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Ohlsson's firm, eclectic recital

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By T.L. Ponick - Renowned pianist Garrick Ohlsson swooped into the Kennedy Center Concert Hall Sunday night for an industrial-strength recital, courtesy of the Washington Performing Arts Society. Mr. Ohlsson drew a good-sized audience eager to hear his eclectic, largely 20th century program which featured works by Prokofiev, Chopin, Rachmaninoff, and Scriabin.

He began the evening with a spirited reading of Sergei Prokofiev's highly percussive Piano Sonata No. 2 in D minor, Op. 14. He hammered the fortissimo sections home while stepping back occasionally to give the more lyrical bars of the work, particularly in the Andante, the breathing room they required.

Mr. Ohlsson followed the Prokofiev with Frederic Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor, Op. 58. Composed in 1844, it is distinctive for its expansive structure which, like the Prokofiev, adds a fourth movement to the sonata form's conventional three.

The artist launched the Chopin with a stirring *allegro maestoso*, though we wish he hadn't skipped the repeat of the opening motif. The brief, rapid scherzo, which follows, oddly (or intentionally) foreshadowed the Scriabin sonata scheduled later on the program.

After a thoughtful "Largo" movement, Mr. Ohlsson's sweeping, majestic take on the finale was notable for its impeccably clean passagework. The program continued with a well-mannered performance of Sergei Rachmaninoff's "Variations on a Theme of Corelli," Op. 42. Built on a famous tune, this 1931 composition was arguably the composer's sketchbook for his later and vastly more popular "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini" for piano and orchestra.

To conclude, Mr. Ohlsson chose a series of piano miniatures composed by Alexander Scriabin, an eccentric Russian whose life and career (1872-1915) straddled the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries.

His earliest piano works strongly resemble the piano music of Chopin, but their dense chords and tonal relationships clearly foreshadow the new direction Scriabin would take.

Representative of this period on Mr. Ohlsson's program were the dramatic Etudes in F-sharp minor and B minor, numbers 2 and 3, from the composer's Op. 8.

More advanced is the "Poeme" in F-sharp major, Op. 32, No. 1, whose mystical lyricism expands into complex "extended" tonality. Mr. Ohlsson performed these works with controlled passion and great musical insight.

But he saved the most interesting Scriabin for last — the composer's Piano Sonata No. 5

in F-sharp minor, Op. 53. Arguably a rewriting of the Scriabin's somewhat more conventional Sonata No. 4, this single-movement work substitutes differing tempos and motifs for the conventional sonata's three-movements.

The work begins and ends with rippling whole-tone scales that begin as deep-bass trills before sprinting headlong toward the piano's topmost notes.

The work's concluding outburst — occurring after a massive coda that extends the piano writing to three staves — seems to propel the sonata off the piano and out the door.

As if to emphasize this, Mr. Ohlsson spun himself off the piano bench right along with the notes (a la the late comic pianist Victor Borge), instantly endearing himself to his enthusiastic audience. Their thunderous applause was rewarded by an encore trio of Scriabin etudes, bringing this already brilliant evening to a spectacular close.

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MAXIMUM RATING: FOUR STARS
