

## The Royal Philharmonic's Southern Comfort a la Russe

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The amazingly vibrant London orchestral world can also be a lean and hungry place. The city has at least five major orchestras, most of them slipping in and out of crisis mode on a semi-regular basis. Yet the city is well served by its surfeit of underfed musicians, and despite the fractiousness of the scene, major conductors regularly throw in their lot with this flotilla of artistically seaworthy but financially worm-eaten ships.

Daniele Gatti, a Milanese conductor who led London's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at the Kennedy Center Concert Hall on Wednesday evening, is a young, very talented conductor with high prospects. His decision to join the Royal in 1996 led to one of the city's daily teapot tempests: No one had consulted Vladimir Ashkenazy, who was then the orchestra's outgoing director, and the eminent Russian conductor left in a huff.

Stiff upper lips all around, and the orchestra (and Gatti) weathered the Sturm und Drang. Now Gatti is regularly touring the orchestra, and it's on the upswing.

On Wednesday, the Royal brought pianist Ignat Solzhenitsyn to perform Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23, K. 488, the highlight of the surprisingly standard program (devoted entirely to Brahms and Mozart). Solzhenitsyn, son of the emigre Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, has been building a career devoted to the brainy core of the classics: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert. He is not yet 30 but plays with understated assurance in music that asks for supreme control.

Solzhenitsyn, a Russian-born, Vermont-raised, English-trained pianist, plays with what is best described as Southern charm: surface sweetness, inner poise and steely control. At the end of propulsive phrases, he lifted his hands with a little snap while the rest of his body came to military attention. Technically, there's not much point to this: The sound has already stopped, and the fingers are off the keyboard. But it suggests a pianist who wants the sound to be perceived as stopping in a particular way. He is a musician attentive even to those details he can't physically control, a form of likable dandyism at the piano.

He also takes risks. The first-movement cadenza was a genuine breach in the musical flow. Although it was relatively brief, Solzhenitsyn made it a world within a world, soft and inward and unaware of the looming orchestral bookends that surrounded it.

The orchestra accompanied Solzhenitsyn with palpable pleasure, playing with a casual disregard for the usual austerity that Mozart receives in the concert hall. It was a warm accompaniment, alert and receptive to the soloist, like a blanket of exactly the right size. It was Mozart with bonhomie.

The rest of the evening was devoted to Brahms, exploring two pieces that might be thought of as the B-sides of more monumental Brahms works. The Symphony No. 2 was written in only a few months, following rapidly the heroic Symphony No. 1, which took most of Brahms's youth and some of his middle age to gestate. The "Tragic Overture" is the dull twin to his sprightly (in a German way) "Academic Festival Overture."

Gatti drives through Brahms with assurance. The Symphony No. 2 is bucolic on the surface, sunny with waltzlike rhythms and tempos in the first movement. But it has moments of fury and insistence--in the midst of his idyll, Brahms lashes out--that other conductors have, conventionally, bloated and magnified to exciting if sometimes hyperbolic proportions.

Gatti avoided most of these, and allowed Brahms's internal excitement to build incrementally. Unlike many American conductors, he is more likely to slow the tempo and expand the music--a kind of "wide load" approach--than he is to increase the volume and push the pulse. It feels a bit fat and sumptuous, but this is the way the English like their Brahms.

The orchestra's strength is primarily internal: These players play well together. The string sound was marred at times when the violins leaped up to grab something on the top shelf--swatting at the note rather than firmly grasping it. The horns are accurate but very bright (especially in the overture). The cellos are warm and lovely, essential to Brahms, and the winds, though often not balanced well with the strings, have many fine players.

The concert was presented by the Washington Performing Arts Society.

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