

Supremely Sensitive Liszt Playing

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Adam Gyorgy at Carnegie Hall
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"Adam Gyorgy is regarded as one of the finest Liszt players in the world," says his press bio. "I'll be the judge of that," thought the jaded critic. Well, chalk one up for truth in advertising and color me impressed.

Gyorgy started his recital with one of his trademarks, an original improvisation. He set up a strumming pattern with a drone bass over which a chiming melody floated. The improvisation broadened while staying highly tonal and melodic, somewhat reminiscent of George Winston but with exquisite dynamic gradations, delicious rubato, and touches of Keith Jarrett-like intensity when Gyorgy sometimes built up a vamp, though without Jarrett's dissonances. It's certainly not something we're used to hearing at a classical recital nowadays, although it's exactly the sort of personalizing touch the Romantics were fond of.

Then came the centerpiece of the concert, Liszt's Piano Sonata. Despite this epic single-movement work's familiarity, the sense of improvisation remained, though of course Gyorgy stuck to the notes Liszt wrote. Practically in free time, he created great suspense leading up to the work's first dramatic eruption. The tempo would continue to be very flexible throughout; Gyorgy also favored quiet dynamics, his rendition the antithesis of the commonly heard loud, banging Liszt style of crass pianists aiming for maximum excitement; his pearly tone and restraint gave the music a Chopinesque elegance (at times, even Impressionistic, and the counterpoint Bachian in the most unpedantic manner). Even the louder contrasting passages seemed effortless, and the long trills were even without seeming mechanical.

While listening, I felt his tempos tended to be on the slow side, but at a bit under 30 minutes for the entire Sonata, he was actually on the fast side (if hardly as fleet as Rubinstein, who came in under 27 minutes). It was more that he seemed to alter the flow of time as the music ruminated. Nonetheless, there was no sense that the work was sectionalized or episodic; on the contrary, the passages, no matter how contrasted in tempo or mood, flowed into each other in an entirely natural way, the work's complex structure unfolding organically, not so much solid architecture as a flower blossoming, or more aptly a vast tree. Or perhaps, given the great tautness of the long lines and the way the music never seemed slack no matter how slowly some bits might be delivered, the best analogy might be tantric sex!

Wonderfully poetic and alive, it was the best Liszt Sonata I have heard, a revelatory proof that as great a work as I thought it was going in, it was even greater, far more multi-faceted in impact than I'd even imagined.

In its wake, I found it hard to enjoy Chopin's Ballade in G minor, which is odd given the above-noted "Chopinesque elegance" displayed in the Sonata, but the Ballade's opening was a tad square, and although eventually it opened up into more passionate expression, it was not at the Sonata performance's level of structural tautness or organic unity.

Then it was back to Liszt. The Rigoletto Paraphrase in Gyorgy's hands was slyly witty rather than just showy; he underplayed (but did not actually suppress) its virtuosity, but it was still a dazzling exhibition. Rhythmically limber and playful, "La Campanella" avoided all clangorousness, lightly floating from the strings until just deploying enough big drama at the finish. The Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2 was darkly moody at first, followed by huge dollops of rubato that contrasted well with the opening; the effect was of Gyorgy making it up as he went along, delighted as each section came to him. His light touch served him well again (though, alas, the Steinway's one tinny upper note was precisely the one repeated most), rendering the piece with elfin charm.

It nearly goes without saying that after all this, the audience went wild; he rewarded their standing ovations with his own very amusing paraphrase of Mendelssohn's Wedding March from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Although perhaps Lisztian in inspiration, it was no mere imitation; Gyorgy drew genuine laughs with a mischievous harmonic sidestep near the beginning, then athletically scampered through variation after variation, with a tangential reference to another theme from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for variety and contrast. It was the perfect encore, a thrilling combination of creativity and virtuosity.

Gyorgy will be back at Carnegie Hall in January for a recital benefiting his [music education foundation](#); and he said in his interview in advance of the above concert that he plans to record the Liszt Sonata at a New York recital, perhaps that very event. Here's hoping that the idiot whose cellphone competed with the Sonata on Sunday night stays home from that recording -- which, if what I just heard is any indication, could be a landmark recording that will set the new standard in the work. - *Steve Holtje*

Mr. Holtje is a Brooklyn-based editor, poet, and composer who most recent wrote a three-part song cycle setting tanka by Fumiko Nakajo.