

Music Review; Mozart Provides Magic for Royal Philharmonic

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The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra of London, returning to Southern California for two concerts this week, began Wednesday night in the Orange County Performing Arts Center with a Brahms/Mozart program thrilling in the middle, considerably less impressive at either end.

Soloist Ignat Solzhenitsyn, assisted unobtrusively and stylishly by conductor Daniele Gatti and a reduced orchestra, made the thrills happen.

In Mozart's Piano Concerto in A, K. 488, a familiar work, here performed in a revelatory manner, young Solzhenitsyn produced a reading that combined Zen-like spontaneity with sculptured execution that brought out all aspects of the piece. The 27-year-old pianist modestly understated the work's well-known profile while highlighting its felicity and myriad details. It was at once simply delivered and filled with feeling, a serendipitous Mozartean moment to remember.

Gatti's conducting of the two Brahms' works, Variations on a Theme by Haydn and the First Symphony, which opened and closed the program, disappointed. Each work went along smoothly, following its familiar contours. Yet the 38-year-old Italian musician, who looks and moves like a true practitioner of the conducting trade, showed little evidence that he was thinking about the music at hand.

In both the "Haydn" Variations and through the first three movements of the C-minor Symphony, Gatti let orchestral balances fall where they might; inner voices and inner tensions were swept along but had no real life of their own.

Indeed, until the cathartic introduction to the fourth-movement finale, the mighty First lumbered. The orchestra's playing, appallingly mechanical and inarticulate in the variations, showed more skill in the symphony, but not until that full-blown finale did it achieve genuine energy.

* The Royal Philharmonic, conducted by Gatti, with Solzhenitsyn, plays a different program tonight at 8, Orange County Performing Arts Center, 600 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa. \$15-\$55. (949) 553-2422.

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