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**PROBITY AND COMPLEX HUMAN PORTRAITS
A SUNDAY MORNING RECITAL BY THE PIANIST IRMA GIGANI**

In a programme that - among many other aspects - was devoted to approaches to musical traditions, the young Georgian displayed brilliant mastery in the service of works and composers.

First a look into the past: relevant biographies report that Svyatoslav Richter needed only four days to prepare for the first performance of Prokofiev's technically and interpretatively immensely difficult seventh piano sonata (which will not actually be the subject here). Now the distressing question: is the age really past, the age of genuinely great soloists with pure professional ethics, and is what counts even in the realm of classical music only the myth-spreading marketing industry, indifferent to versatility, penetrating competence and artistic sense because it is devoted exclusively to easily saleable appearances?

Well, although one sometimes has this impression ... one should not carp. In fact, one's urge to complain passes quite quickly when moving away from the well-trodden, exclusively profit-oriented paths of music management. Certainly, organizations such as the Austrian "Jeunesse musicale" face icy winds in times of increasing remoteness from classical music, not only on these frosty winter days. But it concentrates despite headwinds on encouraging young talent, for instance through the series of concerts with the evocative title "AnTasten" [touching keys], which presents young pianists in medium-sized Vienna concert halls. One of these tradition-rich places is the Ehrbar Hall in Mühlgasse, which, built in 1876 and presenting major figures from Brahms to Schönberg, has been operated since 2021 by the C. Bechstein piano manufacturer. Its manageress recently suffered agonizing hours, perhaps even days of panic, because a long-planned soloist's concert threatened to be cancelled for reasons of ill health. She finally found a substitute: the 29-year-old Irma Gigani, who lives in Vienna and studied at its music university (piano class of Prof. Stefan Arnold). Within a week this soloist from Georgia - who is known in relevant circles not only there but in Germany (Konzerthaus Berlin), France, Italy, Sweden and Austria – prepared a well-thought-out programme for the piano recital on 25 January 2026. And it proved to be ...

... one of those great musical events that one always wishes for and only very rarely experiences over the decades. Under Irma Gigani's fingers music became a journey of scarcely surpassable intensity through the riches of the human soul, which we know is, in Austria, often described somewhat superciliously as an "undiscovered country". One would have wished the Ehrbar Hall had had 20 000 seats so that at least a tiny percentage of Austrians could have had the opportunity, physically and in sublimation by the music, to experience what Arthur Schnitzler long ago might have meant by that phrase. Of course landscapes of the soul are usually limited when represented in art, but if the rainbow has a

broad enough span and really links abysses with apparently unattainable heights, then all limitations are successfully overcome.

Irma Gigani's span started with formally perfect character portraits of the late Italian and Spanish Baroque, five sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti, whose - for that period - avantgardistic harmonic modulations she brought out clearly thanks to her sensitive touch, thus as it were creating psychograms that one rarely gets to hear in such intensity. It was the first stage in this morning journey, stretching from the light-hearted vigour kept under control only by the musical structure of the E major sonata K. 380 to the mysterious melancholy of the D minor sonata K. 32. Overall, one was left with the impression that the Scarlatti sonatas in this pianist's interpretation often have a dual flow: an affirmative stream of sound is reflected in every sense by another, pensive and quiet, stream. The secret of these parallel flows seems to lie in the special emphasis that she lent to the Baroque echo repetitions and melodious sequences without ever altering the basic tempo. These figurations were not only softer but were endowed with mysterious shades of sound by her subtle keyboard touch.

A similarly melancholy veil was cast over Maurice Ravel's "Pavane pour une infante défunte". Irma Gigani played the mix of yearning for the simplicity of a striding dance in the courtly ceremony of the Spanish Renaissance with the harmonic riches of musical Impressionism which prevent that very simplicity. Thus Ravel's Pavane seemed like the second stop on a 75-minute chronological journey through both musical-structural and emotional complexity. In addition, thanks to the choice of pieces for this memorable morning, one also experienced a programmatic interlinking because the past is celebrated in various ways in the 20th century works presented.

It was touching to experience in Chopin's piano music the beginnings of early Alexander Scriabin, who in the course of his career as a composer systematically expanded the complex, though tonal-based chromaticity of his Franco-Polish predecessor until he arrived at a fundamentally new scale based on a "mystic chord" consisting of layered fourths. The two works which Ms. Gigani had chosen, the études op. 2/1 and op. 8/12, she played in a way that conveyed both the Romantic origins and the seed of Scriabin's later development. In op. 2/1 the main voice was accompanied by whispering side voices, but never obscured by them, so that the melodic flow was maintained; this is vital if the interpretation is to help the audience understand the essence of Alexander Scriabin's music: the short-pulsed, continually restarted, nervous exploitation of all musical parameters that ultimately led to the renewal of musical language by the Russian composer. Then, in op. 8/12, the secondary melody of the lyrical middle section which shrinks before the power of the entire étude but is allowed to culminate in the sadly beautiful e' of the left hand ... and – as probably usual with Irma Gigani – a resolutely emotional statement despite all the many layers, because the steady tempo conveys the basic pulse of the piece. Whereas many interpretations of this étude, even by well-known pianists, accelerate towards the end to achieve a climax, the Georgian pianist chose a consistently fast tempo from the start. Certainly a calculated risk, but successful in

the end, verging on the technically baffling with the stretches and leaps of the left hand, which is supposed to play a legato accompaniment, not a pedal-induced mess. Scriabin's stretching of musical sensitivity was achieved in breathtaking fashion.

