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Ivo Pogorelich at GMU: Piano in an Unnatural Key

By Tim Page
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The trap awaiting anybody attempting to review Ivo Pogorelich's Sunday night piano recital at the George Mason University Center for the Arts is the risk of making the playing sound more interesting than it was.

Nobody can deny that it was, shall we say, an *unusual* occasion. Pogorelich, his head neatly shaven, performed in a pitch-black hall, illumined only by a spotlight aimed directly at the piano, which made him look like a bleached, hulking silhouette. There was minimal contact with the audience: His bows were perfunctory and it was hard to make out his face amid the glare and shadow. Pogorelich could hardly have drawn more attention to his exaggerated strangeness had he scrawled "I am a cult figure!" across his face in lipstick.

And then there was the playing -- a rendition of Chopin's Sonata in B Minor, Op. 58, that lasted at least twice as long as any I've heard, or even thought I could imagine. Indeed, the second movement was so elongated and pulled out of shape that all sense of melody and propulsion was lost. It was as though we had entered a time warp.

At times, it was even difficult to tell what key Pogorelich might be playing in, as he let the music for the right hand run so far ahead of the music for the left. It sounded like Pogorelich was following the directions for what might have been one of Steve Reich's early conceptual pieces -- slow the music down until all sense of forward motion is lost and the listener becomes concerned only with the churning of the gears.

One friend suggested that this was a "deconstruction" of the music; another observed that if we hadn't already known the pieces -- the Chopin sonata and the same composer's Nocturne in E, Op. 62, No. 2; Alexander Scriabin's Sonata No. 4; and Sergei Rachmaninoff's Sonata No. 2 -- it would have been all but impossible to recognize them, obscured as they were by Pogorelich's myriad "touches."

See, I told you it would sound interesting -- but it really wasn't. On the contrary, the playing, while never ordinary, was nevertheless spectacularly dull -- an impulsive succession of exaggerated ultra-delicacies and heavy-handed bludgeoning, in no perceptible order, self-indulgent to the point of solipsism.

The proper comparison is not to Glenn Gould (with whom Pogorelich is occasionally, and somewhat bizarrely, linked) but, rather, to David Helfgott, the beleaguered hero of the 1996 film "Shine."

Little more need be said about the performances: As Jim Carrey might have had it, they were "slow and slower," sounding at times like inspired sight-reading. The emphasis was always on what Pogorelich was doing *to* the music, rather than on the music itself. And for all of its self-

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