

Piano, violin the perfect mix for a rollicking good time

By Ben Evans

Chronicle reviewer

The Muskegon Community Concert Association has a reputation for bringing premier musical acts to the lakeshore, and after Pianafiddle left the downtown Frauenthal Theater stage Friday night it was easy to see why.

The delightfully unconventional and immensely talented duo of violinist Adam DeGraff and pianist Lynn Wright filled the theater with rich, complex sounds sampled from nearly every musical genre.

At the outset of the show Wright playfully announced to the crowd that they could "rip up their programs" because the heart of Pianafiddle was their propensity to improvise and that they would almost certainly not stick to the set list. This was the case, and Pianafiddle proceeded to ad-lib their way through two hours of music, at one point even taking shouted requests from the audience.

Their improvisational ability brought energy to the show, and appropriately showcased the creativity and inventiveness of the duo. A piano and a violin riffing off each other like jazz musicians is a truly amazing and aurally stimulating spectacle.

The classically trained DeGraff was a technician. It seemed as if there was nothing he was incapable of playing. One moment he would be sawing his fiddle to a bluegrass melody and the next he would be elegantly stroking Baroque era classical.

One of the many highlights of the evening came near the conclusion of the first set when Wright and DeGraff experimented with the motive of a Tchaikovsky concerto. Over the course of 10 minutes, Pianafiddle was able to transition the piece from harrowing classical to poignant jazz.

Wright, once dubbed the "Reverend of Ragtime," was a master of versatility. He would evoke memories of Thelonius Monk one moment, and Scott Joplin the next. His ability to follow and recreate the intricate patterns of DeGraff's fiddle was impressive. Near the end of the evening, Wright played Beethoven's "Für Elise" melded with the standard "Orange Blossom Special" before turning both pieces on their heads and concluding with a bluegrass style crescendo.

The two musicians radiated enthusiasm and excitement. They engaged the crowd and urged them to participate and shout out if they felt compelled. It was clear the duo enjoyed playing with each other, as they hugged after nearly every piece.

It was inspiring to witness the fruits of these individuals' collaboration. They come from opposite ends of the musical spectrum, and before meeting, Wright played jazz and ragtime in bars and nightclubs, while DeGraff was playing Bach and Brahms in concert halls.

Fate brought them together, and for that we should all be thankful.

Ben Evans is the executive editor of www.foggedclarity.com.

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