

# Pianist Istomin employs technical wizardry

Eugene Istomin  
Convocation Hall  
Friday Oct. 24

by John Charles

Since Edmonton hears so few important piano recitals each year — two? three? — Eugene Istomin's concert, Friday night at Con Hall, was eagerly anticipated.

Istomin's current tour celebrates his 60th birthday, and 40 years as a major American artist. Rudolf Serkin's first important student, and part of the now legendary Istomin-Rose-Stern Trio, Istomin is best known for his Beethoven, Brahms, and other "serious" composers, rather than for flashy stuff. Thus his program, at the sixth annual Kilbourne Memorial Recital, looked like he's determined to break that image. But the results were decidedly mixed.

Istomin opened with a seldom-played Haydn sonata, No. 12 (1767), believed to be spurious by some scholars. It proved to be a beautiful, individual piece, and Istomin's clarity and gravity suited it well. The pianist's light but pointed touch appropriately evoked a harpsichord, and his trills were crystalline. The whole performance had an admirable spaciousness and sparkle.

Schumann's *Sonata No. 1 in F-sharpe minor*, Op. 11 (1832) was the evening's major work. A 35-minute torrent of music, it embodies Schumann's thoughts on the keyboard, love, life, fate, and it's never been an established masterpiece, usually taken up only by virtuosos who feel a real affinity with it. Lately it's become a hot property: besides Istomin, Krystian Zimerman and Vladimir Ashkenazy are playing it in their only New York recitals this season.

Istomin brought the same clarity and gravity to Schumann that we'd heard in the Haydn, but this is one work which cannot be added up through logic or sheer intelligence. The *Introduction* was impeccably handled, but once the first movement was launched, all that youthful abandon and yearning, the constant twists and turns of Schumann's thought, the eager rushing forward and falling back, went for naught

in Istomin's hands.

He played relentlessly, albeit with astonishing technique, including a powerful left hand. The music thus sounded stern, and not varied enough, (with heavy pedalling) and finally dull, as the deluge of notes continued with little sense of emotion or intuition. Even in the *Scherzo*, which is full of playful jack-in-the-box surprises, Istomin kept resolutely cool.

Why he would choose a work for which he seems temperamentally unsuited is puzzling. His 1958 recording of Brahms' *Handel Variations*, for example, is wonderful because of his grasp of its structure. But it does not require the sense of fantasy which

Schumann does.

After intermission Istomin played two Schubert *Impromptus*, and four Rachmaninoff pieces, which made a pretty lightweight conclusion.

In the *Impromptu No. 2, in E-flat, Op. 90* (1827), the sense of clarity and architecture was most welcome, and the pianist's left hand brought out the menace beneath the right hand's pure melody more powerfully than I've ever heard before. The tension of this work, often played for its prettiness alone, was fully conveyed.

The final Rachmaninoff works — a *Prelude*, and *Etude Tableaux*, the vivid *Oriental Sketch* — were the most successful with

the spill-over audience at Con Hall, but the dizzying, sensual aspect of these pieces was absent. Nevertheless Istomin's technical wizardry was impressive, and the gorgeous color and invention of the works provided a delightful experience.

In a 1984 interview, after praising the "hair-raising, electric" quality of Horowitz's playing, Istomin added: "Being hair-raising is not my top priority." That's fine: much of the repertoire needs just the qualities Istomin can provide. But it seems rather perverse to program music which only comes to life if it is hair-raising.

## Bass: strings audience along

The Double Bass  
Citadel - MacLab Theatre  
til November 2nd

review by Juanita Spears

"No one was born to play the double bass," explains the musician in a moment of spiteful self-analysis, during the comic, complex play which opened the Citadel's Rice season.

*The Double Bass* is a one act play for one player, set in a small, completely sound-proofed flat where the character has closed himself from the rest of the noisy, unforgiving world.

The play, written by Patrick Suskind and translated into English by Rob Kift, is a portrait of an orchestral musician's love/hate relationship with his instrument and his profession. The player, a competent third desk bassist in a provincial orchestra, flips in and out of fits of spiteful rage, manic depression, and professorial comic moods, so much so that he invokes uncontrolled laughter one moment, and pulls at your heart strings the next.

Convinced that nobody in his family loved him, he chose to become a musician

to spite his civil servant father and repulse his mother, a flautist, by choosing (in his own words) "the most cumbersome, grotesque looking, droll sounding instrument of all, the double bass."

Yet, in the very next breath, he is reminding you that should you "remove the double bass from the orchestra, it would all become meaningless. "But of course," he says, as he peers out at the audience, "deep down you all know that, of course."

Given just enough talent to recognize his own shortcomings, Eric Peterson is brilliant as the bitter, frustrated musician who expounds his importance in long, but brisk, flurries of speech only to flip-flop so quickly onto his endless list of shortcomings that the quirkiness of the mood changes are hilarious.

One of the many funny episodes occurs as he is professing his love for his instrument only to veer off into a maniacal description of what he feels like doing to "his beloved" when he is particularly frustrated with it. Anyone who has aspired to be an instrumentalist can relate to the following.

"Sometimes I'd just like to throw it out the window. But before I did that, I would

smash it into bits, crushing it into tiny splinters and toss it into the incinerator... Just between you and me," he says in an aside to the audience, "I don't care for it all that much."

But the audience soon finds out that the double bass is not his only source of frustration. He is in love with a beautiful mezzo in the opera chorus who doesn't even know he exists. He blames his lack of success with women on the bass.

"It's like a giant sledgehammer on the relationship." The last time he made love was in 1984 and, as he recalls, he put the bass in the bath-tub so it would not "stand there behind (him) overlooking the whole business, snickering at (his) love-making."

This tortured man goes on to confide that he often pretends that his bass is his beloved Sara, and proceeds to ravish the double bass with his bow. It is so acutely funny and pathetic that you don't know whether to laugh or cry.

You don't need to be a classical music connoisseur to appreciate this outrageously funny and poignant play. It is a definite must to see. Eric Peterson, under the direction of Lloyd Coutts, is more than worth the price of admission.



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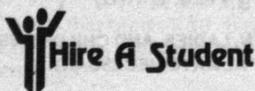
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An informal information session about sexual harassment, hosted by student and staff member of the President's Advisory Committee on Sexual Harassment (PACSH), will be held on the dates and times noted below:

**STUDENTS' UNION BLDG., ROOM 034**  
Tuesday, November 4, 12:00 noon

**CLINICAL SCIENCES BUILDING, ROOM 5-101**  
Wednesday, November 5, 3:00 p.m.

**STUDENTS' UNION BLDG., ROOM 034**  
Thursday, November 13, 1:00 p.m.

**BUSINESS BUILDING, ROOM 1-09**  
Thursday, November 13, 3:30 p.m.

A short film will be presented, and members of PACSH will be happy to answer questions about sexual harassment or about PACSH. All students and staff are welcome to attend any of these sessions.