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by Jay Nordlinger

On recent piano recitals by Alicia de Larrocha & ZoltÃ¡n Kocsis.

In the recent period, we heard a slew of pianists, including Alicia de Larrocha—whom we will not be hearing again, at least not on these shores. This Spanish titan bade farewell to the U.S. in appearances with the New York Philharmonic. But we will get to those in a moment. First consider another great pianist, the Hungarian Zoltán Kocsis. He appeared twice in New York, first in a series with the Philharmonic, then in solo recital at the 92nd Street Y. Kocsis is a man of prodigious technique and solid musicianship. He is sometimes compared to Sviatoslav Richter, and, in fact, the late Soviet pianist invited Kocsis to play four-hand music with him—a considerable honor.

Kocsis is gaining increasing renown as a conductor, but luckily he is not neglecting his instrument. With the Philharmonic, he played Bartók's Concerto No. 3, the last work that composer ever wrote. Kocsis is a Bartók specialist, as he may be expected to be, given his nationality. But he also "specializes" in Debussy and many other composers, being a pianist of versatility. The Bartók Third is a gentle, lyrical, quasi-Mozartean work—or at least it can be. Kocsis, in partnership with the conductor Lorin Maazel, took a different approach. He was aggressive, propulsive—classically Bartókian, in a word. The final movement was quite fast and extraordinarily precise. Kocsis is the same phenom he always was, even if his mass of hair has turned gray.

His recital consisted of Beethoven, Schubert, and Liszt. It began with Beethoven's Sonata in E minor, Op. 90, a seldom performed work. Kocsis gave it a strong reading, so typical of this pianist. It was bold, virile, and straight-ahead. But it was also overly blunt in spots, and included some pounding. Among the Liszt pieces was the intricate and popular "Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este." For all Kocsis's glory in Impressionistic music, this was not a terribly Impressionistic account—not an especially delicate, or limpid, or nuanced one. The villa's waters were a little heavy-running and undancing. But the technique, of course, was unquestionable, and Kocsis knows his own mind, playing with extreme assurance.

Good as Kocsis's first half was—and much of it was very good—nothing could have prepared the listener for the second half of the recital. It was devoted to a single work, Schubert's late sonata in B flat, D. 960. As it happened, New Yorkers would hear this work twice more in the space of two weeks, from major pianists. But I am coming to that. The traversal of Zoltán Kocsis was nothing less than great. He played with intelligence and soul. There was freedom of interpretation, but also an awareness of Schubertian restraints. The opening movement was poetic and transfixing. The Andante was blessedly not slow—and also transfixing. The Scherzo was unusually fast, but not so fast that it did not contain its lilt and pleasure. The concluding Allegro—a hard movement to get right—was splendidly judged. We all knew that Kocsis was a great pianist, but this was awesome

confirmation. As the audience applauded, I turned to the critic sitting behind me and said, “Frankly, that’s some of the best piano playing I have ever heard.” He said, “Same with me.”

Another pianist rumbling through town was András Schiff—another Hungarian (and when Hungary runs out of pianists, the Eskimos will have run out of ice). He appeared in recital at Carnegie Hall, playing three Bach suites, interspersed with a late, great Beethoven sonata and a suite from his, and Kocsis’s, great countryman, Bartók. Schiff had a strangely uneven outing. The first of the Bach works was the French Suite No. 4 in E-flat major. Schiff was deficient in clarity and lyricism. Moreover, his hands and arms were tight (as they often are), which affected his sound. (This tightness is not merely a matter of technical hindrance, although it is that.) Bach’s Sarabande was rather punched at. But the pianist did some things well, bringing out the inner voices, and, in the Gigue, taking obvious delight in the composer’s unusual rhythms.

That Beethoven sonata was the one in A flat, Op. 110. In the first movement, Schiff emitted a cold, metallic sound. Furthermore, he tended to hit notes—more punching—where more of a caress would have been appropriate. Odd as it may sound, Schiff committed some downright ugly playing in this profound and beautiful score—and he is one of the most celebrated pianists in the world. Even the intelligence with which he combated the thorny fugue that ends the sonata could not rescue this performance from its depredations.

