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Turkish pianist impresses

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CLASSICAL

The penultimate night of the 2007 Golandsky Institute International Piano Festival featured the creamy tone of Turkish pianist GÖlşin Onay, who presented an intriguing and well considered program of works ranging from war-horses to forgotten gems.

Princeton University's Taplin Auditorium was largely full for the recital, and Onay captivated from the outset with her opening selection, Schumann's Abegg variations, Op. 1. Onay is a gentle player, and her Schumann was just so, with smooth, delicate runs, occasionally and oddly marred with idiosyncratic spikes and dips in volume.

Onay is also a heavy pedaler, but she balances this with an acute attention to line and clarity, notable in her performance of Mendelssohn's Variations sérieuses, Op. 54, which was given a bright edge not heard in the Schumann. Here Onay drew from the busy music a bass and melody line, creating an illuminating counterpoint. If the pianist's energy was subdued and her dynamics rarely crept above a forte throughout the night, she still proved herself orchestral, certainly at the climax of the Mendelssohn, which she relayed while permitting the listener easy access to the main storyline.

The weakness with Onay's playing that began to surface with her rendition of Elgar's Smyrna is that her attack seems indiscriminately coated in a glossy sheen and bathed in soft light, rendering innocuous that which should have bite. Chopin's Andante Spianato et Grande Polonaise Brillante, Op. 22, which concluded the first half, was not muddy, but its unctuous charm and lack of energy caused the music to sag.

Following intermission, Onay performed works by Turkish composer Ahmet Adnan Saygun, with whom she studied and was made dedicatee of his Second Piano Concerto. The Sonatine Op. 15 (a smart pairing with the Ravel that would follow) proved in the hands of Onay to be strange and wondrous music, dark with much subito excitement. Two of Saygun's Preludes in Aksak Rhythms, Op. 45, were abstract but accessible, begging further exploration of the late composer's work.

Onay's final programmed selection was Ravel's Gaspard de la Nuit, which appeared to be a mighty struggle for the pianist. The accompaniment figure in Ondine was pulsated, revealing Ravel's contrivance and spoiling the illusion. Le gibet was a bit lethargic, and Onay did not appear comfortable, giving the impression of an uncertain gymnast who fears an imminent slip. She regained some confidence with Scarbo, the final leg of the voyage to the end of the night, which was driving and fluid.

Onay saved her best for last. Two encores showed a comfort heretofore absent from her program, and she combined fleetness on the keyboard with bold interpretations. The first was a Chopin morsel that outshone the earlier Polonaise. The final piece, a Bach-Busoni Chorale Prelude, was simply a marvelous bit of wizardry involving running scales set beneath a chime-like melody, which Onay played -- with welcome transparency -- to absolute perfection.

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