

Porter: Pianist mixes new works with classics

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spirituality of Liszt's work, but also because a student of Liszt had taught one of his musical instructors.

Having just two degrees of musical separation between himself and a composer he deeply admires has been a source of inspiration while viewing the large scope and precision of Liszt's work.

"He was the biggest celebrity of the time as a virtuoso pianist, but he left the concert stage around the age of 35 and became very religious. He turned inwards and became more philosophical," Porter said.

That spirituality can be heard in his pieces, though the music can be enjoyed with or without the context of Liszt's Catholic background, Porter said. Having written hundreds of compositions, Liszt was also a patron to young composers and known as a creator of contemplative and meditative pieces.

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– Stephen Porter
Concert pianist

Having the opportunity to share pieces by Liszt with audiences, Porter feels that presenting the music simply is the best way to "examine him in all of his complexity."

With audiences of classical music shrinking over time, Porter believes that it is all the more important for musicians to engage with concertgoers and create a context for the pieces they are hearing.

There was a time when classical musicians would simply perform the pieces without interacting with audiences much beyond taking bows.

"You want to show people an aspect of the music," Porter said. "Talking to the audience

is important, but the audience doesn't want a 20-minute lecture before a 10-minute piece. A few well-chosen words before a performance add volumes. It may be the first time they're hearing it."

Although his Nantucket program draws from traditional works and composers, Porter often tries to mix in new pieces by living composers with lesser-known works by classic composers like Beethoven and Mozart.

The pitfall to be avoided when playing the classics is that when the same pieces and composers are repeatedly performed, the audience can tune out or stop coming,

Porter said. Now, it is more important than ever to draw in and captivate individuals by striking a balance between the familiar and the new.

"We can't stop playing those things and we shouldn't, but if you play them too much, you lose interest and if you only play new music, it's less accessible for the audiences," Porter said.

The space at the Atheneum offers a prime opportunity to observe the performer more intently than is possible in a concert hall, Porter said.

"It's a more intimate space. People can hear and see everything that you're hearing and you're seeing, the communing of the artist and the instrument and the audience as you sit up there and do battle with the black beast," he said.

Pianist Stephen Porter will perform at 8 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 26 in the Great Hall of the Nantucket Atheneum, 1 India St. Free.