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MUSIC

Post-Classical Ensemble



(picture by Tom Wolff)

In the Post-Classical Ensemble's all-Liszt, "Angels and Devils" program at Georgetown University's Gaston Hall on Saturday night, contemplative works were set beside music of a more "demonic" character, highlighting a dialectic this composer explored throughout his career.

If the angels ultimately won the evening, that was due in large part to pianist Mykola Suk, whose reading of the great B Minor Piano Sonata sidestepped granitic force and rhetorical showboating in favor of an introspection that hinted at the spiritual. Suk's solo playing in the irredeemably kitschy concerto "Totentanz" was also remarkably nuanced, its many iterations of the "Dies Irae" theme directed inward, rather than toward the balcony. Conductor Angel Gil-Ordóñez drew lovely, chamberlike sonorities from the Ensemble orchestra, both here and in the "Pastorale" movement from the oratorio "Christus," where some ravishing wind playing brought to mind Wagner's "Siegfried Idyll."

The more overtly "angelic" music on the program -- the late-career choruses "Inno a Maria Vergine" and "Ave Verum Corpus" (written when Liszt took priestly vows) -- bask in an airy, Italianate lyricism that is leagues away from the extroversion of "Totentanz." If the performances by the Georgetown University Chamber Singers, under conductor Frederick Binkholder, were not the last word in ensemble attack or seamless blending, the warmth and commitment of their phrasing was unmistakable.

Now, if only someone could fix the long-ailing Gaston Hall heating system, its incessant clanking and squeaking wouldn't continue to ruin the experience of classical music in this gorgeous venue. -- **Joe Banno**