

The Dennis & Philip Ratner Museum

Washington Musica Viva

July 14, 2009

Former child prodigy pianist Carl Banner enjoys his music, just as Ecuadorean economist Jaime S. Porras enjoyed his numbers. Banner was soloist with the St. Louis Symphony when he was 14, playing a Schumann piano concerto. Porras had a distinguished career in Ecuador before coming to Washington in 1964 to join the staff of the International Monetary Fund, where he found a wife among the members of the IMF legal staff.

Porras certainly knew the recipe for keeping a mid-life marriage happy. Every month, on the 7th (the anniversary of their marriage), Porras and his wife did something special to “celebrate” their marriage. These happy events went on for more than 30 years, and last night Rose Porras was on hand for Washington Musica Viva’s Memorial Concert for Jaime S. Porras. Rose Porras spoke eloquently and emotionally at the beginning of the concert about her happiness with Jaime Porras, and then the music started in a room full of Porras friends.

Carl Banner has a special affection for the piano music of Brahms. Last July, Washington Musica Viva presented as the Banner Arts Trio piano trios by Brahms and Faure, in addition to a “suspicious” work by Beethoven. Last night, the fare was even meatier, with famous piano quintets by both Dvorak and Brahms. The evening continued the theme of marriage celebration when Banner announced that cellist David Cho and violinist Judith Cho had gotten married the previous Saturday.

If the Dvorak was perhaps a bit looser than it ideally should have been, in a space where the sound inevitably rises through the large hole overhead into the empty spaces of the second floor gallery, it was a jubilant evening for the audience positioned around three sides of the room. Both the Brahms and the Dvorak quintets are well known, and members of the audience were sometimes moving in tandem with the music, though one person in the audience who was chewing gum ignored all musical rhythms and continued undaunted at her own determined speed.

Carl Banner’s program notes were helpful, but works such as these make their own magic. The Brahms quintet, originally a relatively early work of 1862 that morphed from string quintet to piano sonata to piano quintet as Brahms explored tonal possibilities, seemed the summation of a life. Deeply inward, contemplative, jaunty without being naively optimistic, the piece was an ideal tribute to the life of Jaime S. Porras.

As other musical organizations struggle to stay afloat in a time of financial stringency, the model of a memorial concert offers considerable promise for smaller groups that might attract an audience of 150 or fewer in a secondary space. An eager audience is assured, and the sponsor or patron for such a concert can enjoy helping to select the music and welcome the audience.

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