

Piano virtuoso gives Shuler's Steinway a good workout in Raton

By Tim Keller - For the Comet | Posted: Tuesday, October 7, 2014 4:25 pm

RATON – Acclaimed classical piano virtuoso Teresa Walters presented her solo program to an appreciative Shuler Theater audience last Thursday night, Oct. 2, in the first show of this year's Raton Arts & Humanities Council's six-show Performing Arts Series.

The longtime New York City resident was raised on a farm in the American Midwest, began studying piano and a world map at age four, and has now given concert tours throughout the world.

Earlier this year, the New York Times wrote, "Teresa Walters has performed on six continents and has earned the highest praise, deserving to be in the top tier of piano soloists in the world. Aptly named 'The International First Lady of Piano,' and overwhelmingly popular with audiences, this virtuoso discusses the music in her engaging manner before she performs."

She used a microphone standing ten feet from the piano on the Shuler Theater stage to introduce each composer and composition to her Raton audience. She's actually registered a trademark for these "Keynote Comments," and they were helpful for the audience in appreciating each piece she performed.

The first set—featuring works by Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, and Clara and Robert Schumann—gave the Shuler's beautiful Steinway grand piano a robust workout. Unfortunately, it sounded more like a workout than a concert. Walters seemed to deliver the pieces through long-practiced muscle memory placed on cruise control. Her technical skills were impressive, but her heart and soul seemed missing, as though she'd left them in the dressing room when she made a rushed late entrance to begin her program.

She seemed weary and sad, as though the decades-long road of one-nighters has taken its toll. When, after each song, she placed her hands over her heart or blew a kiss to the audience, the emotion felt feigned, the motion an affectation.

The 44-minute first set was followed by a 25-minute intermission, though, that did Walters—and thus her audience—a world of good. She returned in a long, slinky red dress that was gorgeous against the



Piano virtuoso Teresa Walters

Acclaimed piano virtuoso Teresa Walters brought her solo program to Raton's Shuler Theater last week, opening Raton Arts & Humanities Council's annual Performing Arts Series.

Shuler's painted backdrop of an ornate Italian villa. She was more animated and conversational, saying of the costume change, "Now you know how I spent intermission. How did you spend yours?"

For whatever reason, the second set approached the sublime. Walters came to life, more expressive and musical, her playing subtle and nuanced. Where the first set's pieces sometimes seemed simply pounded out, the second set's music breathed.

Limiting herself to two extended pieces in the second set, the music itself seemed at least partially responsible for Walters' awakening. The first was a Franz Liszt adaptation of a sonnet by Petrarch, the master poet of the Italian Renaissance. One's eyes could see that Walters was now playing from the heart, but one's ears knew it best—this was no longer an exhibition of skills: this was music, beautiful music.

She closed with "An American Kaleidoscope," her arrangement of themes from George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" woven with elements of two early American compositions that included motifs from "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "My Country 'Tis of Thee." Rather than today's too-familiar bombastic patriotism, here was Americana that ran through blood veins to provoke a profound love of country. It was as Gershwin described it, "a kaleidoscopic vision of America," enhanced by subtly patriotic musical motifs added by Walters. Everything about her performance felt deeply personal, and now her virtuosity was put to good service.

"An American Kaleidoscope" lasted a glorious 20 minutes and won Walters an encore, for which she chose another composition based on early American folk music. "Songs of Jubilee," arranged for solo piano by Afro-British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, explored themes of finding one's promised land, the safe sanctity of home and homeland. The slow, melodic piece continued the depth of feeling and expressiveness that Walters brought to her second set, and it was clearly the second series of songs that earned her a standing ovation from the Shuler Theater audience.

The second show of this year's Performing Arts Series presents the Glenn Miller Orchestra in a Sunday matinee concert of big band music on October 26. Tickets are available from RAHC at Old Pass Gallery, 145 S. First St., (575) 445-2052.