

THE PLAIN DEALER



'Music of the Book' program strikes emotional chords at Cleveland Museum of Art (review)

By Zachary Lewis | October 29, 2015

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Powerful music. An incredible story. Haunting images. These are not what made "Music of the Book" the memorable experience it was.

No, while it possessed all those elements, the multimedia performance by accordionist Merima Ključo and pianist Seth Knopp Wednesday night at the Cleveland Museum of Art resonated as deeply as it did because it operated almost exclusively on a visceral level.

Knowing the story, the 500-year saga of a Jewish illuminated text called the Sarajevo Haggadah, certainly made for a richer evening. Tales of the book's survival, gathered in a work of historical fiction by Geraldine Brooks (who gave an insightful pre-concert talk), are almost too miraculous to believe.

Even without that, however, as a strictly musical and visual event, the presentation hit home. Oozing from its every measure were palpable senses of the book's beauty and value and of the loss and human tragedies it has witnessed over half a millennium.

The accordion, first off, is vastly underrated. In Ključo's hands Wednesday, the instrument wielded all the expressive potential of the human voice. With it, exploring its extremes of range and volume, she was able to mimic realistically the sighs, groans, gasps, and cries of a people besieged.

The score itself was no less effective. Brief but intense, the 45-minute work traced in 12 movements the Haggadah's transcendence of such horrors as the banishment of Jews from Spain, the Inquisition, and the Siege of Sarajevo. For the Holocaust, Ključo crafted music of frenzied, flailing desperation.

Along the way, too came fleeting dances, idylls marking times of peace, and a tribute to one of the book's many unexpected saviors. Never was the music literal; Ključo's method was strictly emotional.

Knopp was an equally vibrant presence. Far more than an accompanist, the pianist produced some of the night's most intriguing sounds, strumming and stroking the wires inside his instrument to evoke fear, anguish, and unrest. The violence he unleashed in "Alhambra Decree" could have damaged the keyboard.

Riveting as all this was, "Music of the Book" would have been incomplete without artist Bart Woodstrup. His video animations, displayed on a giant screen behind the musicians, contributed enormously to the experience, affording glimpses of the Haggadah's glories and providing vital structure and context.

Human and animal life gradually emerged out of nothing in "The Creation." Snaking colored lines depicted ancient "Coexistence." Gushing red on ink-stained parchment summarized the "Alhambra Decree." And during the "Siege of Sarjevo," bright orange flames burst through photos of a war-ravaged city.

These images, like the music and the Haggadah itself, are certain to last ages.