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Pianist Vonsattel rises to the challenge

BY LAWRENCE BUDMEN
South Florida Classical

Brahms' *Piano Concerto No.1 in D minor* is a massive score that requires virtuosity of the highest order. More than a few gifted pianists have come to grief attempting this titanic symphony for piano and orchestra, but Gilles Vonsattel proved equal to the challenge on Friday, when he was the solo protagonist with the Miami Symphony Orchestra at Gusman Concert Hall.

The Swiss-born winner of the 2002 Naumburg International Piano Competition, Vonsattel possesses a dazzling technique that can storm the heavens or sing in poetic introspection.

He brought incendiary fire to the opening movement, leavened by interludes of tender repose. Vonsattel invested Brahms' elongated paragraphs with deep expressive force rather than mere hollow display. He has power to spare but held it in reserve for climactic moments, assaying a subtle range of dynamics and tonal colors.

Vonsattel's exquisite touch and sensitivity imbued the noble Adagio with elegiac lyricism and pensive tension.

Approaching the Rondo finale at breakneck speed, Vonsattel's playing was astounding in its transparency and agility, and his finely attuned sense of Brahms' singing line soared through the score's broad structure. An impressive artist and dynamic virtuoso, Vonsattel left an indelible mark in a terrific Miami debut.

Except for some wayward horns and frayed wind playing, Eduardo Marturet infused the orchestra with much of Brahms' dark, searing passion. A perceptive accompanist, he never overpowered Vonsattel, adeptly bending the orchestra to the pianist's phrasing.

The Miami Symphony has shown considerable improvement in recent seasons but the concluding performance of Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 6 (Pathetique)* was a step backward.

In addition to the overheated angst of Marturet's conception of Tchaikovsky's swan song, orchestral discipline was shaky. At one point near the end of the first movement, the ensemble threatened to come apart completely.

The excellent strings seemed to be part of another orchestra, playing in a parallel universe. Their rich, glistening tone and musical precision was surrounded by harsh, unsteady brass and a wind section ridden by poor intonation, particularly the flutes. The strong bassoon and clarinet solos in the first movement could not compensate for much unreliable playing.

Marturet was at his best in the two middle movements. The waltz emerged bright and virile, the march taut and properly stirring. The conductor's slow tempo robbed the passionate finale of much of its tragic poignancy. Ultimately, this heavy-handed *Pathetique* failed to take flight.

Comments



[clareabend](#) wrote on 05/09/2010 12:32:28 PM:

Totally agree!!! I was not there on Friday, to contradict Mr Budmen's comments, but the concert last night had so much power, virtuosity and sheer energy that it is hard to believe that it could have been much different from the night before.

What Marturet has done with Miami Symphony is close to a miracle. His version of Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony left the audience breathless. I have seldom heard a more dramatic ending where we were left in total silence for several seconds before the applause.

I can't wait for next season!

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[jerryhaar](#) wrote on 05/09/2010 11:36:31 AM:

The Tchaikowsky Pathetique a step backward???? Which orchestra and conductor, on which day, and in which concert hall was the reviewer present? I can only surmise that he either left his Miracle Ear at home or is incredibly annoyed that Marturet and his orchestra increasingly receive only glowing reviews in South Florida and beyond. I attended both concerts—the Pathetique is one of my favorite works, having listened to it intensely for more than 50 years—and I can only say that the brilliance of the Gusman Hall performance was equal to that of the one at the Lincoln Theater. Of the various recordings I own—New York Philharmonic, Russian National Orchestra, Berlin Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra—a live recording by MISO on either night would have come very close to those of a Bernstein, Gergiev, von Karajan or Ormandy. Marturet and the Miami Symphony captured all the melancholy, sorrow, power and passion of Tchaikowsky's last symphony. Strings provided unified sheen, woodwinds were taught, and the power and impact of the brass and percussion were hair-raising. The conductor's tempi, phrasing, inner workings of the 6th were outstanding. While the reviewer believes the Pathetique “did not take flight”, I believe it soared-- to heights rarely heard in a concert hall or on a recording.

[Recommend](#) (4)