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Two Pianists Show Off in Vastly Different Ways

Recitals by Nikolay Khozyainov and Emanuele Torquati



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Nikolay Khozyainov, from Russia, who won the 2012 Dublin international piano prize, his New York debut at Zankel Hall.

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On Tuesday night Nikolay Khozyainov, a bushy-haired 20-year-old Russian pianist, made his New York debut in a recital at Zankel Hall, part of his prize for winning the prestigious [2012 Dublin International Piano Competition](#). The music world is taking note of Mr. Khozyainov's stunning virtuosity. Videos of his performances are all over YouTube, including his [account of Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto](#) from the final round of the competition last year. And from the program he chose for this recital, Mr. Khozyainov clearly came to town determined to show off his prodigious technique.



Jennifer Taylor for The New York Times

Emanuele Torquati, from Italy, in a recital at Columbia University that included lesser-known work.

He played not one but two touchstone pieces young pianists take on to demonstrate their virtuosity: Prokofiev's Piano Sonata No. 7 in B-flat, with its perpetual-motion finale that ends in a headlong rush of arm-blurring chords; and Liszt's titanic Piano Sonata in B minor. Mr. Khozyainov played them on a program that also offered a late Beethoven sonata, Chopin's Berceuse and a Busoni arrangement of a Liszt fantasy on themes from Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro" (got that?), a piece that seemed about as hard as the Liszt Sonata.

Mr. Khozyainov's playing could use more musical maturity and a lot less youthful abandon. Still, he is quite a talent.

Yet his skills were put in perspective for me the following night when I attended a recital by the 35-year-old Italian pianist [Emanuele Torquati](#) at Columbia University, presented by the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America, at the academy's invitingly intimate music room. This event felt far removed from the world of flashy virtuosity. Mr. Torquati is a thoughtful musician and a self-effacing, somewhat stiff performer. He has gained attention as a [champion of contemporary music](#) and for exploring little-known corners of the repertory.

Mr. Torquati is no brilliant virtuoso. On Wednesday he concluded his program with Beethoven's "Les Adieux" Piano Sonata, and though his performance was insightful, some of the swirling passage work in the exuberant final movement seemed to push his technique to its limits.

But the best piano recitals, in keeping with the word “recital,” should have a quasi-literary dimension, where a performer offers a discourse on music by the choice of works, something Mr. Torquati did exceptionally well in his fascinating program.

In the first half, he juxtaposed two pensive Scarlatti piano sonatas (the composer’s short, one-movement Baroque keyboard pieces) with recent works by three Italian composers: Ivan Fedele, Eric Maestri and Francesco Filidei, each an experiment in sonority, color and harmony. These five pieces were grouped as an entity, played with only brief breaks and no applause in between.

After intermission, Mr. Torquati played Busoni’s extraordinary “Fantasia Nach J. S. Bach,” composed in 1909, and then “Les Adieux.” This was a program that conveyed not just how Mr. Torquati plays the piano, but how he hears and thinks about music.

I doubt that he could play the finale to Prokofiev’s Seventh as fast and furiously as Mr. Khozyainov did. But I left Mr. Torquati’s recital with much to ponder. I left Mr. Khozyainov’s concert having been impressed by his prowess and touched by his talent, but not much else.

His conservative choice of pieces was one problem. It is hard to fathom that a young pianist is not naturally curious about new and recent music. It would be like encountering a young actor who had scant interest in new and recent plays. Maybe Mr. Khozyainov performs contemporary works. But for this important debut, he mostly stuck to virtuosic war horses.

He began with Beethoven’s Sonata No. 31 in A-flat, one of the composer’s visionary late works. Mr. Khozyainov gave a sensitive, clear-textured and unmannered account of the piece. Still, there was something dutiful about the performance, as if he were beginning his recital with a sublime late Beethoven score to prove his musicianship and depth.

It seemed like he could not wait to play the Prokofiev Seventh, which came next. The first movement was fleet and crisp with a brittle, steely tone in the percussive bits. But for me, he lost it in the finale, which was too fast and hectic.

He certainly nailed the formidably difficult Liszt sonata. There were some brilliant passages and scintillating colors. But he did not convey the breadth of the work, its reach into the mystical, its anticipation of music's future. Excessive intensity and a determination to please also undermined his performance of Busoni's arrangement of Liszt's "Figaro" Fantasy.

After all this, I was exhausted. Not Mr. Khozyainov. He offered an encore of Chopin's lovely, undulant and, in its subdued way, challenging "Barcarolle," played with a lilting gait but undue intensity. And there was one more encore: Liszt's "Mephisto" Waltz No. 1, which is nearly as hard as the Liszt sonata, in what might have been the fastest performance ever.

What a change on Wednesday with Mr. Torquati's program. He played the opening work, Scarlatti's wistful Sonata in A (K. 208), with enough pedal to create milky colorings. His approach effectively set up the next piece, Mr. Maestri's "Natura Degli Affetti," in which a run that slowly cascades down the keyboard keeps repeating, obsessively, but with slight alterations, until the music takes another turn. In this context, you heard the searching side of Scarlatti and timeless resonances in the Maestri. The entire program was filled with such striking contrasts.

There is something awesome about Mr. Khozyainov's skills. Still, this young virtuoso could learn something from the serious Mr. Torquati. I did.