



MUSIC IN THE AFTERNOON

Women's Musical Club of Toronto

Campbell Fagan Park Trio's WMCT Season Opener A Total Delight

Joseph So

Finzi: Music from: 5 Bagatelles, op. 23 / Vaughan Williams: Six Studies in English Folk Song / Debussy: L'Isle Joyeuse / Schubert: Shepherd on the Rock / Srul Irving Glick: Images at nightfall: Georgian Bay / de Falla: Seven Spanish Popular Songs / Ravel: Pièce en forme de habanera / Bassi: Concert Fantasia on Motives from "Rigoletto" James Campbell, clarinet; "Quando m'en vo," from La Boheme; "Les oiseaux dans la charmille" from Les contes d'Hoffmann; Encore: Newfoundland Folksong "She's Like the Swallow." Leslie Fagan, soprano; Angela Park, piano. Walter Hall, University of Toronto, October 3, 2024.

In good old TO, the autumn season brings cooler weather, the start of school, and the beginning of a new music season. For audiences of the venerable Women's Musical Club of Toronto, this means the start of its 127th season.

Yes, you read it right. For 126 years, WMCT has been nourishing the hearts and souls of its audience with beautiful music, unquestionably the oldest uninterrupted concert presenter in Canada, and perhaps even in North America.

Their programs are typically a mix of chamber works and solos pieces for instrument or the voice. This season opener featured three outstanding Canadians – clarinetist James Campbell, soprano Leslie Fagan, and pianist Angela Park, in a mixed program of familiar works and less known pieces.

WMCT has always enjoyed a loyal audience. From my experience of attending their concerts, the 490-seat Walter Hall was almost always full. It came as a surprise that attendance this time around was unusually sparse. Scheduling it during Rosh Hashanah was partly responsible, plus an unfortunate mix-up resulting in the absence of the young people from the Student Outreach Program.

If I may permit myself a bit of speculation: the drop in attendance also reflects the aging demographics of the classical music audience. A sure sign was the announcement that for those WMCT members requiring assistance, their caregivers will be admitted free. More reason that we need to encourage the younger generation to discover the joy of classical music. To that end, I really applaud the WMCT's Student Outreach Program initiative.

On a more positive note, those who were there were treated to a delectable and generous program, of Finzi, Vaughan Williams, Debussy, Schubert, de Falla, Ravel, and a less familiar name, the Italian composer Luigi Bassi. Canadian content was provided by a wonderfully evocative piece, Images at nightfall: Georgian Bay, by Srul Irving Glick.



Kicking off the proceedings was the **Five Bagatelles** by Finzi, for the clarinet and piano, paired with Vaughan Williams's **Six Studies for English Folk Songs**. These gorgeous pieces are folk song inspired, melodic and evocative, beautifully played by Campbell on the clarinet and Park on the piano. Oddly, only five of the six Vaughan Williams studies were performed, omitting No. 5 *Andante tranquillo*.

Next came the only piano solo of the afternoon, **L'Isle Joyeuse** by Debussy, a lovely and whimsical work, brimming with energy, expertly interpreted by Angela Park. It was followed by Schubert's justly famous **Shepherd on the Rock**, featuring the third member of the Trio, soprano Leslie Fagan. She told the audience how emotional this homecoming was for her, as she has fond memories studying at U of T Faculty of Music, with Irene Jessner, Lois Marshall and Greta Kraus, three legendary names in Canadian music.

Given that Fagan's musical journey goes back to the Forrester/Marshall/Jessner/Kraus era, it's amazing how youthful her tone has remained, a light, lyric timbre without any sign of the passage of time. Her Schubert was lovely, but to my ears, she was at her best in de Falla's **Seven Spanish Popular Songs**, and especially the opera arias.

She started off with "Quando m'en vo," with her endearing stage persona front and centre. She combined purity of tone with an unbridled joy of music making. In the high B-natural at the end, she even did a lovely if daring diminuendo. Also terrific was "Les oiseaux dans la charmille," better known as the Olympia's Doll Song. Fagan pulled out all the stops, with a perfect trill, plus the requisite sight gags of the Doll running out of gas – figuratively speaking that is – only to have Campbell coming on to wind her up. The only thing missing was the mechanical sound effect!

It couldn't have been easy to share the stage with such a flamboyant diva, but Campbell held his own, giving the audience exquisite clarinet playing in Srul Irving Glick's tone poem, **Images at Nightfall: Georgian Bay**, a piece commissioned by the Festival of the Sound and dedicated to James Campbell. Incidentally, I loved the uncredited paintings projected in the background during.

The very generous formal program ended with Luigi Bassi's **Fantasia da concerto Rigoletto**, for clarinet and piano. A very familiar tune to opera fans to be sure, plus added instrumental flourishes by Bassi, here executed marvellously by Campbell. The audience responded with warm applause, and they were rewarded with an encore! Unannounced, but thanks to the excellent diction of Fagan, I was able to decipher the words, and it turned out to be the Newfoundland folksong, "She's like a Swallow."

A lovely season opener, and I look forward to more!