

THEARTS

Pianist Markus Groh spellbinding

Alex Browne

Arts Reporter

It was a splendid demonstration of piano technique and style – marred only when an internationally-renowned guest artist was forced to lecture White Rock Concerts subscribers on audience etiquette.

Virtuoso German pianist Markus Groh interrupted his Jan. 27 concert early on, after a barrage of unsuppressed coughing destroyed his concentration during the first of four *Ballades by Brahms* – and threatened the enjoyment of most audience members at White Rock Baptist Church.

“This is a very delicate piece,” he explained quietly, in excellent English, wondering aloud whether the afflicted offenders might find somewhere else to indulge in such uncontrolled paroxysms.

After the brief lesson



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Browne's Tone

in manners (with which, to judge by spontaneous applause, many agreed) the pianist went on to give a lesson in artistry, submerging any temporary annoyance in a sublime oneness with music.

This is something for which Groh, winner of the 1995 Queen Elizabeth Competition in Brussels, has already won praise on two continents. It's a quality that goes beyond interpretation — like an actor, Groh seems to take on the personality of each composer, effectively

evoking and embodying each individual style.

And yet, more than simply being a musical chameleon, Groh manages to keep his own personality to the fore.

His spellbinding quality was apparent from the first measures of the opening piece, an addition to the program in honour of Mozart's 250th birthday.

His version of the charming little *Fantasia in D Minor* (K. 397) was as fresh as if it had just been invented, played with a subtlety that made the rests carry almost as much weight as the notes and sustains.

Groh brought the same sensitivity to his exploration of *Brahms Four Ballades, Op. 10* – after the false start – ably demonstrating the composer's apparently limitless capacity for developing, and revisiting, lyrical themes with increasing complexity.

Two etudes by 20th century composer Georgy Ligeti showcased complexity of a different kind. *No. 4 Fanfares* demonstrated the

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composer's fascination with mathematics (at times sounding like a random note generator – or video game – run amok) but Groh was unflinching in the necessary one-hand ostinato (a 3-2-3 pattern in 8, as he explained it). More comfortable to listen to was the suitably dreamy and airy *No. 5 Arc-en-ciel* in which Groh, ever the servant of the composer's intentions, managed the required loose rhythmic feel.

It's not hard to read a commentary on his times into Sergey Prokofiev's *War Sonatas* and the *No. 7 in B-flat, Op. 83*, and in Groh's commanding hands it painted a clear sound portrait of mechanized destruction (the *Allegro inquieto*) contrasted with the sentimental

decadence of pre-war salons and cabarets (a finely-phrased *Andante caloroso*).

The desperate, insistent and dissonant *Precipitato* finale was yet another demonstration of Groh's understanding of musical intentions – an intense and supremely challenging workout in which Groh never let go of rhythmic drive and inherent sense of syncopation.

The second half of the concert was given over entirely to Franz Liszt's *Sonata in B Minor*. Again, Groh was able to evoke the personality of a composer, capturing with impassioned intensity all the fantasy, pride, egotism and magnetism inherent in Liszt's ever-evolving themes.

In all, the concert was a brilliant, virtuosic display of flawless technique allied with exceptional sensitivity.