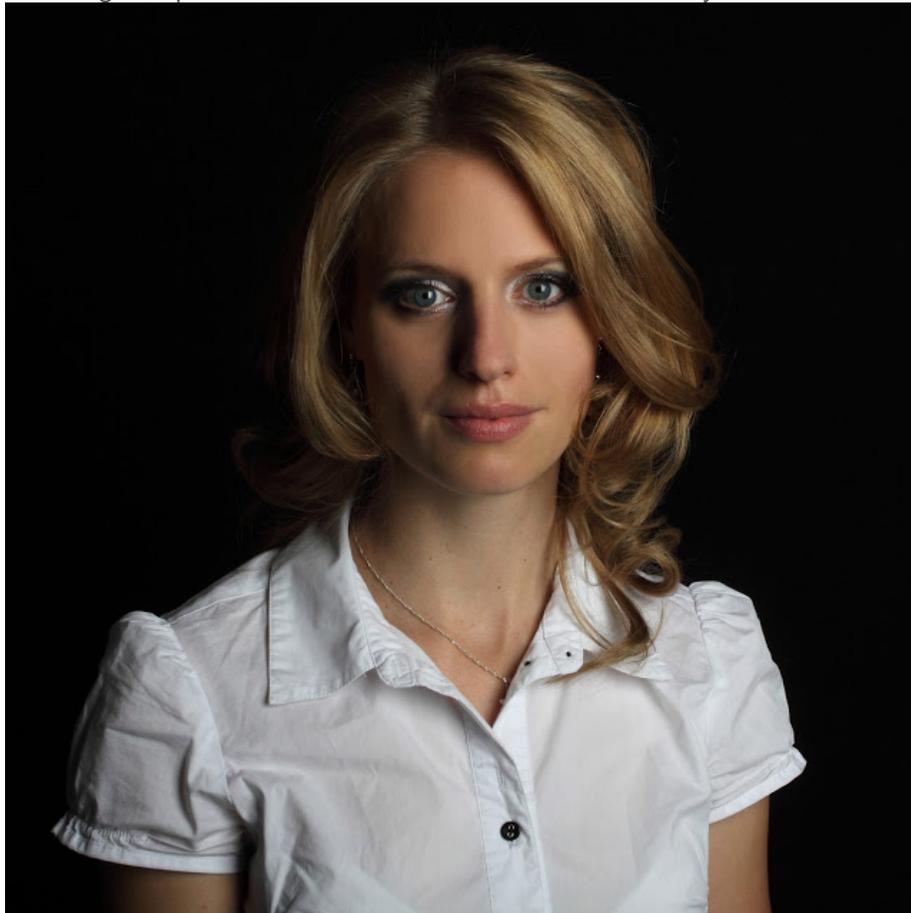**Review: Pianist Veronika Böhmová at the Czech Embassy in the Embassy Series**

Review: Pianist Veronika Böhmová at the Czech Embassy in the Embassy Series

By **David Rohde** on June 13, 2016

The Czech Republic is a small country with a big impact on music. It's a good thing they don't just churn out mere virtuosos, of whom the world has plenty. Instead the best of the lot harness tecnique to strong interpretive skills and communicative immediacy.

Pianist Veronika Böhmová. Photo courtesy of her website.

All this was on display last Thursday evening at the Embassy of the Czech Republic here in Washington, when one of the leading lights of a new Czech generation, pianist Veronika Böhmová, performed in the Embassy Series.

Ms. Böhmová wowed the audience with the solo piano version of Maurice Ravel's *La Valse*, a post-World War I symphonic conception that first presents and then distorts Viennese waltz themes in a wild crush of notes. But her real achievement was a fresh and ingratiating look at other works across a broad European landscape of Czech, French, Spanish, and Russian music based on real interpretive insight.

