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Delicate Touches Strongly Felt

By Vivien Schweitzer, December 13, 2013

“The best pianists are able to produce an alluring sound from any instrument. Richard Goode, during a magisterial performance of late Beethoven sonatas in May at Carnegie Hall, produced a glowing, warm sound that encompassed a wide dynamic spectrum from muted intimacy to full-throttle power without ever sounding harsh.”

Virtuosos often impress with their ability to produce unlikely sounds from their instruments. It’s such a pleasure when a pianist coaxes beautiful, singing lines from a percussive object and a singer produces trills and effects that seem impossible to have come from a human voice.

When a musician’s technical control is blended with almost intangible expressive gestures, a pause that perhaps a millisecond shorter would have lacked the same impact, or an unexpected and hair-raising change in dynamics, truly memorable performances occur.

Chris Thile is a master of the soft-spoken mandolin, rendering it a fitting vehicle for music from Bach to bluegrass. At a solo recital in October at Zankel Hall, he demonstrated an alluring range of colors and shadings in his interpretations of excerpts from Bach’s Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin.

At the 92nd Street Y in February, the composer-pianist Marc-André Hamelin again proved adept at wielding a jaw-dropping technique to create inspiring results, his impeccable touch and shading resulting in wonderful performances of works by Rachmaninoff, Mozart and Debussy.

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As Anthony Tommasini noted in his January review in The New York Times of Donizetti's "Maria Stuarda" at the Metropolitan Opera, the mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato's performance in the title role "will be pointed to as a model of singing in which all components of the art form — technique, sound, color, nuance, diction — come together in service to expression and eloquence."

The soprano Diana Damrau, in her debut performance as Violetta in Verdi's "La Traviata" at the Met in March, also wielded her instrument to fine effect, singing with clean coloratura throughout and deeply expressive pathos in arias like "Addio del passato."

Musicians, like athletes, can face myriad physical challenges. The tenor Rolando Villazón certainly deserves credit for rebuilding his instrument after surgery in 2009 to remove a congenital internal cyst on his left vocal cord. Mr. Villazón, whose burgeoning career was curtailed because of the impediment, offered an impassioned and convincing portrayal in his comeback at the Met, singing Lenski in a new production of Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin."

Richard Goode