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Cartier Connoisseur Soiree



**Las Vegas Philharmonic Pianist
Barbara Riske with Eric Ruske on
French Horn.**

Bowing before the eager audience with his French horn, Eric Ruske announced that he and pianist Barbara Riske would start the evening's performance with an extra piece that wasn't on the program's list of four selections. I like this guy already!

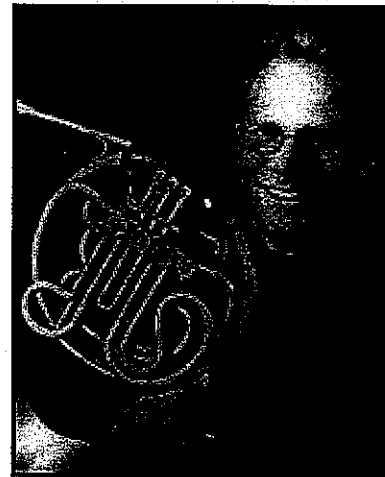
The third of four "Soirée" performances this year, sponsored by Cartier and presented by the Las Vegas Philharmonic, took place in the gracious home of Rich and Claire MacDonald. Located on a hill above the city, the house offered spectacular views of the area from Henderson out to - oh, approximately Reno. The foyer's lush garden setting provided a lovely backdrop for the musicians and a convenient place for Eric to deposit the moisture that builds up in the horn and must be drained occasionally by removing two of the curved brass tubes. Hey, it goes with the territory, but Eric handled it with grace and humor: "This is why you don't invite a horn player into your home."

Actually, I already liked the guy after attending the master's class he conducted the previous day at the Las Vegas Academy, our city's wonderful training ground for up-and-coming musicians.

Eric has been on the faculty at Boston University for twelve years and is instantly recognizable as a natural teacher. (Raised in Illinois, he must have been kicked out of the

Midwest for talking too fast.) Emitting more energy than Hoover Dam, he was surprisingly demanding of these horn students he had never met, but he knew exactly how to critique them and improve their already excellent playing in a very brief time. His self-effacing manner and machine-gun laugh kept the mood light. I quickly decided that I would love to have been one of his students but not one of his parents.

So, what was this first "freebie" piece? 'Air and Variations in E Major' is a melodic set of variations on a theme, written by George Frideric Handel. Nicknamed 'The Harmonious Blacksmith' by others after Handel's death, this composition features very difficult "jumps" between low and high notes on the horn. French horn is a high-risk instrument: a fairly large horn with a small mouthpiece, it requires a very tight embouchure (mouth positioning). It is easy for the player to "crack" a note, and if he does, the mistake is very obvious. Eric leapt gracefully from one note to another, maintaining the horn's wonderfully rich tone even when skipping quickly through eighth-note triplets. Not for nothing is he called one of the best in the world.



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart is famous for (among other things) his four horn concertos, but tonight we were treated to the second and third movements from Mozart's 'Violin Sonata in B-flat Major', with the violin part transcribed for horn. It was different from Mozart's horn compositions, with its long, calm notes and long interludes of solo piano. Barbara Riske, the Las Vegas Philharmonic's own keyboardist, complemented Eric's playing beautifully. Like Eric, the Canada native has performed all over the world and is a university faculty member (UNLV, in Barbara's case). That's a great thing about these world-class artists: they don't just share their gifts with us, but they also pass them on to new musicians. Eric had stressed to the Las Vegas students the importance of taking deep breaths to create a robust sound and avoid having to breathe again in the middle of a phrase. In this Mozart sonata, some of the violin phrases were so long that even Eric had to work hard playing them on a single breath.

Now, we're normally not supposed to applaud between movements, but in this intimate venue, things felt different. After completing the initial section, Eric accepted our applause graciously and even answered a question from the audience before announcing with a grin, "And there's one more movement - yay!" What could we do? He was standing there draining his horn into a planter box! No wonder the Las Vegas Philharmonic and decent orchestras everywhere put the horns in the back. Right then, I think artist and audience tacitly agreed not to be the least bit offended by each other's actions. Besides, anyone who can say the word "Yay!" in such an elegant setting is all right in my book.

Robert Schumann's 'Fantasy Pieces, Op. 73' was originally written for cello, an instrument that to me always sounds rather somber. Eric played the soft, slurred notes with amazing finesse, and Barbara's piano part was often the more "active" of the two. Written in a major key, this pretty piece was somewhat "Mozartian" but more grey, with many accidentals and complex chords. It sounded as if it had been written by a rather depressed composer who was trying to emulate the vivacious Mozart. Indeed, as Eric told us, Schumann wrote it during a period of frenetic activity and declining mental health. "He was losing his mind, but he was very busy."

I said it about The Ahn Trio, and I'll say it again: don't you just hate prodigies? Richard Strauss wrote his 'Nocturne for Horn and Piano' at age eighteen, as a gift for his father, the

great horn player Franz Strauss. At that age, I think I gave my dad a model airplane. This piece featured flowing piano that meandered through major chord progressions and resolved beautifully to the main key. The long horn notes were very serene, and the piece ended with a very low and surprisingly soft "A flat." In the master's class, Eric had demonstrated that low notes are much easier to play when you blast them like a foghorn (which looked like great fun, I might add). This ending took great skill - and, uh, a lot of self-control.

Vittorio Monti is one of approximately two million composers who seem to have written music based on Hungarian folk dances. His signature piece, 'Czardas', consists of a slow gypsy dance and a faster peasant dance and reminded me of the Bela Bartok piece played recently by the visiting Hungarian National Philharmonic. The music started slow, somber, and rather Russian, with frequent tempo changes that must have made for difficult dancing. Eric got to play a few very loud notes and did it with stunning clarity. Someone had jokingly asked Mr. and Mrs. MacDonald earlier why they hadn't removed the huge windows at the back of the room before the performance. "Haven't you heard about Eric?" Soon the tempo sped up dramatically, and with a rollicking piano setting the foundation, Eric pelted us with streams of lively sixteenth notes, playing so fast that I thought surely he would crack one, but each was perfect. What a dance! How does a person go about becoming Hungarian?

After many well-deserved bows and a final draining (yes, of the horn!), Eric and Barbara mingled with the joyous crowd and received more huzzahs. I have a serious sweet tooth, but the conversations were so enjoyable that after the wonderful desserts and coffee were served near the kitchen, it took me half an hour to get across the room to them. At this Soirée I burned more calories visiting, laughing, listening, and tapping my toes than I took in from all the sweets. Now that's a diet I can live with. - By Robert LaGrone, Las Vegas Entertainment Editor. Visit The Las Vegas Philharmonic; you may win the Jaguar car raffle!

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2003

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