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Music review Pianist is just the ticket

Recital notes - Mihaela Ursuleasa unleashes an "exquisite" performance at the Lincoln Hall

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In the wake of star pianist Murray Perahia's recent cancellation, disappointed concertgoers were left with the remainder of Portland Piano International's regular season -- an unusually obscure roster this year -- for their recital fix. Mihaela Ursuleasa? Who in heaven's name is she?

Well you should ask -- and chastened you should be, if you considered going to one of her recitals last weekend at Lincoln Hall and gave it a miss, because Portland debuts as exciting as hers on Saturday night happen only once every few years.

Regular subscribers to the piano recital series could tell from the opening bars of Beethoven's "Eroica" Variations that the 27-year-old Romanian was exceptional. Like desperate suitors, one player after another has struggled to coax warmth and softness from the hall's Hamburg Steinway, but at Ursuleasa's exquisite touch, the sound just seemed to blossom even at the most hushed dynamic. The rest of the piece demonstrated that she has technique to burn, and expressive abilities to match: The variations proceeded with puckish wit, terse outbursts, brooding intensity and sublime lyricism.

Throughout the evening, her playing was crystalline, regardless of how much pedal or volume went into any given passage, and each piece unfolded with color and character: Robert Schumann's C Major Fantasia was ardent and thoughtful; Alexander Scriabin's Three Etudes was flashing and mercurial; and Brahms' Seven Fantasies was lively and luminous.

When Ursuleasa first walked onstage, the impolite question came unbidden to at least a few members of the audience (c'mon, admit it): Does she have a tummy, or is she...? Yes, as it turns out, she is, and after this weekend's performances, she's headed home to Leipzig, Germany, for the remaining four months of her pregnancy. One can't help but envy her baby-to-be, who has the ultimate front row seat for her magnificent playing. We should all be so lucky.