

The Master of Incarnations

New York

Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Centre

01/29/2009 - & January 30*, 31, 2009

Ludwig van Beethoven: *Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Minor, Opus 37*

Alexander Scriabin: *Symphony No. 2 in C Minor, Opus 29*

Radu Lupu (Piano)

New York Philharmonic Orchestra, Riccardo Muti
(Conductor)

Music critic Nicholas Nabokov described Alexander Scriabin's music as "fit for high-strung adolescents, where even the orgasms were faked."

That being said, Scriabin's *Second Symphony* could have used a few artificial ejaculations and teenage passions, for this is a work where not even this master of incarnations could have been recognized.

Nobody outside Russia has a greater admiration for Scriabin than Riccardo Muti, so no blame could be laid at his fervid conducting prowess last night. But the symphony itself, which has been played only once with the New York Philharmonic in the 108 years since its creation, suffers from 50 minutes of elephantiasis. Worse, there was little of Scriabin himself.

As one of music's great mystics, Scriabin certainly believed in incarnations. In fact, he joked once that he "once was a Chopinist, once a Wagnerian, and now only a simple Scriabin." Alas, not even the five moment-form was revolutionary here.

The work consisted of a classical introduction and sonata movement, a sweet slow movement, with many a flute-produced birdsong, and a scherzo tied to the finale. The melodies could have come from any German composer of the period, albeit with a few tinges or Rachmaninoff. The harmonies were conservative, but a plethora of augmented fifths would have fit in directly with César Franck.

The finale was most uncharacteristic of all. A big broad chorale, which Bruckner would have loved, followed by too many scurrying measures and finally the chorale giving a grand glorious Central European climax.

One is hardly astonished that Arensky and Glazunov found it too "dissonant" for their tastes (those augmented fifths would be like dog droppings on their velvet sensibilities), but Rimsky-Korsakov should have known better. This was simply a Germanic symphony with few disguises.

Fortunately, Riccardo Muti's love for the composer made for an engaging, even magisterial reading. He is a conductor whose commitment and energy has never been questioned, and he made the Phil sound terrific throughout the work.

In a program devoted to the key of C Minor, Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3* was given a splendid performance by the always-reliable Radu Lupu. Mr. Lupu is a frequent visitor to New York, both with orchestras and as a solo recitalist. And frankly, one cannot have enough of him. Mr. Lupu has never aimed for the grandiose, but he is hardly a delicate shrinking violet. Instead, he treats his composers—whether Debussy, Schumann or Beethoven—with the greatest respect. If he is not a piano-painter, he has such beauty of phrasing, such an appreciation of melodies that one always feels the greatest pleasure after a performance

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This was certainly true in the Beethoven, with a performance that resisted muscular energy but produced a series of mellow lines, a dynamic first-movement cadenza (Beethoven wrote two, and this, I believe, was the energetic first) and an extremely moving soliloquy for the second movement.

For the finale, Messrs Lupu and Muti revved up the tempo, making it almost robust, but Mr. Lupu retained that most daunting sense of unpretentious elegance and classical joy.

Harry Rolnick