostly sounds before spiriting abruptly into more joyous sounds, with driving, rapid triple meter, and then to a lovely waltz for the two violins, and finally with a triumphant coda. Throughout, the pianist has huge responsibility, as it is a heavy part—with reverberant, thrashing transport; Lane delivered with symphonic gravitas. In all, a huge but satisfying aural feast.

The audience left happily sated. Lane told us that he was greatly satisfied to be playing the Hamburg Steinway D that he had co-recommended for the Shalin Liu, and that it had turned out to be just the right choice. Clearly the audience agreed.

Julie Ingelfinger, a classically trained pianist who studied at the Hartt School of Music, Aspen Music Festival and School and at Harvard, enjoys her day jobs as professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, pediatric nephrologist at Mass General Brigham for Children and deputy editor at the New England Journal of Medicine.

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For us, this concert was a WOW! The Elgar Piano Quintet, a work we were both unfamiliar with, just completely blew us away. I don't believe a better group of performers could have been assembled for this masterpiece. The musicians played as one, completely in sync with one another and the music itself, and the overall effect was transporting in the extreme. For me, this music registered as music of loss and mourning while tempered with hope as well. It's not the least bit surprising it was written in 1918-1919 at the end of World War I, and the emotions the music and the performers successfully conveyed were profoundly affecting. I walked out of the concert deeply moved. Kudos to all the musicians for a towering performance that so profoundly honored this masterpiece.

Overall this was a tremendous concert.

The Schubert Fantasie in F-minor was lovingly performed and quite enjoyable. Whatever quibbles I might have had about the restraint Piers Lane sometimes exhibited when the music may have called for more in the moment (to my ears), at all the right times he wholeheartedly dove in when the music needed it. The overall impact was strong. Michael Stephen Brown was an exceptional partner, and he greatly impressing me with the broad, sturdy, and rich foundation he built in the lower two-hands of the performance that reminded me of Martha Argerich.

And the British songs were so wonderfully sung by Canadian soprano Adrienne Pieczonka. All I could think (while enjoying her lovely performances) was, how is it that I've never heard of her before? She was WONDERFUL. I especially loved the Vaughan Williams selection, which for me was the highlight of her vocal performances Sunday afternoon/evening.

Generally speaking, the standards at the Rockport Chamber Music Festival are high. This concert exceeded them. It was exceptionally programmed, incredibly well-performed, and a joy to listen to. We left elated. Kudos to everyone involved – this was music-making of the highest order. Thank you!!!

Comment by Mogulmeister — June 23, 2026 at 6:17 am

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