

Musical language of the heart

By Ruth Ostrow

DAVID Helfgott takes the stage. He is smiling, beaming like an excited child, looking every bit the eccentric that Geoffrey Rush portrayed in the film about his life, Shine.

He is passing through a town near me as part of his ongoing commitment to bring music and culture to the country. He is playing in a humble rural church. He looks almost religious standing on stage next to the gleaming Steinway, dressed in a long white shirt.

It has been an ambition of mine to see him play. Ironically, it has taken a move to a remote place to get to see this international pianist, but his wife, Gillian, explains to me that he prefers intimate gatherings in little towns because of the exuberance and appreciation he feels.

As I make my way to the front to take two seats that look miraculously empty, a friend taps me on the shoulder and pulls me towards her. "Don't go up the front," she whispers. "It's so disconcerting. He mumbles and hums and talks to himself through the whole concert. You won't get as distracted by it if you are further away."

The whole point of me coming is for Helfgott, not the music I've heard so many times before. I want to hear him mumbling, want to experience the energy and vitality that is this wonderful, unusual performer. And so I grab those seats, two rows from the front, and sit watching the man making his bows.

Finally he sits down and begins to play. Beautiful, brilliant sound. I shut my eyes and wonder what Beethoven was thinking.

"What's he saying?" my husband whispers to me, and I open my eyes to see Helfgott talking busily to himself, as he is famed for, moving his mouth frantically, making sweet, humming noises and shaking his head, in keeping with his nervous condition.

I strain my ears. I can hear whispers but no words. "I don't know," I say to my husband, but now I am consumed with wondering. Could he be talking about the music? His life? What he has been through? Is he talking to his father? Could he be giving us the meaning of life?

"He's just saying whatever comes into his head about the music," says one girlfriend in the intermission. "I saw him once before, and he'd say things loudly like: 'The cow is in the meadow, now the sunshine is on the lawn ...' It's all nonsensical."

"He's talking in tongues," said another. "He's talking about love," said another. "I saw his lips keep saying over and over: 'I love you, I love you.'"

"Actually he keeps reassuring himself. I heard him saying: 'This is OK, this is good, this is OK, this is good,'" said another.

My husband is suitably uninspired by the speculation. "It's a bit like life, girls. I think he's saying whatever you want him to be saying."

Back inside the concert and Rachmaninov is voicing his soul. I hear love, I hear yearning, and I hear Helfgott whispering and sighing and talking to me of love and loss.

And as I watch him play and watch him paint pictures with his mouth, struggling to communicate to us some exquisite grand vision of life, I feel my heart open profoundly. Suddenly the words become meaningless. I stop seeing Helfgott's lips move and see his eyes sparkling instead, I see his smile, so full of joy and warmth, despite the estrangement and loneliness and pain he's endured. And I know that my husband is right. Most of what we say and hear is just "blah, blah" and doesn't matter a toss. Words gets misinterpreted anyway through the prejudices and filters of other people's perceptions.

It's what is expressed through our souls, through our entire being, that matters. And here on stage is a luminous being -- full of light. Lighter and brighter for having turned suffering into joy, bliss and success.

The audience is moved to cheers and tears of gratitude. Because despite the craziness, the muttering, the incessant sniffing that marks today's performance, and the strange appearance at interval of Helfgott, naked to the waist, running out on stage, he is teaching us through his poignant vulnerability about hope.

The concert ends. Helfgott is bouncing about with glee. I tell his wife the alchemical effect he's had on me. She nods. "David is pure love and joy," she smiles. His gift is not just the music but how he can move and uplift audiences by giving so much of himself.

"Come, let me introduce you." And as she does, Helfgott falls into my arms, deeply, warmly, tenderly. He plants his wet lips on mine and smiles at me through magical, squinting eyes, innocent and disarming as a child. Then he hugs me again, pressing his fragile body into mine.

As I hold him trembling in my arms, I finally hear what he's been saying. I've heard the sounds before. It's the language of the human heart. The language of love. And the beauty of it suddenly, surprisingly, makes me cry.

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