

Grand Debut for Solzhenitsyn Pianist undaunted by 'Goldberg'

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Bach's 'Goldberg Variations' represent one of the most daunting peaks of the keyboard repertoire, and in his debut recital in Berkeley's Hertz Hall Friday night, Ignat Solzhenitsyn scaled it superbly.

Playing under the auspices of Cal Performances, the 23-year-old pianist brought a formidable technique and a coolly analytical approach to bear on Bach's encyclopedic set of 30 variations. The results, gleaming with unruffled virtuosity and tonal clarity, were memorable.

Solzhenitsyn's 70-minute recital was devoted solely to the 'Goldbergs' (he took all the repeats), yet by evening's end the audience had heard enough music to mull over at considerable length.

Treacherous landscape

The mountain-climbing metaphor is not idly applied, for Bach's towering work can be seen as a broad and often treacherously slippery landscape.

There is an overall feeling of ascent, particularly in the canons that recur in every third variation at increasingly large intervals, from the unison up through the ninth. But the path is no simple climb; it abounds with sudden twists and broad clearings like the 25th Variation.

Solzhenitsyn's performance, for all its specific delights, succeeded in taking the long view. This was a single integrated reading, rather than a series of discrete miniatures, and as such it took some preparation.

In the opening Aria, the 32-measure melody on whose harmonic framework the piece is built, and even in the first handful of variations, Solzhenitsyn displayed the methodical calmness of a climber laying out his ropes, clips and crampons within easy reach.

The effect was to make the music seem a little chilly and restrained -- certainly the Aria can be phrased more gracefully than Solzhenitsyn did, and the brittle efficiency of the first variations was perplexing.

But within minutes, the performance began to cohere, as Solzhenitsyn's dry, clipped tone -- designed to display the complexities of Bach's polyphonic writing -- softened enough to allow the music to breathe and



even dance. And from then on, the music was at once transfixing and challenging.

Craggy brow

Solzhenitsyn, who made his first Bay Area appearance last year with the California Symphony, is the son of writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn (you can spot the echo of his father's high, craggy brow from the back of the hall). His technical prowess is astonishing -- especially in the fiendish variations designed for two harpsichord keyboards, which on a single piano entail a dizzying amount of hand-crossing. The fearsome torrents of notes in such variations as No. 8, No. 17 and No. 20 came through with utter precision and rhythmic control.

Joy and discovery

But there was more than simple technique at work here. The music's polyphonic intricacies -- not just in the recurring canons but in the fugal 10th Variation and elsewhere -- were explored with a sense of joy and discovery, like a child taking apart some exciting mechanical toy.

And when more overt sentiment was appropriate, Solzhenitsyn mustered that as well. The 13th Variation boasted a splendidly modest sweetness, and the huge 25th Variation took its place as a beautifully still point of repose.

Most haunting of all, in a way, was the final return of the Aria, now infused with a bittersweet air of nostalgia for the entire journey we had just traversed. The notes were the same, but the difference in spirit was extraordinarily moving.

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