

Review: Fazioli International series at Auckland Museum

4:00AM Monday May 11, 2009

By [William Dart](#)

How fitting, in Haydn's celebratory year, that Emmanuel Despax should launch the second of the Auckland Museum's Fazioli International Piano Recital series with the composer's B minor Sonata.

This work from the mid-1770s is the sort of sleekly-contoured challenge that might have been created with pianists like Despax in mind. After an Allegro that astonished with the finesse of its textural play and piquant touches of rubato, Haydn's Minuet was cast as a surrogate slowish movement, pensive and poised, a taking of breath before the rush of its Finale.

Despax's individual voice as a Chopin man could be heard in the composer's Berceuse, as the Frenchman traced cool part-playing, quicksilver runs and floating chords over the piece's mantra-like harmonic loop.

Chopin's Barcarolle might well have been set on Venetian waters, with its volatile shifts from major to minor, while a superbly laid-out F minor Ballade gave us our first taste of the virtuoso style that would dominate the second half of the evening.

We do not hear Prokofiev often in recital, and so the Russian's Fourth Sonata was particularly welcome. Toughness is tempered with resilience here, and tension was palpable in the measured precision of Despax's opening bars as well as through all subsequent bursts of fire. The Andante assai was illuminated by magical pedalling, and the closing movement achieved the miracle of creating torrents of fiercely brilliant sound without drawing a single harsh tone from the museum instrument.

Liszt's Dante Sonata is as ambitious philosophically as it is musically, as the composer wrestles with Dante's (and his own) demons. Despax brought this struggle to full theatrical life, with octaves firing from both hands and shimmering tremolos that evoked orchestral hues.

When it was time for encores, many in the audience may have been wondering just how he could top the brilliance already dispensed. Wisely, Despax did not try.

The hushed understatement of The Poet Speaks from Schumann's Kinderszenen gave us time to reflect on just how much poetry had already been meted out to us, and how grateful we should be to the museum for providing venue, artist and this opportunity for our enrichment.

