

**The Oregonian**

## **Watts' change-up opens Chopin's power**

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Great programming can be as important in a concert as great playing. As pianist Andre Watts demonstrated Sunday evening at the Newmark Theater, where he appeared courtesy of Portland Piano International, neither is necessarily settled before the concert begins.

It looked promising enough on paper: The first half was to feature two Domenico Scarlatti sonatas, two Mozart rondos and three short pieces by Franz Schubert, all examples of simple, strict forms with musical ideas that sound anything but. The second half was to be all Chopin -- a Nocturne, two Ballades and a half-dozen Etudes, representing a vaguely similar meeting of expression and form.

Watts' touch was delicate and austere to begin with, but also stiff, which was apparent in the ornaments of the first Scarlatti (L.187), the repeated-note figures in the second (L.422) and the runs in the Mozart D Major Rondo. But in the A Minor Rondo, the stiffness vanished; his touch was finely calibrated, from lyrical and legato to growling and percussive in portions of the Schubert, and one had the sense that the night was truly under way.

Then, after intermission, Watts sat down at the piano bench, turned to the audience and asked, "You know that bit at the bottom of the page where it says, 'program subject to change'?" He was changing the second half, he announced, to include pieces by Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy, Franz Liszt and finally Chopin. It may have been disappointing to listeners with their hearts set on Chopin, but it turned out to be ingenious.

The program was still about Chopin; if anything, the revision made it even more so. If the first half approached Chopin by way of his predecessors, the second half went at him from the other direction, through such pieces as Ravel's "Oiseaux tristes" ("Sad Birds") and Liszt's "La lugubre gondola" ("The lugubrious gondola"), binding two centuries of music with a thread of poetry tinged with mystery and melancholy. (Watts explained that Liszt's "gondola" was inspired by a dream of a funeral gondola carrying his son-in-law Richard Wagner, and that Wagner, who had been ill, died in Venice three weeks later. Creepy.)

When Watts finally homed in on Chopin -- in the wistful Nocturne in C Minor, Op. 27, No. 1, three of the Etudes and one of the Ballades -- he gave a sense of the French-Polish composer, one of the transformative geniuses of piano writing, as a perfect combination of classical clarity and the soulful poetic expression of Romanticism.

In a performance that was as satisfying intellectually as it was emotionally, the pianist made the case for himself as well.