

## Raim-Wehr Piano Duo With Percussionists Andrew Reamer and Edward Stephan

By Michael Huebner

Béla Bartók's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion was featured on Tuesday's Birmingham Chamber Music Society concert. Milhaud, Schumann, Rachmaninoff, Bartók given powerful readings on Birmingham Chamber Music Society concert.

Music for two pianos, however rare in live performance, has yielded a wealth of repertoire that can sometimes eclipse composers' finest symphonic works. Whether written specifically for the combination, arranged by later scribes or composed prior to an orchestral version, the genre has intrigued composers from Mozart to Milhaud anxious to take advantage of the expanded palette.

Performers have included Ashkenazy and Previn, Gaby and Robert Casadesus, and Quattro Mani, the duo that performed Paul Lansky's "Shapeshifters" at the Alabama Symphony's Carnegie Hall debut in 2013.

On a rainy Tuesday night, as classes and other functions were being cancelling because of the weather forecast, a small but devoted Birmingham Chamber Music Society crowd bravely gathered at Brock Recital Hall to hear the piano duo of Cynthia Raim and David Allen Wehr. Along with Milhaud, Schumann and Rachmaninoff, they offered a 20th century monument, Bartók's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion.

Darius Milhaud's "Scaramouche" Suite, more popularly known in its cabaret version for saxophone and orchestral, was originally composed for two pianos. The duo tapped into its raucous Brazilian rhythms, gently rocking lyricism, and the exhilarating samba of its finale, titled "Brazil-eira." Versions of this work for larger ensembles seem almost tame compared to the original, at least as rendered here.

Six études by Robert Schumann brought adrenaline levels back to normal. Each represents Schumann's introspective style – his "soul-searching Eusebius" as Wehr explained in his verbal program notes. Composed for the short-lived pedal piano, an instrument with pitched foot



pedals, they were arranged for two pianos by Claude Debussy. Raim and Wehr focused on their long, arching melodies and gentle countenance, playing off one another in fluid, connected phrases.

Sergei Rachmaninoff took a grander approach for his Suite No. 2 for

Two Pianos, Op. 17. Thick orchestral textures and percussive flourishes dominated as the composer seemed determine to channel all 176 keys. March rhythms in the opening movement formed the backdrop for melodies that might be found in the composer's orchestral repertoire. A quick waltz, slow Romance and energetic Tarantella followed, each demanding focused ensemble and expression from the performers. Raim and Wehr excelled beyond expectation.

Béla Bartók composed the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion in 1937, when sound experimentation was beginning to reach its peak. Like the Milhaud, the work also exists in an orchestral version, but judging from this reading, there is no substitute for the original.

Pittsburgh Symphony percussionists Andrew Reamer and Edward Stephan set up seven instruments (timpani, bass and snare drums, cymbals, triangle, tam-tam, xylophone) behind the pianos, as the composer specified. Precision, clarity and energy were the hallmarks of the performance, coupled with moments of atmospheric intrigue.

Pianos became pitched percussion instruments as the four musicians played seamlessly, making perfect sense of Bartók's sonic excursions. The combination of thunderous force, lyrical lines, humor and rhythmic drive was engaging, at times intoxicating.

