



Review: Lilia Donkova at Weill Recital Hall

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It was *deja vu* all over again at the Weill Recital Hall on Monday evening as violinist **Lilia Donkova**, a recent graduate of the Royal Academy in London and a student of Lydia Mordkovich, presented her recital. Two of the pieces on the program were the same as those offered just the day before by Arabella Steinbacher at Town Hall. The coincidence allowed for some good old-fashioned head-to-head competition. The fact that the two women are almost exactly the same age only made the comparison more flavorful.

It took me about three seconds to realize that Ms. Donkova was by far the superior player. Those strings were vibrating even before her bow caressed them. The first notes of Brahms's Sonata No. 3 emerged with the most delicious tentativeness, a slight crescendo leading to an almost imperceptible diminuendo. This was extremely heartfelt Brahms.

Ms. Donkova did an excellent job of phrasing and pacing throughout. In the Andante, the flowing melodies were ribbons of infinitude; by mid-movement, her violin was weeping, as were several members of the audience. After witnessing Ms. Steinbacher's forensic approach, I welcomed this highly emotive music-making.

To be fair, Ms. Donkova did not always enunciate as accurately as her counterpart, and the playing field was not entirely level. She luxuriated in the warmth and opulence of Weill, whereas Ms. Steinbacher had to brave the somewhat brutal, gladiatorial atmosphere of a free concert at Town Hall. And the pianists differed significantly.

Helene Jeanney was in no sense an accompanist, but rather an equal partner in this recital. Instantly conveying her command of the keyboard, she infused the Brahms with the same type of growling, snarling support that the original composer no doubt brought to the

table. Brahms learned the craft of composing pieces for violin and piano while touring as a young man with the Hungarian Edouard Remenyi, and he cherished as a life lesson the idea of solid, expressive showmanship.

Speaking of Hungarian violinists, Maurice Ravel wrote "Tzigane" for the exotic Jelly d'Aranyi, the same woman for whom Bartok composed his two sonatas. Those familiar with the piece will tell you that there are two versions - one for violin and piano and one for violin and orchestra. However, there are actually three incarnations of this fiendishly difficult work, the

third being for violin and luteal, a now-extinct addition to a standard piano that made the instrument sound like a cimbalom.

Ms. Donkova struggled with the Ravel, as had Ms. Steinbacher the day before. An ideal performance of this essay would showcase its immense technical challenges - Ravel modeled some of the effects on Paganini - without the soloist breaking a sweat. But Ms. Donkova had to alter some of her rhythms to forge ahead with the left-hand pizzicato that occurs simultaneously with bowed arpeggios. She squeaked a couple of times during the inordinately high singing on her G string, although overall she delivered an exciting rendering.

The granddaughter of the Bulgarian composer Bentzion Eliezer, Ms. Donkova brought with her two marvelous surprises. "Sevdana" by Georgi Zlatev-Cherkin is a tone poem about a beautiful maiden of folklore; it contains not only lovely melodies, but also an exotic Central Asian scale. "Toccatà," by Petar Hristoskov, lives up to its name with a very powerful introduction and an urgent sense of import. This soloist (who, incidentally, wrote astute program notes for the concert) was clearly invested in presenting this music and did so convincingly.

If there are three versions of the Ravel, then there are at least eight of the modern classic "Fratres" by the Estonian Arvo Part (and this doesn't even include the piece titled "Fratres II"). Ms. Donkova chose the violin and piano setting from 1980, a longer and less frenetic incarnation than the one recently presented by the Jupiter Symphony Chamber Players. She did very well with the opening paroxysm of febrile energy that alternates between lowest and highest strings, then settled into a measured exploration of the floating material that follows, planetary fragments drifting after the big bang.

It should not be necessary to state this, but one of the most impressive qualities of Ms. Donkova's recital was its stylistic appropriateness. Mozart (the Sonata in F major, KV.376) sounded like Mozart, Brahms like Brahms, Part like Part. Well, of course they did, but far too many young players lack subtleties of performing practice. The fault lies in teaching and cultural context, but Ms. Donkova - reared not only in Eastern Europe but in the house of a composer - had sufficient armor in place to survive her residency at conservatory.