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Concert note

by Jay Nordlinger

It's a striking name—thrilling, in a way— on a concert program: Solzhenitsyn. What's it doing there? Well, the great man has three sons, the middle of whom, Ignat, is a pianist. It is right and just, somehow, that he is an excellent one.

Earlier this year, Ignat Solzhenitsyn, who is twenty-seven years old, toured the United States with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under its music director, Daniele Gatti. Gatti himself is a worldwide sensation; now thirty-seven, he is thought to be the great hope of his generation for conducting. It was Solzhenitsyn, however, who made the more encouraging impression at their concert in New York on February 6.

The concerto was the A major of Mozart, K. 488—a worthy test for any pianist. This is a piece that requires intelligence, taste, and musicianship. From the beginning, Solzhenitsyn was in command. His playing was straightforward, correct, and characterful—in a word, Mozartean. His runs were clean, with a sheen to them. He displayed a sure sense of the musical line. He used a sensible amount of rubato—not so much as to distract or obtrude, enough to lend a freedom. Right and left hands engaged in a sprightly, controlled conversation. The octaves were resonant and bold, without falling into (inappropriate) bravura. The quick passagework was limpid and unusually musical; the pianist was not doing nothing here; this was not merely filler; rather, it was all part of the musical whole. Solzhenitsyn showed his greatest individuality in the cadenza—Mozart's own—which had a feeling of spontaneity, familiar as it was.

The second movement, the Adagio, was a little gem of an arietta. Tempos were well judged, and the playing was noble,

modest, and aristocratic. Every accent, every stress, was correct. The pulse was always there; Solzhenitsyn did not allow the movement to become a fantasia. In the closing Allegro, he was spirited and exciting. Even when he was aggressive, he was not ungraceful. In these hands, the entire concerto seemed newborn—a considerable achievement.

Solzhenitsyn is a man who obviously loves music, certainly this music. Don't they all? No, actually. Not every professional musician truly loves music, or gives much evidence of it. Most interesting, Solzhenitsyn is not afraid of Mozart. Many are—even some Mozart specialists, approaching the master with shaking knees and handling him with sugar tongs. One simply cannot play Mozart scared; one must embrace him, humbly, yes, but also confidently and joyfully. According to the old saying, only children and elderly sages can play Mozart. Solzhenitsyn, happily, is an exception.

A busy conductor, too, he will no doubt go far. He has an open, generous personality, and he is self-effacing, even as he is charismatic. There may never come a day when Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is known as Ignat's father. But there will come a day when Ignat's name is given in the musical world.

Daniele Gatti is already there, eagerly sought by orchestras everywhere. He began the concert with Brahms's *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*, which was warm and heartfelt—Brahmsian—but technically imprecise. He closed with the Beethoven Fifth, in which he was all business. Gatti had little time for the philosophical or spiritual. His hard driving—particularly in the second movement—deprived the work of beauty and grace. In all, he sounded like a man who had spent many, many years listening to Toscanini recordings, which is not necessarily healthy for children and other living things.

To his credit, though, the players from London were fully engaged, even in this terribly familiar music, which says something about the conductor and his talents for leadership. Gatti is already impressive; when his mass of black hair gains a little gray, he will probably be all the more so.

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