

Academic Music

VIRGINIA ESKIN AND OTHER GREAT LADIES

American pianist and musical emissary Virginia Eskin performed in St. Petersburg. Possessing extraordinary virtuosity and limitless energy, Virginia Eskin charmed a sophisticated Petersburg public. The concert, which took place in an ancient elegant hall on Little Stables, transported the audience into salons in 19th Century Philadelphia, Atlanta, or Boston. Virginia would have naturally blended into the company of pleasant American ladies, who volunteered to help their fighting husbands or brothers¹ and enjoyed beautiful works by European composers. Virginia Eskin is an absolute master of her craft. She has excellent technique and divine sound; but there is also something subtle in her style and in her stage presence that is reminiscent of the fresh playfulness of youth.

In the first act, Virginia expertly and engagingly played waltzes by Chopin and Liszt. But without a doubt, the highlight was her performance of the Waltz and Ballads of the American pianist and composer Amy Marcy Cheney Beach. This woman, unknown in Russia, was born in the middle of the 19th century and lived until the middle of the 20th. It was Beach who came to mind as Virginia played: a pretty American young lady from a bourgeois family, who composed charming melodies, and who became one of the first American women professionally engaged in music.

For our American guest, the choice of works by Amy Beach was not coincidental. Virginia Eskin is known for her research on women composers. Virginia is not a feminist, but she certainly wants the world to become acquainted with female American composers. It is quite appropriate, then, that the concert contained a reference to the creativity of another representative of the U.S. musical world: Judith Zaymont.

Our contemporary, Zaymont positioned herself as the author of dramatic, emotive, and bright compositions. A winner of the A. Copeland award, Judith Zaymont works in various genres, but Virginia Eskin chose Zaymont's work in the ragtime style and played it with extraordinary expression and spark.

Ragtime, a lively American genre, became the core of the second act. Virginia managed to captivate the St. Petersburg audience with these fiery pieces. The pianist was able to evoke a comfortable world of American towns and uncomplicated entertainment, a world that is retreating in the face of modern technology.

As is customary in salon music, Virginia revealed to St. Petersburg a musical surprise: she learned and played fragments of the piano suite "Fables of the Hen," the work of young St. Petersburg composer Vasily Shishkin. Virginia performed this music elegantly, with humor and easy irony, securing a warm reception from the audience. The audience did not release the pianist for a long time; the encores were everlasting. Then, Virginia endlessly posed for photographs with the ladies in the audience, completing a lovely picture of the past.

¹ Specifically, by pulling thread from clothing to make bandages.

The St. Petersburg audience was evidently delighted to partake in the retro atmosphere, and will long remember this evening, organized by the Heritage Charitable Foundation and the Peter the Great Academy of Music.

Ludmila Modina