Schiff did not get much better in Bach’s Partita No. 2, in C minor. In the (opening) Sinfonia, he did some rushing, and his execution was wanting. And the Capriccio (which concludes the suite) was a complete mess—a complete technical mess. It was actually amateurish, which, again, is a shocking thing to say about a pianist of Schiff’s stature. But the Bartók suite—*Out of Doors* —was magnificent. Here the pianist fully justified his large reputation. The movements of this suite were duly percussive, lulling, painterly, or dazzling, according to the music’s demands. The printed program ended with the final Bach work, the English Suite No. 6 in D minor. Schiff treated it better than he had the previous Bach suites, but not as well as he treated Bartók’s.

Encores? The first was Chopin’s Nocturne in F-sharp major, and it was truly superb. Shiveringly beautiful. The second was some more Bach, some music from the Partita No. 1 in B flat, including the delightful Gigue, which was clod-hoppingly heavy and offensive. And then Schubert’s iconic Impromptu in G-flat major, which Schiff rendered adequately. Such a strange, strange night.

At Alice Tully Hall, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center offered an excellent concert of Brahms, Edgar Meyer (a young American), and Schubert (the familiar “Trout” Quintet). The pianist in this program was André Watts, who participated in the Brahms Trio in A minor for clarinet, cello, and piano, plus the “Trout.” Watts—whose mother was Hungarian, incidentally—is known as a whiz-bang virtuoso. But, by the evidence of this particular afternoon, he deserves more of a reputation as a chamber musician than, to my knowledge, he has thus far enjoyed. His work in the Brahms was sensitive and wise, and he fulfilled his role in the “Trout” with both lyricism and panache. Man cannot live by Liszt concertos alone.

A few days later, the French pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet—about whom I have rhapsodized in these pages—played Saint-Saëns’s Concerto No. 2 with the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande (under its newish music director Pinchas Steinberg). This is a somewhat bombastic work, and Thibaudet is skilled at taming bombast: I have noted this in, for example, an account of Richard Strauss’s*Burleske* *Burleske* Certainly, Thibaudet began his go at the Saint-Saëns very well: playing richly, applying his palette of colors. Normally, this is about the most fluid pianist alive. But, midway through the first movement, some tightness set in, noticeable particularly in the right-hand passagework. The dancing, much-loved Scherzo lacked fleetness and grace. Also, Thibaudet missed a ton of notes, which is unusual for him. The final movement had its due fury, and the pianist executed some terrific trills (this is a trill-laden movement). But the playing could have been much more stylish,

and Thibaudet could have avoided such errors as rushing and pounding. A curious outing from one of the finest pianists before the public today.

The Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, and Thibaudet, had performed in Avery Fisher Hall. Not long after, the Norwegian Leif Ove Andsnes gave a recital in this same hall, proving that Avery Fisher's acoustics are not so bad that a good pianist cannot overcome them. Andsnes had no trouble making himself heard, with his various colors and voices. Opening the program were the three Romances of Schumann, surgingly Romantic, and also ruminative and discursive. Andsnes tends to play with great seriousness. I think of this as a kind of aural furrowed brow. Such earnestness can be endearing, but, every now and then, it would be nice to have more of a smile (musically speaking, of course). I should note, too—talking of taming—that Andsnes has a way of reining in Romantic music, injecting it with discipline, not letting it get away from him. This is an invaluable quality.

Following the Romances was more Schumann, his *Faschingsschwank aus Wien* (*Carnival Jest from Vienna*), a splendid test of a pianist's mettle. You need virtuosity and musicality, and Andsnes had plenty of both. He played exceptionally clearly, not permitting the work to be heard as so much Schumann piano noise. After intermission, Andsnes offered that Schubert sonata: the B-flat sonata, D. 960. His performance may not have had the transcendence of Zoltán Kocsis's, but it was first-rate and memorable. Andsnes did not try to make the work profound; he knows that it is profound, already. He simply let it be itself.

Leon Fleisher? His story is well known, but I will retell it briefly. He was a widely acclaimed young pianist of the 1950s and 1960s. At the zenith of his career, he lost the use of his right arm, owing to a neurological disorder. He turned to teaching, conducting, and music for the left hand alone. Slowly, slowly, he has returned to some two-handed repertory. Now seventy-five, he played with both hands at Carnegie Hall for the first time since 1947. (The program was a mixture of two-handed music and left-hand music.) This was a great night, certainly emotionally, and often musically.

Fleisher began his recital the way pianists often used to, but seldom do now: with a transcription of a Bach piece. He played Egon Petri's version of *Sheep May Safely Graze*, and he did so with a startling purity. He missed a number of notes, and his right hand did not want to cooperate. But he worked the inner voices, and Bach's music had the divine peace that it should.

