



Russian Renaissance

Ivan Kuznetsov / *Balalaika*

Alexander Tarasov / *Button Accordion*

Ivan Vinogradov / *Contrabass Balalaika*

Anastasia Zakharova / *Domra and Domra Alto*

Saturday Evening, January 27, 2018 at 8:00

Rackham Auditorium

Ann Arbor

M-Prize is an international chamber arts competition based in Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance which aims to:

- Identify and showcase the highest caliber of international chamber arts ensembles;
- Provide a professional performance and adjudication platform for the chamber arts;
- Help launch and advance the careers of chamber ensembles through prizes and professional development opportunities;
- Evolve the breadth and depth of the chamber arts landscape and associated professional opportunities for exceptional ensembles.

The next competition will be held May 4–6, 2018.

This evening's performance is supported by the Helmut F. and Candis J. Stern Endowment Fund, which supports an annual UMS Chamber Arts Performance.

Media partnership provided WGTE 91.3 FM.

UMS is proud to partner with M-Prize to present the grand prize winner of its annual competition. Russian Renaissance is the second M-Prize grand prize winner, an honor which was awarded in May 2017 in Hill Auditorium.

Special thanks to Matt Albert; Eugene Bondarenko; Elena Fort; Heather Kendrick; Aleks Marciniak; Natalie McCauley; Marysia Ostafin; the Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies; the Center for World Performance Studies; and the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia for their participation in events surrounding this evening's performance.

In consideration of the artists and the audience, please refrain from the use of electronic devices during the performance.

The photography, sound recording, or videotaping of this performance is prohibited.

PROGRAM

This evening's program will be performed without intermission. The program will be announced by the artists from the stage and will include selections from the following:

Johann Sebastian Bach, Arr. Franz Liszt
Fantasia and Fugue in g minor, BWV 542

Alfred Schnittke
Concerto Grosso No. 1 (excerpt)
Rondo

Ryuichi Sakamoto
Bibo no Aozora

Richard Galliano
New York Tango

Russian Renaissance
Vanya

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Swan Lake (excerpt)
Russian Dance

Edward Artemiev
Postlude

Astor Piazzolla
La muerte del ángel

Vittorio Monti
Czardas

Richard Galliano
Spleen

Django Reinhardt
Rhythm Futur

Duke Ellington
Caravan

Russian Folk Song
Barinya

MAKING THE CASE FOR CHAMBER MUSIC

by Doyle Armbrust

The Winter Olympics are just around the corner, and although I'm not generally a sports guy, nothing comes between me and my Olympics. It's the ultimate audition. A competitor has spent years training for a moment that often lasts mere minutes, and most of us can't help but weep along with them, whether in devastating disappointment or unbridled joy. There's also something so tidy about it all. We can say with utter certainty that this person was faster or more nimble or more cunning than that person.

Also, who doesn't love that some of these events seem to be based — like playing the french horn — on a dare. Looking at you, luge.

Music competitions are, for the most part, the opposite. There's no real possibility for objectivity; a more dramatic or technically challenging piece will often win out between near-equally talented competitors, and, well, what exactly is our basis for comparison? If that weren't complicated enough, the University of Michigan's M-Prize pits ensembles of wildly different approaches and styles against each other in its grand prize round. Here is where our story begins.

For the second annual M-Prize competition, U-M director of chamber music Matt Albert went to bat for a new component with which to select the winner. Ensembles in the final round would now have to run the gauntlet of an interview, during which they'd be compelled to make the case for why they chose the music they were playing. I can't even begin to tell you what a game-changer this is. We live in

an era that enjoys the largest number of top-level performers and groups that has ever existed in history. So if the market doesn't need 50 string quartets that are all playing the same circuit of Beethoven/Schubert/Mendelssohn/etc., how do we make room for them all? By specializing, and by offering more to the public than just polished performances.

This element of the M-Prize compels judges to consider why a group is excellent in the (essential) context of their place in society. I know it sounds high-minded, but it's true. It's not enough to just play well anymore. There aren't enough series like UMS to sustain the glut. So why does this particular ensemble *need* to exist?