Ms. Böhmová opened with two selections from the *Iberia* suite composed in the early 20th century by the Spaniard Isaac Albéniz. Particularly notable was her treatment of the languid and very Andalucían (or southern Spanish) feel of the second selection, called "Rondeña." A flow in the piece based on a repeated count of six long beats can easily get lost to the listener if not properly "felt" by the performer and marked off. Ms. Böhmová did a great job of ever so subtly pulling back the last beats in each set of six and reinitiating the pulse at the beginning of the next set.

Another highlight was her performance of Ravel's *Pavane pour une infante défunte,* which technically translates as "Pavanne for a dead princess" although Ravel meant it in a purely imaginary sense and it became literally a hit tune in turn-of-the-century Paris. This moment in the concert was particularly intriguing since a somewhat older, mid-career Czech pianist had **performed the same piece in the same place in the Embassy Series** 14 months earlier.

Ms. Böhmová did with this staple of French classical music what is arguably harder than playing wildly virtuosic piano music. For the Pavanne, Ravel wrote three simultaneously occurring elements with very different qualities – a glowing melody in long connected phrases, a gently rocking accompaniment situated mostly lower in the right hand that is meant to have a certain amount of note separation, and a sonorous bass that builds from single notes to bigger chords. Ms. Böhmová pulled these elements apart in real time and somehow applied pedal in just the right amount such that they sounded like they must be coming from three different players at three different pianos. That's real musical maturity right there.

But best of all was Ms. Böhmová's concert finale of Sergei Prokofiev's Piano Sonata No. 7, the second of three "War Sonatas" that have been featured more than once in a spring season of music in Washington **featuring many works of Prokofiev**.

Dating from the early 1940s, Prokofiev's seventh is a frequently barn-burning, often rather disturbing instrumental reflection of both war among countries and repression within countries. When it's performed, though, the three movements of this landmark composition can feel disconnected, particularly since the third movement, labeled "Precipitato," is a showpiece of perpetual motion that young pianists often perform separately simply for its "wow" factor.

For her part, Ms. Böhmová gave a particularly special reading of the second movement that blends lyricism with heavy touch of mixed emotions and world-weariness. This movement's arc devolves into a set of cathedral bells against dissonant surrounding chords that can lose meaning for the audience if it sounds like just so much banging on the piano (which much of the first movement is frankly supposed to sound like, as it clearly depicts "boots on the ground"). Ms. Böhmová's playing made the bells truly emerge from the flow of the music.

She then opened the more iconic third movement at a slightly more restrained volume and speed than is often heard, giving it great space to build. One of the valuable aspects of the Embassy Series is that the artists typically stay and chat with audience members at the following reception – well, in the Embassy Series it's often more than a reception, as the Czech Embassy served a full post-concert buffet dinner. During this portion of the evening, Ms. Böhmová described for me an entire private narrative that she had built into her playing of the Prokofiev seventh sonata, which clearly paid off in its fully integrated, communicative power.

Two years ago Ms. Böhmová **recorded Prokofiev's Sonata No. 8** and she told me she knows all nine of Prokofiev's completed piano sonatas, which are in fact very varied in scope and tone although always challenging to some extent for audiences. Any one of these would be great to have on her program the next time she comes to Washington, perhaps in one of our bigger concert venues and not constrained to a location matched to her national identity.

In the meantime, compliments again to the Embassy Series for performing the function it often does – introducing intriguing global artists to the city through their wide-ranging diplomatic contacts. It's also one of the rare series in our area that extends its regular concert season all the way through June, and it even has a Portuguese "Fado" and jazz pianist to **finish out its season on June 23rd** at the Residence of the Portuguese Ambassador.

Running time: 1 hour and 40 minutes, with one 20-minute intermission.

Pianist Veronika Böhmová performed on Thursday, June 9, 2016 at 7:30 p.m. in the Embassy Series at the Embassy of the Czech Republic – 3900 Spring of Freedom Street NW, in Washington,

DC. For future events in the Embassy Series, see their **performance schedule**. For Veronika Böhmová's future performances elsewhere, see her **concert schedule**.