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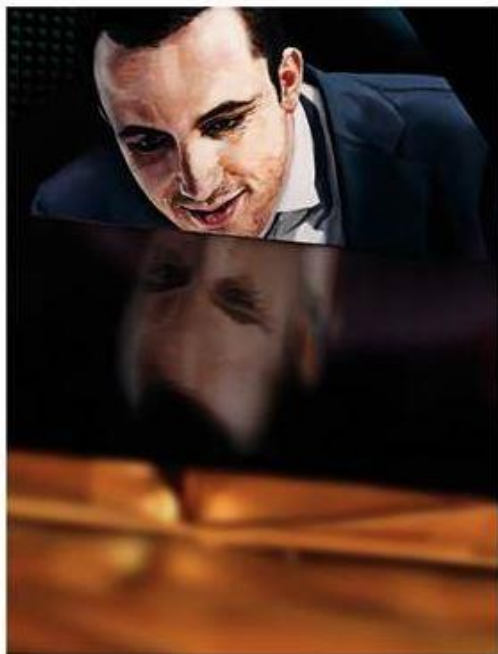
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MUSICAL EVENTS

SÉANCE

The pianist Igor Levit plays late Beethoven.

BY ALEX ROSS



Each week, I receive a dozen or more piano recordings in the mail—the digital calling cards of performers looking to join the tiny club of virtuosos who can sell out Carnegie Hall and otherwise maintain international fame. Some of the disks are lavish presentations from major labels, swaddled in effusive press releases and gauzy eight-by-ten photos. Others are self-produced offerings in cardboard cases, with a note attached. There is not enough time in the day for me to absorb them all—never mind the new-music disks, the Baroque-opera sets, the Mahler cycles, and the rest. Sometimes I apply what might be called the multitasking test: put a CD

in the player, set about other work, and await some strong gesture or upwelling of emotion that forces full attention to be paid. All too often, the music stays in the background. There is a surplus of pianists who play with glistening skill and photograph well but who have nothing memorable to say.

A few months ago, the arrival of a debut recording on the Sony Classical label had me in a skeptical mood. The cover showed a well-dressed young man leaning over a piano, languidly dragging his fingers along the keys. The program contained the last five sonatas of Beethoven: two hours of sublime riddles, the realm of such erudite masters as Maurizio

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Pollini and Mitsuko Uchida. What prematurely hyped whippersnapper would introduce himself in such a fashion? After a few minutes, I was transfixed. Here was playing of technical brilliance, tonal allure, intellectual drive, and an elusive quality that the Germans indicate with the word *Innigkeit*, or inwardness.

The pianist is Igor Levit. He was born in 1987 in Nizhny Novgorod, or Gorky, as it was then known. His family emigrated to Germany when he was eight, and since then he has lived in Hannover. He is well known to German audiences and has also won a following in London, where he participated in the BBC's New Generation Artists program. So far, he is noted chiefly for his Beethoven, though his interests range wider, from Renaissance polyphony to twentieth-century modernism. He has worked with the American composer Frederic Rzewski and is exploring Stefan Wolpe, Morton Feldman, and Kai-khosru Sorabji, whose gargantuan variations on "Dies Irae," all seven hours of them, have lately occupied him. Or so one gathers from his Twitter account.

In March, Levit made his North American recital debut, at the Park Avenue Armory, the Gilded Age drill hall on the Upper East Side. The venue was the Board of Officers Room, an antechamber that was recently restored and reopened as a hundred-and-forty-seat recital hall. It's an intimate, sumptuous, mildly spooky space, rich in reddish mahogany and adorned with a spear-tipped chandelier that looks as though it had been repurposed from the torture chamber of Gilles de Rais. Because the sound of a concert grand might prove overwhelming in such confines, the Armory is supplying artists with a Steinway baby grand that, unfortunately, makes a tinny sound in the upper register. Nonetheless, Levit elicited a broad spectrum of colors, from silken pianissimos to brazen fortissimos that had an almost assaultive effect on those in the front rows.

