

De la Salle: Savouring Music, Life

Reviewed by: Lee Hyo-won

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Lise de la Salle performs with trumpeter Jonathan Clark and the Sejong Soloists in her Korea concert debut, Saturday, at the Great Mountains International Music Festival in / PyeongChang. Courtesy of GMMFS

PYEONGCHANG, Gangwon Province — It is no surprise why Lise de la Salle, just over 20, is one of the most sought-after concert pianists of her generation. **She plays some serious music but does so with such effortless joie de vivre** as demonstrated in her Korea debut, Saturday.

The French native performed for local fans for the first time in PyeongChang, Gangwon Province as part of the Great Mountains International Music Festival, offering a magical touch of a Chopin solo and impassioned concerto by Shostakovich.

In Ballade No. 4 she gave flight to a lilting, crystalline fioritura ripe with nostalgia that made the listener wonder what her interpretation of Chopin nocturnes would be like (no doubt beautiful). Moreover, **she demonstrated that piano-playing is a very physical exercise, by executing each note with balletic gestures and a graceful poise.**

The pace and heat picked up as Sejong Soloists and trumpeter Jonathan Clarke joined her for Piano Concerto No. 1. The interplay between de la Salle and the trumpeter of the hour was dynamic yet finely tempered, while the conductor-less string ensemble brought their usual electric energy to the stage. It was a fine sight, to see youthful artists breathing together in harmony, most notably in the urgency of the second movement.

Moreover, the positive energy was palpable since the artists were clearly enjoying themselves.

Yet, perhaps like a swan who is gracefully gliding across water that is actually frantically treading water underneath, de la Salle says music-making “is no miracle” — it takes effort.

“I’m a perfectionist. I’m not saying I play pieces perfectly. It’s actually far from it. But I like to be able to tell myself that I did my absolute best after a concert,” she told The Korea Times. The long-necked blonde may be seen sitting regally before a Steinway, but off stage, de la Salle was like any other 22-

year-old, wearing a colorful print hood sweatshirt with kitten ears that she bought during a tour in Japan.

“I get nervous every time I go onstage but you have to do it with an assurance,” she said. “Yes, even if it feels like standing naked in front of everyone.”

But the stage, she stressed, is first and foremost about sharing music rather than being a podium for ego-tripping. “I am an interpreter, which in Latin means ‘between.’ I am what is between the composer and the audience, and I need to stay modest and humble about my function. We musicians as interpreters have the power to destroy or sublimate (the composer’s intentions),” she said. “It’s a universal treasure that we must keep alive.”

Her interpretation of Chopin, surprisingly, is only a recent endeavour. She always had a deep affinity for the composer, along with Mozart, but it took a while for her to find the courage to plunge into his oeuvre. “Chopin is so delicate and fragile. I didn’t dare play it. It’s been about two years since I started playing Chopin and now I can’t stop,” she said with a grin.

Practice makes perfect for this perfectionist, but **she says art is rooted in the real world. “Too many young pianists are focused on just practicing. But you need to learn in real life, because music is real life.”**

Rather than sitting endlessly before the keys, she would go mountain-climbing or visit an art museum, or indulge in her latest obsession with retro Italian cinema. Her inquisitiveness and upbringing under an art dealer father and singer mother seem to fuel her hobbies.

“I love travel, meeting new people and visiting new countries. I’m crazy about food, and it’s about feeding yourself inside,” she said, meaning this both literally and figuratively. “It’s my first time in Korea and I’m a little sad I didn’t get to taste the local food and sight see. I’ll be sure to do that when I return.”

And her journey, to savor music, and moreover, life, has only just begun. “I feel blessed and lucky. In 60 years, if I’m still alive, I wish I would have the same enthusiasm for music, and have fun sharing it with the audience. That is my dream.”