

# ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

## Kaboff and Clarke show beguiling lyricism

By David Cannon  
Sentinel Arts Critic

For a great way to start getting out of the winter doldrums, Strathmore Hall's current programming is just what the doctor ordered. Along with the ongoing crafts exhibition, Strathmore continued their Music in the Mansion series with an intriguing chamber music performance.

Cellist John Kaboff and pianist Alfred Clark Jr. are area residents who were scheduled to appear at Strathmore two years ago. Due to an accident, Mr. Kaboff had to cancel, but as last Sunday's performance demonstrated, he and Alfred Clark are back in top form once again.

Their program of modern Russian music for cello and piano demonstrated several things. Despite several pieces being transcriptions, the program showed Russian composers have two modes when writing for cello. In slower passages they use the cello for highly lyrical and emotional music, perfect for that frequent Russian mood of pathos. When it came to faster music, few composers are as technically demanding as Russians are.

Mr. Kaboff, with strong accompaniment by Mr. Clark, more than met both demands of this music.

For the lyrical aspect of the instrument, the highlight was a transcription of Sergei Rachmaninoff's great short piece *Vocalise*. People forget that Rachmaninoff was very much a twentieth century composer, living until 1943 and even premiering in Baltimore his vastly popular *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini* a few years before his death. But despite his dates, Rachmaninoff was in many ways the last true Romantic composer, and his *Vocalise* is a lovely melody that on cello has a certain nostalgic sadness to it. If nineteenth century music needed a swan song, this is it.

On the other hand, the final piece on the program (actually the encore) was a transcription of Rimski Korsakoff's popular bauble "*Flight of the Bumblebee*." A difficult piece for violin, the cello transcription is equally demanding with its constant flurry of notes and treacherous fingerings. It looks brutal to perform, especially after just completing an already demanding concert, but again the two artists tossed it off like a bon-bon.

But here the similarities between these Russian composers end. Rachmaninoff was into gor-

geous melodies and dark psychological moods, and that showed in his cello Sonata in G Minor (Opus 19). Fans of this composer's Second Symphony will be on familiar territory here. In the opening movement it is amazing how much sound the composer is able to coax from two instruments, as the movement builds to its central climax. The second movement scherzo and finale made plenty of demands on the cellist, including long pizzicato sections and much use of double stopping. And while the sonata's slow movement is not as memorable as that of the Second Symphony, it does feature a haunting sad melody for the cello to muse upon.

### Kaboff-Clarke Duo

Strathmore Hall



While cellist Kaboff did a great job with this piece, this was also where pianist Clark got to shine. Rachmaninoff is best known as a pianist and composer for that instrument, and the accompaniment here in the cello sonata is more demanding for the pianist than many solo piano pieces.

The first half of the program was devoted to more modern works. The program kicked off with a transcription of Stravinsky's *Suite Italienne*, which is itself a reuse of old Italian tunes. That stately introduction is a familiar tune and the whole piece is full of Baroque and Classical forms as the Minuet and Aria.

It's very neo-classical and despite Stravinsky's reputation is full of delightful tunes. Yet the piece is very much Stravinsky: there was a free use of dissonance at times in the harmony and he composer could not resist technical tricks, such as having the cellist play near the bridge of the instrument at times to produce an icy sound. The fourth movement *Tarantella* was a demanding piece for both performers, full of rapidly played notes, before ending on the lyrical and refined sounds of the minuet finale.

Meanwhile the Shostakovich cello sonata in d minor is yet another world. Shostakovich was perhaps the greatest and most harassed composer in Stalin era Russia, and his

music falls into several categories. His more public orchestral music tended to be more conservative, more into neo-classicism and tonal tunes while his more intimate chamber music is more personal and experimental.

In the cello sonata we get a brittle opening movement followed by a scherzo that sounds simple enough at first but grows increasingly frazzled. The heart of the piece is the slow movement, as desolate and lonely a landscape as this composer ever penned followed by a demanding finale that includes a passage where the cello is strummed almost like a guitar. A very demanding piece for the cellist and like so much by this composer, a demanding but cryptic piece for the audience.

Still Kaboff and Clark showed their skill in this demanding program, from the most beguiling lyricism to some very dissonant and technically demanding passages. Though all these composers overlap in their lifetime, going from a Rachmaninoff to Shostakovich is quite a journey, but this duo was more than up for the trip.

There are several more concerts this season but a few of these popular events have already sold out. Coming up in the next few months are such varied performers as jazz bassoonist Michael Rabinowitz on March 14, the Sumi Guitar Duo on April 4, and Carolyn Black-Sotir's American Popular Song Artist on May 18, this one spotlighting the music of Leonard Bernstein.

While there check out the Creative Crafts exhibition running to April 5. See imaginative works by area artists using quilt material, stain glass and metal for some truly unusual results. Plus there are the afternoon teas with music and the Spring Break Theater for children in the coming weeks.

And be sure to check out the back of Strathmore Hall where the Concert Hall is definitely starting to take shape despite this winter. Plans to open some time in 2005 continue apace.

For more information on exhibits and concerts at Strathmore Hall this spring season, call (301) 530-0540 or visit their Web site at [www.strathmore.org](http://www.strathmore.org).