Finally the eighth piano sonata in (among many other keys) B flat major, op. 84 by Sergei Prokofiev. Here Irma Gigani – again in her inimitable fashion – set a new standard. As is well known, Prokofiev invites criticism. His life style was judged, depending on the political stance of the critics, either as opportunistic cleverness or heroic loyalty to his home country and ideology. Both attributions are wrong, because they do not do justice to the complexity of Prokofiev's personality, which is undoubtedly expressed in the music by the profusion of musical styles. Another example of divergent interpretation: the piano sonatas Nos. 6, 7 and 8, written during the Second World War, are called the "war sonatas" because they reflect the Russians' tragic sense of life during the first half of the 1940s - say some. Others insist that nothing non-musical should be projected into these three works of many moods. Does the truth lie in between? Again, where pure composition is concerned, it is said of many of Prokofiev's instrumental works that they string together various aspect-rich sections without transitions and do not give a convincing overall impression. Great, heart-warming music produces an overall impression - that is a fact. And Prokofiev wrote great, heart-warming music, there is no doubt about that either. But somewhere a problem appears when thoughtfully listening to or reading the score, for instance, of the first movement of the eighth piano sonata. Its individual sections seem just too disparate. At least until, one morning in the Mühlgasse in Vienna, Irma Gigani offers the key to understanding it. Through the fine-grained and touching way she played the *Andante dolce* while avoiding changes of tempo not prescribed in the score she achieved a uniform flow and showed - by wise, careful accenting and dynamic separation between genuine melodies and transitional or accompanying passages - the relationship between the individual themes of this movement, which thus revealed themselves as units arising one from the other. That alone is a hermeneutic master achievement which can only be the fruit of a fundamental attitude in preparing for a musical work: instead of vain self-discovery, Ms. Gigani aims - and her audience can sense this - for careful, even reverent exploration of the individual spiritual content which the composer consciously or unconsciously set in the musical texture and which can be uncovered only by a performer who is willing to serve by following a journey from the representation of relationships within the score to abstract knowledge. – Precisely this approach then made possible in the second movement a convincing interpretation of the "sognando" in the heading *Andante sognando*. What Prokofiev seems to have dreamed up is a gallant Rococo minuet with a tune that one seems to have known since time immemorial and nonetheless has never actually heard. A slight friendly smile seems to wink along through the master's nickel spectacles when the joy of tightly connected thirds occasionally even recalls Schubert and certainly also when the entire movement oscillates, under Irma Gigani's hands, between subtle irony and warmth, covertly advancing many-voiced understanding of the world. – Finally, the *Vivace* in its unbelievable virtuosity which nevertheless is structured throughout by controlled energy release, even in those two

repeated sections which Prokofiev adores so love to hum to themselves: the short passage of romantically explosive broken chords which Ms. Gigani subordinated to the general sequence without using any pedal, and in particular the waltz-march in the middle section of this breathless rondo, a strange, almost obtrusive march in 3/4 rather than 4/4 time, with stomping crotchets on A flat and triumphant stresses from second-interval suspensions. It is a compositional insertion which was interpreted as a feeling of victory that had gradually taken hold in the war-torn Russian collective unconscious. Here too the pianist's approach is holistic, an insertion becomes, by softer emphasis on its polyphonic structure, a logical development of the melodic ornamentation from bars 3 and 4 of this final movement. In Ms. Gigani's technically superior interpretation this movement presents itself as a web of variations of precisely those suspensions in the third and fourth bars, and thus the audience is finally released with an overall impression of musical and spiritual variety in brilliantly intertwined coherence.

Roaring, prolonged applause, for which the pianist thanked the audience with Chopin's mazurka op. 17/4, as if syntonically looking back to Scarlatti's speaking character portraits at the start of the concert.

But there was not only clapping and cheering, expressions of admiring disbelief at Irma Gigani's performance were also exchanged among the people in the hall. The perhaps most significant came from a French-speaker: "Elle n'est pas terrestre." Yes, in the general excitement of the moment some people certainly wondered whether the earthly realm had not been left behind. Well, yes it was ... and it wasn't. It was the rainbow of thinking and feeling aesthetics created by this modest pianist which had unfolded its splendid effect.

One often reads in biographies of famous musicians that their career of greatness began with a concert given as a substitute. One would be happy to read it once more ...

(Translation by Martin Reading)

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