Distinguished among pianists in the world today is Jean-Yves Thibaudet, a Frenchman under forty and a specialist in the music of his country. He would no doubt bridle at being called a specialist—his repertory is sufficiently wide. But to play Debussy and Ravel well is no disgrace. A student of Aldo Ciccolini (a quintessential French musician, despite the name), Thibaudet comes from that tradition, and exemplifies it. He devoted the first half of his program to Debussy’s Préludes, Book II, an excellent test of French piano playing. In the first piece, “Brouillards” (”Fogs” or “Mists”), Thibaudet quickly achieved that French musical soup. There is, of course, a fine line between mush and distinct enough, and Thibaudet walks it admirably. He has a good sense of what notes should come out, and what notes should stay down, or blend in. We should really avoid using that awful and amorphous word “touch” but Thibaudet has it. He tends to play on top of the keys, in the French manner, yet there is plenty of body in his playing. It is not weak, or dainty, or precious. He is also an expert pedaler, as all players of this music must be. (Pedaling is a neglected art.) So too, he is a superb colorist, again, any French player must be.

Thibaudet has an ample technique, in the sense of fingers, speed, accuracy. A couple of the preludes showed a real virtuosity. He also boasts a marvelous sense of rhythm, of dance. He did everything that Debussy requires, and Debussy, in this collection, requires a lot: diffidence, jazziness, a galaxy of unearthly sounds. This is an extremely tasteful pianist. He gives the impression of knowing a considerable amount about all sorts of things: art, philosophy, history. Some musicians are like this, and the quality is evident in their playing.

After intermission, Thibaudet turned his attention to Ravel and his Miroirs. The first item, “Noctuelles,” had a fabulous clarity. A later item—“Une Barque sur l’océan”—was fantastically vivid: you could almost feel the salty mist on your face. “Alborado del gracioso,” though, was a bit of a mess. It lacked definition and force. Strange that so common and iconic a piece should seem so insecure under
Thibaudet’s fingers. His arms tend to get a little tight, and he has a tendency to creep up on the keyboard, which further binds him. “Alborado” was downright poor; Thibaudet has no doubt played it far better in the past.

Concluding the printed program was Messiaen’s “Regard de l’église d’amour,” which ends the monumental Vingt regards sur l’enfant Jésus Thibaudet played this piece with conviction, and it is obviously one that inspires him a great deal.

What to do for an encore, following a nearly unfollowable work? Thibaudet announced that, if anything, it had to be Wagner, a composer whom Messiaen revered. So Thibaudet performed Liszt’s transcription of the “Liebestod” from Tristan und Isolde. This is a travesty of a transcription, filled with (inadvertently) comical tremolos—a piano banger on a Mississippi River steamboat circa 1911 might have presented the “Liebestod” this way. And Thibaudet did some odd things with it, particularly as it concerned dynamics. He then offered a Duke Ellington piece, honoring the connection between France and jazz. Next came a Chopin waltz in E flat—probably Thibaudet’s worst playing of the night. It was, in fact, bad playing: careless, robotic, even flippant. The pianist bade farewell with another jazz piece, something from Bill Evans, deliciously played.

There is a rare interpretive spirit in Jean-Yves Thibaudet. In a none-too-golden age for the keyboard, he stands out, a worthy bearer more than worthy of his country’s pianistic torch.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at National Review.