

Alexei Volodin's Istanbul Recital Matches Impeccable Programming with Flawless Execution.

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 Turkey **Schubert, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky (arr. Mikhail Pletnev), Wagner-Liszt, Kapustin:** Alexei Volodin (piano), Istanbul Recitals at 'the Seed', Istanbul 15.02.13 (AM)

Schubert: Four Impromptus, D. 899, Op. 90

Beethoven: Piano Sonata No. 8 in C Minor, Op. 13 'Pathetique'

Tchaikovsky (arr. Pletnev): Concert Suite from the ballet The Nutcracker.

Liszt: "Isoldens Liebestod: Schlußszene aus Tristan und Isolde", transcription for piano (after Wagner), S. 447

Kapustin: Sonata for Piano No.2, Op. 54

I don't think the Steinway Concert Grand D on stage at 'The Seed' ever had to work this hard to accommodate its master since its manufacture. The evening's interminably varying program was not only extremely taxing on the instrument; it was also designed to humor many different aspects of pianism. Alexei Volodin, in top form and complete control of the piano, gave one of the best performances I have ever witnessed live.

The C minor impromptu was delivered with sharp incisions all the way through, true to the music's marching nature. The contrast between the somber main theme and the sweet interval A flat interval could have been a bit more pronounced, but other than that there was nothing to complain about. The eighth notes of the second impromptu were similarly executed with razor sharp precision. Contrary to his interpretation of the first, Mr. Volodin was not the least shy about laying down some serious variance in both dynamics and intensity: he brought out some seriously powerful sforzandos in the middle section and the virtuosic coda. His G flat major impromptu, on the other hand, was as sweet as can be. The left hand figurations which were given their due weight took the initiative in setting the tone more prominently than the usual.

Alexei Volodin wasted no time in diving straight into the Pathetique sonata with a thumping chord followed by a rather slow, meditative introduction. The peace, of course, did not last long. From the moment Mr. Volodin hammered the octaves in F, he did not give the audience a chance to breathe until the Grave's reinstatement. His left hand tremolando octaves grew in both speed and strength in each of their repetition. In fact, the whole first movement was cast under extreme agitation and the pianist built up his stamina all the way to the end. Just as we were thinking "this must be the most extreme he can get out of a piano", he managed to seize even more out of it during the coda. So much so that, the audience had no choice but to burst into a spontaneous applause at the end of the movement. His adagio carried the same sweet resonances from his G flat impromptu; there was no hurrying, but there was no soporific air to it either. After these two movements which are resolutely against established forms, Beethoven's third movement for this magnificent sonata bows to classical style. Mr. Volodin here, gave us a yearning -but also rather regal, rondo accentuated by an amazingly even finger work.

The second half of the concert featured a more colorful program in which Pletnev's Concert Suite on Tchaikovsky's The Nutcracker was up first. Built up from the more popular fragments of the ballet, it's obvious from the technical tasks required that this twenty minute suite is written by a competent pianist. The opening March, while based on the famous but simple March from the original work, demands lightning fast right hand

phrases with staccato bass notes that arrive and leave at whim. Mr. Volodin handled the obstacles with more than sufficient rigor. After a quirky and humorous Sugar Plum Fairy dance, the pianist suavely overcame a Tarantella which sounds and looks like a complete nightmare. There probably isn't an easy Tarantella in the whole piano repertoire, but this one looks truly terrifying. It was no sweat for Mr. Volodin however; he kept a precise time and had ample concentration left to calibrate his dynamics and pedal work to perfect accuracy. Following this frantic dance, Mr. Pletnev grants the performer a somewhat lengthy intermezzo to regain his/her strength. Our pianist's fingers might have gotten a respite during these few minutes, but his musicianship certainly did not. Alexei Volodin played the movement expressively, not giving into its romantic charm. In Pletnev's reimagining of Tchaikovsky's music, Trepak, with its popular melody is given nearly the same amount of its original orchestral buoyance. The performer was, once again, up to the task to draw out a cumulative orchestral sound from his instrument. Following the Chinese Dance, the suite ends with an Andante Maestoso. Though it lacks the brilliance of the movements that precede it, this final movement offers its own challenges. The left hand melody over elongated arpeggios of the right hand that moves in thirds is one of them. The melody itself is often in two or more voices and it requires great control in both phrasing and voicing. Mr. Volodin's approach against this sturdy material was again very expressive and confident.

It is hard to believe that Liszt, in his transcription of Tristan's death scene and Isolde's soliloquy over her love, has Wagner's vocal lines eliminated. Instead, the composer has composed a piano song out of the orchestral melodies, while making it sound almost as effective. There is the risk of the performer overstressing the lush romanticism of the music, and not emphasizing the crucial melody adequately. No such pitfall for Mr. Volodin as he blended the undertones of the harmony with the enchanting melody while executing the technical obstacles of the piece (the trembling chords of the left hand) with finesse.

After all the physically exhausting music he had victoriously emerged out of, one had to wonder whether Alexei Volodin had enough energy left over for Kapustin's energetic and jazzy sonata. Well, he did. And not only did he have more than enough vigor left, he played the music with more liveliness and drive than all the rest. In the Allegro molto, there was at least as much Jazz as Kapustin had intended, if not more. Volodin's rendition was quite far from Hamelin who has championed this piece. Hamelin plays it faster and jazzier, whereas Volodin opted for a more varied and freer approach; at times bringing Prokofiev's biting humor into the picture. His bass stabs almost always came from out of nowhere and took us by surprise every time. The Scherzo progressed in similar fashion with intense and unforeseen twists and turns, giving way to a ballade-like soft Largo. The final movement of the sonata is where extreme pianism is required. In this exceedingly fast and hectic music, Alexei Volodin gave us a crisp and clear reading with a perfectly rhythmic left hand bass.

That had to be it: this final Kapustin movement *had* to deplete any pianist with humanly limitations. Mr. Volodin was not done with us yet, though. He was called on stage three times, and in each of them he gave us a Chopin to remember: a refined C-sharp minor nocturne, a C minor waltz devoid of all excess sentimentality and –if you can believe it, an erupting Heroic Polonaise to top it all off.

It is very rare that a nearly perfect programme is executed with equally flawless execution. This evening was one of those rare occasions.

Alain Matalon

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