I'm not surprised that Matt is behind this. We've been friends and colleagues for a good many years, and he is always in search of what's next for classical music. We were both exiting rehearsal rooms when we connected by phone to unpack this new development for M-Prize.

Matt Albert: I just stepped out of a coaching. I was listening to a group playing Jacob TV's *The Body of Your Dreams*.

Doyle Armbrust: So you just jump right in with the fact that the chamber music program at U-M is light years beyond the rest of the country.

MA: [Laughs] It's a pretty good juxtaposition to go from that to this conversation.

DA: Yeah. Well, with the M-Prize being so new, it was fascinating to me that you all were pivoting after just one year to adding the interview portion of the competition. Can you set the stage for me as to how this came about?

MA: After the first year of M-Prize — I wasn't yet at U-M, but I observed. There was a huge conversation amongst the judges, administrators, the press, and even the public. In a final round that had a string quartet, a piano-percussion quartet, and a saxophone quartet...how do you grade value? How do you adjudicate? How do you say someone is better than someone else? I heard a lot of people theorizing, "Oh this repertoire was better," or, "This group played more variety," or, "This group championed new music."

I asked myself, "Does M-Prize want to promote a certain way of performing, or does M-Prize want to reward those that have an opinion about the way they present?" I approached the steering committee and said, "I don't think we should say what is good. We should ask the performers to tell us why they believe what they are doing is good." We decided to add the interview component in the grand prize round, and let competitors tell us what is important to them.

DA: In that interview, how much of it is about the players as a group, as opposed to the particular program they've chosen for the competition?

MA: Most of it is about them as a group. We asked them to talk about their program and how it represented

who they are. Russian Renaissance's story was about their wide-ranging approach to celebrating Russian folk instruments through multiple genres. Everything from Russian folk music through the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and everything in between. The Argus Quartet talked about wanting to present old and new music in a 50/50 split. And the Donald Sinta Quartet talked about wanting a sax quartet to be understood as the flexible, rich chamber music tradition that it is.

DA: So that makes the groups be more explicit about why they've made the programming choices they've made. How does that help the judges choose between a sax quartet and a string quartet, for instance?

MA: What it allows the judges to do is assess how each group is achieving what they say they're trying to achieve — are they connecting with us as listeners while furthering their mission?

We hire judges for who they are — for their bias. We want them to apply their bias and their experience in listening to these competitors. And with 15 judges in the grand prize round, these opinions will balance each other out.

DA: So is part of your selection of judges focused on people who are excellent at their particular flavor of music, but also those who have a wider appetite for different types of music?

MA: We look for artistic excellence in judges, first and foremost. That could be in depth, or in breadth. What I think we are really good at, and what I think my main job is — I don't vote or even

see the early rounds — is to frame the questions for the judges. How, by listening with open ears, and listening to their fellow judges...they can use the same standards of excellence that they've always used. It's hard to describe, but that's where I hope I can make the biggest difference — the way that we allow judges to speak to one another and the way we frame the competition for them.

DA: The first place my mind went, when I heard about the addition of this interview round, is that in asking these groups to present their missions, it will inherently make them take stock of how and where they exist in the world of chamber music. It comes across as a beautifully under-handed way of gently nudging things in a certain direction. How overt was this?

MA: It was not overt. It was as simple as, "How do we get these groups to tell us what is important to them?" I was thinking that by asking groups to tell us, it would force them to consider what is important to them. And yes, my belief is that in thinking about this deeply, groups will go down a more productive path than if M-Prize had set an agenda. Another way of doing this would be to say, "You have to play a piece written after 1980," or "You have to play a piece by a woman composer," or, "You must play a piece by someone born in the southern hemisphere." What we want to do is see what the world of chamber music thinks is important.

Last year, there were only two composers represented that were no longer living — Josef Haydn and Duke Ellington. They were all male, so

there's a huge opportunity there for improvement. But two of the three groups played everything from memory without it being a requirement. I loved seeing those choices.

