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Artists who ‘push the universe’

Festival of the Arts Boca takes a youthful turn with Amadeus Leopold, Patricia Engel and Valentina Lisitsa.

By Phillip Valys
STAFF WRITER

As a violinist who calls himself the “Viagra of classical music” and “Edward Violinhands,” the South Korean virtuoso Amadeus Leopold is every bit as humble as his onstage performance is subtle. Which is to say, not at all.

When Leopold comes bounding onstage at the Mizner Park Amphitheater on Saturday to perform Tchaikovsky’s complex “Violin Concerto,” the charismatic musician and performance artist will likely be adorned with a Ziggy-Stardust-like mask of multicolored mascara and tall, black hair that terminates in a widow’s peak. This will not, Leopold is quick to clarify, be a fashion statement.

“I just want to reinvent classical music, and throughout the years, I’ve become the music, whether it be Mozart or John Cage or Chopin,” says the 25-year-old Manhattan-based musician, speaking by phone in advance of his headlining performance at the seventh annual Festival of the Arts Boca. “I was committed to show every emotion and every color of the music, and I just happened to go a little further than most classical soloists. I wouldn’t call it a persona. I would call how I look the embodiment of the expression of the music.”

Born Yoo Hanbin 25 years ago, Leopold will be backed by the Boca Raton Symphonia under the baton of guest conductor Constantine Kitsopoulos. By age 19, the Juilliard-trained violinist had already performed at the Grammy Awards, the Museum of Modern Art and the Louvre. The artist’s signature flamboyance, stamped as it is with arresting bow movements, glam theatricality and androgynous costuming, was born in the Louvre, he says, after “feeling a



MILO MOHR/COURTESY

Violin virtuoso Amadeus Leopold will perform on March 9 at the Mizner Park Amphitheater in Boca Raton. The performance is part of the seventh annual Festival of the Arts Boca, which runs through March 16.

great sense of responsibility to be artistic” amid the priceless art. The name was born there, too.

“The Tchaikovsky that I’m performing [Saturday] was the very first violin concerto that I studied with Itzhak Perlman in Florida almost a decade ago, so this is my personal, come-full-circle moment,” says Leopold, who studied under the violinist at the Sarasota-based Perlman Music Program. “I learned how to do everything from Itzhak. I played that concerto last year with the Seattle Symphony, and he was there. The grin on his face when he met me backstage meant more than anything.”

Leopold’s avant-pop show joins a diverse bill of high-flying acrobats, taiko drummers, pianists and authors at the festival, continuing through March 16 at the amphitheater’s 3,250-seat tent and the Mizner Park Cultural Arts Center. (The festival opened Thursday with a performance by New Orleans’ Preservation Hall Jazz Band.)



Carpenter



Lisitsa

But the violinist’s youthful bravura, says longtime festival co-producer Charlie Siemon, stands among a “trifecta” of acts he is hoping will court younger first-timers to a classical concert. The other two include a show by 31-year-old organist Cameron Carpenter (March 14), he of the controversial keyboard interpretations of Mahler and Brahms; and Russian pianist and Internet star Valentina Lisitsa (March 15), whose muscular interpretations of Chopin, Beethoven and Rachmaninoff has topped 55 million views on YouTube.

“Amadeus told me, ‘Classical

music has been asleep for 100 years.’ It’s not that he’s wrong. It’s that these artists are examples of people who push the universe,” says Siemon, whose day job is an attorney specializing in urban planning. He operates the festival with business partner Wendy Larson. “We’ve been looking for ways to reach out beyond the typical audience. That’s why we have \$15 tickets, and you don’t feel like you have to dress in a stiff suit and tie. There’s more interactions with artists. There’s more cultural soul.”

Joining Lisitsa and Carpenter are: the Peking Acrobats; taiko-hitters Kodo, bringing the percussive rhythms of Japan’s Sado Island to Boca; conductor Peter Oundjian; and the gifted folks behind the Miami Beach-based New World Symphony. Padding the literary lineup will be authors David Ignatius (“Foreign Affairs: How To Fix the World”), young Miami novelist Patricia Engel (“A Writer’s Life”) and Australian writer

Festival of the Arts Boca

When: Through March 16

Where: Mizner Park Amphitheater, 590 Plaza Real, Boca Raton; and Mizner Park Cultural Arts Center, 201 Plaza Real, second floor

Cost: \$15-\$100 for each performance

Contact: 866-571-2787 or FestivaloftheArtsBoca.org

Thomas Kenally (“The Case of Oskar Schindler”). Gen. George W. Casey Jr. and Michael Sandel will also discuss their new works.

“We’ve got some rock-star writers here,” Siemon says. “There was a strong desire from the public to have people from Washington who weren’t so-called ‘commentators,’ and Ignatius is that person. I think that blends nicely with Gen. Casey’s talks of a post-9-11 world. Patricia Engel is perfect for aspiring young writers.”

Constantine Kitsopoulos, a one-time Carnegie Hall conductor who worked on the Tony-winning 2012 revival of “Porgy and Bess,” returns to the festival for his fourth time. Siemon didn’t need to try hard to persuade the conductor to play Boca. Kitsopoulos met his wife, oboist and Palm Beach Symphony alumna Lynne Cohen, during a South Florida show 20 years ago. As the festival’s musical director, Kitsopoulos recommended to Siemon his “Porgy and Bess” cohort, the Grammy-winning Audra McDonald. The dynamic singer and actress will perform American songbook classics on March 16.

“I’ve known Audra for about 21 years, and she’s a great artist and colleague, a monster interpreter of songs, because she has this way of finding a deep, emotional connection to them,” says Kitsopoulos, also leading the Boca Raton Symphonia during Carpenter’s performance. “I think the thing that we wanted to do this year was surprise people with what they were going to see and hear. We want to reel some new people in and introduce them to the provocative style that these artists are used to doing.”