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In Princeton, no sign of piano conformity

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Ilya Itin. Photo: Roy Quesada

PRINCETON - The Golandsky Institute's annual International Piano Festival, in its concert with the New Jersey Symphony, demonstrated that its methods, which promote injury-free pianism, don't produce conformity.

It's a valid concern. Sharp-eared music lovers can often identify students of a particular teacher without knowing the player's resumé.

But on Thursday at Richardson Auditorium, Golandsky mainstays Ilya Itin and Sean Duggan showed little family resemblance when Itin performed Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 12 (K. 414)* and Duggan played Bach's *Harpichord Concerto No. 2 (BWV 1053)*. Clearly, the institute's Taubman Approach releases individuality instead of mediating it.

As a career pianist, Itin plays with a long-honed precision and nuance that allowed each of Mozart's phrases to question, answer, and expound on what comes before and after. Much of his expressive imperative was about revealing clarity at every turn, giving a sort of big-picture panorama, showing his listeners what the possibilities are and what he selected from them.

Duggan's big picture was a more homogeneous rhetorical statement. Details were fewer. His left-hand counterpoint was actually muddy at times. Of course, any Bach-on-piano performance won't have the clarity of instruments the composer wrote for. So listeners had to take his sense of interpretive selection on trust, which felt, at times, one-dimensional.

The elegance of Itin's playing might suggest that it lacks force. Not true in Shostakovich's *Piano Concerto No. 1*. Much of the piece has a lot of antic music influenced by the composer's early years accompanying silent films. But this piece was also written before Stalin partially muzzled this young lion, so the music has some foreground rage that was even more forceful, thanks to the penetrating transparency of Itin's sound.

Itin, Duggan, and two other Golandskyites - Sakura Myers and Nathan Grabow - converged for Bach's *Concerto for Four Keyboards (BWV 1065)*, an enjoyable novelty with carefully crafted keyboard interplay. The pianists were perfectly genteel about giving one another the limelight. However, four such percussive instruments tended to cancel each other out at times, and also dwarfed the chamber-sized New Jersey Symphony Orchestra.

Not enough can be said about conductor Mark Laycock's sensitive, collaborative accompaniment that made the Mozart concerto feel like chamber music, and allowed Shostakovich to sound downright improvisational, even in its bratty moments. Thanks to the Thursday concert's sponsors Bill and Judith Scheide, Laycock will also conduct the Buffalo Philharmonic on Wednesday at Richardson Auditorium in a program including the premiere of his own *Flute Concerto*.

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