

Benjamin Hochman

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Baltacigil's Musical Hunger

By JAY NORDLINGER

Rossini wrote of "A Turk in Italy," but there have been very few Turks in classical music. Fasil Say, the pianist and composer, is one; and Efe Baltacigil, a young cellist, is another. Mr. Baltacigil is a very talented, capable guy, almost a sure bet. He was chosen for a European "Rising Stars" program. Again, a pretty sure bet.

And he played a recital on Tuesday afternoon under the auspices of the Merkin Concert Hall people. The recital took place at the Society for Ethical Culture, however, as Merkin is being renovated. There's a lot of that going on in New York — as always.

Mr. Baltacigil was joined by Benjamin Hochman, a young Israeli pianist. He, too, is a talented, capable guy. And the first half of their program was dominated by Shostakovich's Sonata in D minor, Op. 40.

The cellist produced a warm, streamlined sound — a sound eminently desirable from this instrument. And he played his Shostakovich intensely. An intense piece deserves an intense performance. In general, Mr. Baltacigil engages his instrument with controlled passion — intelligently governed passion — just as a certain late cellist from Russia used to do.

As for Mr. Hochman, he played the first movement of the Shostakovich with an admirable quiet confidence. Understatement was his friend. He realized that Shostakovich has built ample irony into the piece. Incidentally, from the side, Mr. Hochman looks rather like a young Adam Sandler. (Is it possible that Adam Sandler isn't young anymore?)

The Scherzo, Mr. Baltacigil tore into madly, whirling around, glissing delightedly and impishly. The next movement, Largo, is one of Shostakovich's sad, fearful songs.

EFE BALTACIGIL

Society for Ethical Culture

And Mr. Baltacigil played this beautifully, with that warm, bur-nished sound of his — a sound that made some of the pain go away.

And the closing Allegro spooked along in its characteristic way. Mr. Hochman could have done more to bring out Shostakovich's circus element — that cuckoo quality. But his understatement still served.

I should mention that, at a quiet, suspenseful point in the first movement, a cell phone went off — very loudly. It was playing the

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Cingular theme, I believe. And the two musicians were cool as cucumbers — they never batted an eye; they were unyielding from the music. I wish I could say the same of the audience.

As usual, the reactions were worse than the original offense: all the cluckings, and sighs, and groans, and scoldings. People seem to think that, if they glare and admonish, the person will turn his cell phone off faster. And don't they realize that no one in the hall is more mortified than he? It could happen to anyone — even the scolders.

People should have a little mercy, in addition to turning their cell phones off.

Mr. Baltacigil opened the second

half of his recital with a Turkish folk song, arranged for cello and piano by Hasan Ucarsu. In this arrangement, the song is simple but not unsophisticated. Mr. Ucarsu did good work. And Mr. Baltacigil played the piece with clear affection. Toward the end, he started to sing — I mean, not only with his cello, but with his mouth. I found this slightly show-offy and bathetic; but others, no doubt, found it touching.

And it's true that Mr. Baltacigil sang well!

The two musicians closed their program with a Brahms sonata — the Sonata No. 2 in F, Op. 99. They played this work with Romantic freedom, but always kept their heads. Remarkable about this performance was its complete absence of stupidity — even of willfulness. They did not insist on being "individuals"; they let Brahms be the individual.

Take the slow movement, Adagio affettuoso. Messrs. Baltacigil and Hochman were willing to let this be the beautiful song it is. And, no, Mr. Baltacigil didn't sing, except with his cello. (Perhaps he hadn't learned the words?)

The last movement, Allegro molto, is one of the most gladdening things in all of music. And these players let it flow in just this way. Mr. Baltacigil suffered a speck of pitch trouble — just a speck. I mention it only because it had not happened before.

Throughout the afternoon, Mr. Baltacigil played with what you might call a musical hunger — a smart, unapologetic, justified musical hunger. It was an enormous pleasure to hear him play. Somewhat instructive, too. As far as I'm concerned, this Rising Star has already risen.

Given Efe Baltacigil, Han-Na Chang, and Alisa Weilerstein — at a minimum — the future of the cello is in very good hands.



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