DA: It's more about thoughtfulness than an agenda.

MA: Yes, it's about thoughtfulness.

DA: One would hope that any amount of thoughtfulness would make one consider the larger implications of one's own programming.

MA: I think it did with these groups.

DA: Are you aware of any other competitions that have a similar interview-focused round?

MA: I know that 21CM at DePauw has all the competitors interview right after they perform, on stage. Other than that, I'm not aware of any.

DA: There are a lot of eyes on M-Prize right now, and I hope that this encourages other competitions to find other ways to adjudicate beyond accuracy and panache.

MA: It seems as though M-Prize has the ability to measure a group, not just on how they play, but on their whole career. Not just them playing on stage. We've asked ourselves "What else can we adjudicate, what else can we ask them to do?" The thing we're doing this year — we're keeping the interview round — is that in the semi-finals, we're adding a Youth Engagement round.

DA: Fantastic!

MA: Yeah! In addition to them playing their 20-minute program, we're going to bus in some kids from local schools, and every group is going to give a five-minute presentation. The judges are going to watch to see what their impact is on a different audience, measuring what their career means beyond just playing in concert halls.

DA: I love it. To wrap things up, can you give me your impressions about what was exciting about the most recent grand prize winners, Russian Renaissance?

MA: They walked on stage for that final gala concert and they *owned* it. They showed who they are, and they took us on a 25-minute journey. There was humor. There was a *ton* of virtuosity. There was lots of heart. There was passion and belief and a huge dynamic range...all the things that I think make a dynamic, engaging performance. It was totally captivating, and I obviously wasn't the only one that thought so.

Doyle Armbrust is a Chicago-based violist and member of the Spektral Quartet. He is a contributing writer for WQXR's Q2 Music, Crain's Chicago Business, Chicago Magazine, Chicago Tribune, and formerly, Time Out Chicago.





ARTISTS

Russian Renaissance debuted in October 2015, performing with the world-renowned director Emir Kusturica (the two-time laureate of the Cannes Film Festival) and No Smoking Orchestra. The Ensemble has performed in the US, Japan, Europe, and Russia.

Russian Renaissance prides themselves in taking traditional folk music to the next level, modernizing the sound, and making it vibrant and enticing. They marry tradition and modernity, creating a fusion of styles and crossover, and search for new expressive techniques and genres that are not necessarily typical for Russian folk instruments in order to extend the repertoire. The Ensemble's performance of Richard Galliano's *Tango pour Claude* was an innovative arrangement and its performance was highly esteemed by the great jazz accordionist and composer.

Apart from their work in the Ensemble, all members have individual bustling solo careers performing with folk and symphonic orchestras, as well as jazz bands. The vast experience of each performer as an individual soloist allows the Ensemble to achieve an unrivaled level of mastery.

Russian Renaissance won first prize in the 69 World Cup in 2016 in Rostov-on-Don, Russia. Russian Renaissance is the second grand prize winner of the M-Prize chamber music competition, an honor which was awarded in May 2017 in Hill Auditorium.

UMS welcomes Russian Renaissance as the Ensemble makes its UMS debut this evening.

TONIGHT'S VICTOR FOR UMS:



Helmut F. and Candis J. Stern Endowment Fund

Supporter of this evening's performance by Russian Renaissance.

MAY WE ALSO RECOMMEND...

- 2/3 Estonian National Symphony Orchestra
- 2/17 *The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess*
- 3/11 Elias Quartet

Tickets available at www.ums.org.

ON THE EDUCATION HORIZON...

- 1/31 Master Class: Gabriel Kahane
(Stamps Auditorium, Walgreen Drama Center, 1226 Murfin Avenue,
4:30 pm)
- 2/3 Master Class: Ian Bostridge
(Britton Recital Hall, Moore Building, 1100 Baits Drive, 12:30 pm)
- 2/13 Artist Interview: Janai Brugger
(Watkins Lecture Hall, Moore Building, 1100 Baits Drive, 2:30 pm)

Educational events are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted.