

Community concert takes on new meaning in Quebec town

August 29, 2008

By Jim Lowe Times Argus Staff

SOREL-TRACY, Quebec — It's hard to imagine it happening in the United States, but it's possible. A week ago, on a beautiful moonlit night in a suburban neighborhood in this industrial town 45 minutes northeast of Montreal, the rue des Muguets (Muguets Street) was filled with more than 1,000 — some say as many as 2,000 — people sitting on lawn chairs to listen to classical music and a little jazz.

"The AlexandreS present Piano in the Street" featured just that — pianist Alexandre Vovan, guitarist Alexandre Éthier and vocalist Alexandre Désilets — performing music from Chopin to Désilets' own jazz compositions on the street. It drew an enthusiastic response from the community audience. But, what is more interesting was that the elderly folks and families with small children, and even teens were there on a Friday night.

The concert was the brainchild of Vovan, a pianist, computer expert and all-round promoter. Previously Vovan was press attaché for the Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal, marketing director of Analekta Records and a consultant to CBC Records, but nearly two years ago he moved to Sorel-Tracy to be with his fiancée, Genevieve Allard, who owns a home on rue des Muguets.

Last summer, Vovan presented a similar concert — that time with piano, guitar and violin — and reportedly attracted 1,000 people. Like this year, corporate and city government donations paid for the production and donations gave the musicians a small stipend for their efforts.

Despite being a neighborhood concert, the Aug. 22 performance was no homespun affair. A modular aluminum and steel stage, complete with professional theater lighting, closed one end of the street, with a roadblock at the other. Huge television screens on either side of the stage, and a projection screen halfway back, to the left of the audience, relayed the close-up work of a videographer on stage.

All this would have been wasted if the music had not been good, but it was — and the audience loved it. Vovan opened the program with Rachmaninov's Prelude, Opus 23, No. 5, a most Romantic work performed by a most romantic pianist. Although Vovan had some trouble with Chopin's Fourth Ballade because of a muscle cramp, he imbued the Fantaisie Impromptu, Opus 66, with a singing line and grandeur.

Éthier played with an easy virtuosity and musical understanding, particularly in the difficult but beautiful Etudes by Leo Brower. Désilets is a tenor, but he uses his attractive light voice in an unusually ethereal way, almost like an instrument. It was quite beautiful in de Falla's "Nana" (with Éthier) and the Gounod "Ave Maria" (with Vovan).

The three joined together in Désilets own "Aléatoire," a tender song with instrumental improvisation, which proved quite moving with its deep tenderness. But perhaps the most beautiful performance was the closing and most appropriate "Clair de lune", or "Light of the Moon". Arranged for the three it delivered the Debussy favorite's shimmering beauty.

It was truly a community concert.



Guitarist Alexandre Ethier performed before an audience of more than a thousand people on the rue des Muguets in Sorel-Tracy, Quebec.

Photo: Photo by Philippe Manning