

Piano concert takes on Russia

The Friday evening audience at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Bangor came to hear featured pianist Eleonor Bindman, but they got much more than that.

Calling the April 2 concert a "quintessential Arcady event," Dean Stein, Arcady Music Society executive director, said he was pleased to announce that the evening's program would include music of the Russian Romantic period performed by Bindman and, in addition, a short performance by the Eastport Strings, along with an exhibition of photographs by Bangor photographer Aquelidio Manuel Rodrigues.

Taking a few moments to talk about his work, Rodrigues set nearly a dozen framed color photographs up on easels around the piano, where they would stay for the remainder of the evening. With titles like "Dancing on Ice" and "Symphony," the lyrical images, some of which were photographed in Russia, were a perfect visual counterpart to the program chosen by Bindman, which included appropriately enough, Modest Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" and other music from the Russian Romantics.

With the front of the church filled with images of reflection, shadow, water and ice, Bindman entered and began the program with her own transcription of Mussorgsky's "Night On Bald Mountain," which, she said, she had transcribed many years ago and was finally good enough to actually play.

Remembering the power and complexity of this piece as performed in its usual orchestral form and listening to it performed now by just one person and just one instrument, I was surprised to find that this piano version could not only hold its own, but actually shine in its own right. The piano is a percussion instrument. And although Bindman plays with exceptional fluidity and grace, the percussive voice of the piano gave new clarity to the melody while it accentuated the rhythm throughout. From the wasplike whirl of notes at "The Gathering of the Witches," through the especially lovely "Sabbath," this piece was a delight to hear.

Keeping within the Russian Romantic tradition, Bindman next performed four excerpts from Tchaikovsky's "The Seasons." Her performance of "April" was particularly touching, capturing the poignancy of hope growing from despair, of joy tempered with remembered sorrow, a recurring motif in Slavic music where there is seldom emotional simplicity.

Next came three short pieces by Rachmaninoff, The Prelude in D Major, Op. 23, No. 4 and Moment Musical, Op. 16, No. 3 in B minor and No. 4 in E minor. Echoing the images of water from the photographs surrounding her, Bindman's playing was at once languid and lyrical, as in the Prelude, and then powerful and moody, as in the Musical Moments. Even the silences were rich with emotion.

At intermission time, The Eastport Strings charmed the audience with both their youthful enthusiasm and their much more mature ability to play quite well. Under the leadership of Gregory Biss, and accompanied by the program's other adult leader, Alice St. Clair, seven young string players performed spirited versions of Scott Joplin's "Paragon Rag" and Gustaf Holst's suite, "Brook Green." This group of young musicians, ranging in age from 9 to 14, played with intensity and focus. Of particular note was 14-year-old cellist Daniel Baskerville, whose syncopated bass line put the rag in the Joplin piece, and who also provided some beautiful melodic work in the Holst work.

At intermission, the audience took the opportunity to view the photographs on display at closer range and then it was time for "Pictures at an Exhibition." Bindman once again played with unsurpassed technical skill, tying the different recapitulations of the "Promenade" theme together almost seamlessly. And although the Unitarian Church is a room that quiets sounds, some of her fortissimo passages in this piece were loud enough to shake any dust in the rafters.

Overall, Bindman chose demanding pieces of music for this program, yet to the casual observer they might have seemed too easy, since she played the most difficult passages with apparent effortlessness. With no grotesque exaggerations of emotion, with no self-satisfying technical extremes, Bindman performed with a natural phrasing, almost as if she were breathing the music, or singing the music, or perhaps having a conversation with her instrument.

Bindman's playing is art, practiced for years, until it finally becomes internalized, a natural part of the performer. It is true that hearing Bindman play is like hearing a nightingale sing, but what she plays is not the mindless instinctive song of a bird, but the expression of the heart and mind and soul of a human being.

Eleonor Bindman will appear in concert 7 tonight at the Dover-Foxcroft Congregational Church at 10 West Main St. Tickets are available at the door or by calling Arcady at 288-2141. More information on the Arcady Concert Series can be found at their Web site: www.arcady.org.