The program was, again, late Beethoven: the Sonatas Opus 109, 110, and 111. On the Sony recording, Levit is almost unsettlingly poised and controlled; live, he proved more impulsive and imperfect. In a way, this was reassuring. His occasional slips came from taking risks—notably, from his almost manic determination to realize Beethoven's

metronome markings, some of which seem improbably fast. The Prestissimo of Opus 109 moved at a nearly violent clip. Yet Levit managed to introduce a flurry of nuances and subtleties amid the rush of notes. Early in the movement, two bars of detached, scampering activity are followed by two bars calling for legato, a smoother, more flowing articulation. Quick contrasts between those two styles recur throughout. The late pianist Charles Rosen, in his book on Beethoven's sonatas, observed that players tend to gloss over the distinction, and confessed that he used to do the same. Levit, however, employed the detached-legato contrast to create an almost cinematic rhythm, as if jump-cutting between camera angles.

In the ethereal theme-and-variations movement that ends Opus 109, Levit revealed an equal gift for cantabile playing, for spinning out a long, lyrical line. Younger performers often have trouble falling into the kind of mood that Beethoven describes as "Songful, with innermost feeling." It is the tempo of walking in the woods, of humming to oneself, of finding the slow pulse of nature. Whether or not Levit indulges in such antiquated behavior—his tweets make no mention of it—he has an uncanny ability to let the music amble away into a summery haze. The extended bass trill in the sixth and final variation was kept perfectly in check, so that it murmured beneath the right-hand figures without swamping them.

Something striking happened at the close of Opus 109, after the lilting variation theme lapsed into silence. Levit was so visibly reluctant to take his leave of the music that the audience made a conscious choice not to disturb him with applause. So, after a pause, he began Opus 110. I've seen pianists request no clapping between pieces, or indicate through body language that they wished to play on without a break. This was different: a touching awkwardness, as if performer and listeners alike were unnerved to find themselves sharing a private moment in a public setting.

In Opus 110, Levit again underlined contrasts between hard-driving, strongly accented material and extended stretches in which Beethoven dissolves the piano into an imaginary bel-canto ensemble. In the great passage marked

"Klagender Gesang," or "Lamenting song," the melodic line became a mesmerizing mirage of an operatic voice: it swelled and faded in deep-breathing phrases, it swayed on either side of the beat, it even seemed to thin out as it reached for a high note. Levit's rendition of these nineteen bars was sufficient to place him among the most promising pianists of his generation.

He has room to grow. In Opus 111, the most mystical of the series, I began to yearn for more shadings in the middle ground between utmost vehemence and utmost lyricism; the effect of swinging from one extreme to the other lost novelty as the evening went on. More wit, more playfulness, more easygoing patter might have mitigated a feeling of relentlessness, for which Beethoven himself is partly to blame. Still, the spell cast by the final pages of the sonata—one of whose gestures Thomas Mann described as "the most touching, comforting, poignantly forgiving act in the world"—was profound.

The British pianist Paul Lewis, now forty-one, came to prominence a little more than a decade ago, with powerfully pensive recordings, on the Harmonia Mundi label, of the late sonatas of Schubert. It was another case of a young player showing precocious command of repertory that stands at the threshold to another world. Lewis has since established himself as a leading interpreter of Schubert, Beethoven, and other high-minded fare. At a recent recital at Zankel Hall, though, he took an unexpected turn into Romantic-virtuoso territory: after poised presentations of Bach-Busoni chorales, Beethoven sonatas (Opus 27, Nos. 1 and 2), and late Liszt, he took on Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition," thundering out double octaves and stacked chords as if the ghost of the young Sviatoslav Richter had seized him. Also unexpected was the coiled snap of Lewis's rhythms: he sounded like quite a different pianist from the one who had dreamed his way through the first movement of the "Moonlight" Sonata. The distinction between brains and brawn in the piano world, between the ivory-tower musician and the arena virtuoso, is to some extent a fictitious one, and Lewis is happily crashing through it. ♦



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