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Young Concert Artists, Inc.

GLEB IVANOV, *pianist*

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Ivanov rattles rafters to audience's delight

By T. L. Ponick
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The Young Concert Artists Series opened its 27th season in the nation's capital Tuesday with a swashbuckling recital by young Russian pianist Gleb Ivanov. The boyishly handsome 22-year-old phenom nearly overwhelmed the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater -- and its Steinway concert grand -- with a pianistic assault calling to mind the 20th century's legendary cadre of popular Romantic pianists.

Today's young pianists are almost universally acknowledged to be technically superior to their forebears, but many of these accomplished musicians are faulted by critics for bloodless interpretations of the masters that elevate pristine technique over that always elusive emotional connection with the audience.

Mr. Ivanov can't be numbered among them. After opening his program with a workmanlike reading of Haydn's Sonata in E-flat major (Hob. XVI: 52) and a somewhat overpedaled pair of Chopin miniatures -- the Waltz in A-flat major (Op. 42) and the Nocturne in C minor (Op. 48, No. 1) -- he attacked the piano, heartily performing stuff that really interested him, such as Samuel Barber's Sonata, Op. 26. Written for Vladimir Horowitz, this mid-20th-century work is loaded with massive, spiky energy that, while retaining a discernible tonal base, forays frequently into savage atonality.

Erily like the ghost of Mr. Horowitz, Mr. Ivanov engulfed the keyboard and the Barber, rattling the Terrace's rafters -- particularly in the wicked final "Fuga" -- and thrilling an audience generally not accustomed to embracing such thorny music.

After a brief and welcome pause for a tastefully executed transcription of Rachmaninoff's "Vocalise," Mr. Ivanov gave a hearty reading to a trio of Schubert lieder as transcribed by Franz Liszt.

This was only a warmup for Liszt's ridiculously challenging "Fantasia quasi sonata" after Dante, taken from the composer's "Annees de pelerinage" Book II. This galumphing showpiece is the ultimate Liszt -- threatening, stirring, at times heroic, veering from Romantic richness to harmonic weirdness prefiguring the mysticism of Alexander Scriabin. Above all, it requires the pianist-athlete to produce nearly constant, room-filling volume, which Mr. Ivanov accomplished magnificently, although he occasionally dropped or buried inconvenient notes as Mr. Horowitz was wont to do. Liszt himself would have been astounded at Mr. Ivanov's ferocious attack.

The rapturous crowd demanded encores and got them, including a palate-cleansing Bach transcription and an impressively frenetic attack on Brahms' vigorous Hungarian Dance No. 6.

While Mr. Ivanov should devote more care and feeding to the less showy parts of the repertoire, the big keyboard nukes capture his attention the most -- apropos, perhaps, for a talent that seems bigger than life and one that calls to mind a time not long ago when barnstorming lions such as Horowitz, Rachmaninoff, Paderewsky, Josef Hoffmann and Artur Schnabel made classical pianists almost as well-known as the movie stars of Hollywood's golden age.