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Francois-Frederic Guy

If there was ever a time when performer and instrument were one, it was Monday night at the French Embassy. Pianist Francois-Frederic Guy played Beethoven's soul-stirring "Pathetique" and raging "Waldstein" sonatas, Liszt's spell-binding "Benediction de Dieu Dans la Solitude" and Robert Schumann's "Geistervariationen," composed just before a suicidal jump into the Rhine River.

Words offer pale substitutes for an evening that this reviewer won't easily forget. From start to finish, Guy summoned the Steinway to speak for itself, drawing out the sound from within the piano rather than imposing himself on the instrument.

In the "Pathetique," one felt the pianist's large-scale approach, the languid yet wrenching opening

intoned with fingers delving deep into tone-color, sustaining its sonic depth. The Allegro whirled on its tumultuous way, while the Adagio was pondered and tenderly caressed, leading to a finale more fiendish than playful.

Liszt's "Benediction" was sheer revelation, the music's shimmering, airy textures outlined with the delicacy that Monet conveyed in his pink and blue views of the Rouen Cathedral.

Guy turned Schumann's wretched suffering into a paean of consolation. Even in the seething stretches, the pianist never let Schumann's string of variations lose their rapturous theme. Beethoven's "Waldstein" was given an epic scope, the Allegro's chief theme evolving into conflicting masses of sounds wrestling in titanic fury — and written while he was also composing the "Eroica" Symphony. Guy's observance of the composer's momentous silences made the performance all the more breathtaking.

— Cecelia Porter