

Kim Saehyun at the La Roque d'Anthéron Piano Festival



[...] Light-years ahead, the Korean pianist Saehyun Kim, whose name filled the stands of Parc de Florans for the 9 p.m. concert. Kim is four years older than his younger peer (born on March 31, 2007, in Seoul) and just a few months ago won the Long-Thibaud Competition in Paris. At just 18 years old, he has already been signed by Warner Classics—and it becomes clear why from the very first notes of Mozart's Sonata No. 3 in B-flat major, K. 281, played with an ideally airy, singing quality, magnificently phrased, almost choreographic. Once again, his pianistic abilities are superlative: the touch is elegant and deep, the phrasing infinitely nuanced, and his sense of narrative undeniable.

French music is one of the young man's favorite repertoires. With utmost delicacy, Faure's First Barcarolle, played here in a half-voice, clearly reflects its debt to Chopinesque elegance and the restrained lyricism of the French melodie.

Simian Harlequinade

Full of grace and surprising agility, the velvet-pawed perpetuum mobile of Faure's Second Impromptu preceded Ravel's triptych *Gaspard de la nuit*. Dazzling *Ondine*, whose liquid element seems to shimmer in the light like a reflection in a mist of water. In the haunting *Le Gibet*, the touch flirts with the harp, even with a glass harmonica, as the obsessive tolling of a B-flat pedal held for 52 bars turns into both a poetic spiral and a lifeline. The heavy weight of the basses, drifting toward resonance and silence, ultimately halts its somber toll. As for *Scarbo*, it's a frenzy of ricochets, defiant gestures, and sharp outbursts—a simian harlequinade where every detail stands out as in a play, never threatening the overall balance. A masterclass.

This command of dynamics, this coloristic precision of touch, this burning inwardness—Saehyun Kim would unleash them again in the concentrated delivery of two Bach chorales transcribed by Ferruccio Busoni (BWV 645 and BWV 639), before a staggering performance of Liszt's Sonata in B minor—the ultimate Grail for pianists. The competition is fierce, as the greatest pianists have made it their signature piece. Yet the Korean pianist captivates from the very first notes launched into the blazing vertigo of silence.

Everything seems essential in this thriller of a performance shaped as a battle around the Faustian myth. Saehyun Kim opens abysses, pleads for redemption, and closes wounds. Which will triumph: the desperate song of love or the demonic pact? The answer lies in the final few notes—utterly stripped down, holy, ecstatic.

Par Marie-Aude Roux (La Roque d'Anthéron)