

Music review

Music review: Cellist Jonah Kim at Terrace Theater



ALL FUN: Jonah Kim made Piazzolla, Chaminade and Debussy sound so easy. (Korean Concert Society)

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There's a particular insouciance manifested by very young adults who are supremely good at playing musical instruments. They give off a sense of ease, of delight, sometimes of showboating.

Many of them come from the Curtis Institute of Music, America's leading conservatory and a known prodigy factory -- think Lang Lang, think Yuja Wang. Jonah Kim, the 22-year-old cellist who gave a recital at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater on Sunday afternoon, is cut from the same cloth. That's both high praise and a mixed blessing.

Kim -- whose performance celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Korean Concert Society -- can do pretty much what he wants on a cello. He showed it off from the start, sitting down with a "Serenade espagnole" by the beguiling Cécile Chaminade and coquetting with it to the point of egregiousness. He flirted with the line, shaped it, wrapped it around his fingers, pulled it out in a new dimension, all with the practiced ease of someone who knows that he knows a few cool tricks, milking a slender but appealing appetizer of a piece for all it was worth.

He proceeded to offer an ambitious program across a fair spectrum of styles, played with a lot of finesse and a lot of intensity and not always a lot of stylistic variation.

The program offered three sonatas in what you might call backward order. Debussy's Cello Sonata was written near the end of the composer's career -- here, full-blooded and aggressive. Grieg's A-Minor Sonata is a late-midcareer work; it was even more intense, and romantic in a slightly dated but very ardent way that Kim enjoyed. Then came Samuel Barber's Op. 6 Sonata. Like Kim, it's a product of Curtis, written when the composer was 22, and filled with lyrical, rich earnest melody -- a young man's work. Kim was beautifully partnered by Sean Kennard, a strong luminous pianist and fellow-Curtis product.

"I know how to play fun music, too," Kim announced to the audience before the final piece, Piazzolla's "Le Grand Tango." It was a somewhat bewildering statement, since he seemed to have been having plenty of fun with the Chaminade, or the comic pizzicatos in the second movement of the Debussy; while he made the ardor of the tango as strong and fiery as anything that had come before.

The statement showed that Kim is well-versed in the traditional concert rules that dictate that some music is to be valued more than other music. But it also revealed a question that emerges in the playing of the other abovementioned young virtuosos as well: They are terrifically competent in the classical repertory, but where do their own tastes lie? Kim showed that he has all the goods to progress, to excel and to entertain. He just didn't yet reveal all that much about himself.