The pianist later returned to Bach, but he first traversed the work of four American composers: Dina Koston, George Perle, Leon Kirchner, and Roger Sessions. Many composers have written left-hand-alone music for him, just as many wrote such music for Paul Wittgenstein, the famous pianist (brother of the philosopher) who lost his right arm in World War I. In fact, Kirchner said, describing the origin of his *For the Left Hand*, "Leon Fleisher is an old friend. He needed music for the left hand. I stopped whatever I was doing at the time to write a piece for him."

When Fleisher played with the left hand alone, at Carnegie Hall, he had a special authority and confidence. Obviously, he has developed tremendous facility with his left hand alone, knowing, for example, how to follow and bring out the melody (and not merely with the thumb). In the second Bach work—a transcription of the famous D- minor Chaconne for violin, fashioned by no less a personage than Johannes Brahms—Fleisher delivered a left-hand tour de force. He accorded this work, this transcription, a certain modesty, to go with masterliness and finally majesty (albeit a spiritual majesty, not a pomp-filled one). The Chaconne was exquisitely calibrated, with each phrase and section given the proper weight. Like so many other people, I have heard Bach's Chaconne a thousand times, from violinists (including great ones), orchestras, etc. Never have I heard a more moving performance.

And then, after intermission, Fleisher played … that touchstone sonata by Schubert. He did some impressive playing in it, but the limitations of his right hand were apparent. In the last movement,

especially, he seemed tired, with the right-hand octaves defeating him, or at least vexing him. But his musicianship—and all that accumulated wisdom—was more important than his technical wherewithal. The audience roared and roared for him, and not just for his playing, of course. Let's not kid ourselves: A terrible, tragic thing happened to him, all those years ago, stealing so much of his career. Fleisher will not want tears or pity. But that should not stop us from recognizing a strength in this man that is more than artistic.

Now to a pianist at the beginning of his career: Lang Lang. He is twenty-one years old, and made his Carnegie Hall recital debut shortly after Leon Fleisher returned. Lang is the pianistic phenom of this hour, replacing Evgeny Kissin in this capacity. He is also one of the most hyped musicians in the world. But does this exuberant Chinese pup deserve the hoopla surrounding him? By the evidence of his Carnegie recital, yes. I have criticized him severely in the past, but he seemed to me to reveal a growing musical maturity.

Sure, the fingers are still there, and what stupendous fingers they are. The showmanship is still there too, a showmanship that would make an opera star blush. But Lang evinced a genuine musicianship, particularly in works of Schumann, Haydn, Chopin, and the contemporary Chinese composer Tan Dun. Take the Haydn, which was the Sonata in C major, Hob. XVI:50. Lang did any number of things that grated. But I could not help thinking of Horowitz: You complained about the old Russian, and you did not want others to emulate him (much of the time)—but you stayed glued to him, alternately convinced, entertained, appalled, or awed. Lang's Haydn was exceedingly Romantic, and somewhat mannered, but it was graceful, and musical.

The work by Tan Dun was *Eight Memories in Watercolor*, an Impressionistic suite. Here the young man proved himself to be a deft colorist, someone you would want to experience in Debussy or Ravel. He ended his printed program with Liszt's *Reminiscences of Don Juan*—a piece in which a monster technique can be showed off. Rest assured, it was. The crowd screamed for Lang as for a rock star (or, better, as for Liszt himself). And the phenom had earned the delirium.

Our friend Alicia de Larrocha ended a bit more quietly than Lang Lang began. Now eighty, she has been a giant among us for nearly fifty years. When she gave her farewell to Carnegie Hall last season (in a program with the Tokyo String Quartet), I composed a little rhapsody about her in these pages, which I do not intend to repeat now. Suffice it to say that she is a consummate pianist, who has set a high example for everyone. Her final U.S. appearances, as I remarked at the outset, were with the New York Philharmonic, and she played Haydn's Concerto in D major and Falla's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*. These were apt choices: De Larrocha has always been splendid in music of the Classical period, and she has been the world's foremost exponent of the Spanish repertory throughout her career. As to how she played—she is not necessarily wrong to be withdrawing from the stage. But she provided glimpses of her glorious self. Moreover, she has built one of the largest discographies of any pianist: and, God and the record companies willing, we will always have those.

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