

Review

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How To Have Fun With Mozart

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Mark Steinberg



Mitsuko Uchida

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By **Michelle Dulak**

There are whole swaths of music that have fallen out of the mainstream repertoire merely because they don't fit well with the design of a contemporary recital. One scholar, writing about the Haydn piano trios, began a chapter on them by saying that they were doomed music. The real place for them was in the course of a piano recital, but pianists wouldn't hire string players to fill out a recital, and established piano trios wouldn't bother with music where the role of the strings was so subsidiary.

The fate of the Haydn trios hasn't turned out to be quite as dire as that; there have proved to be any number of trios willing to treat them more or less as accompanied piano sonatas. The Mozart violin sonatas have not fared as well. When they show up on recitals (which is not all that often, in any case), it's generally in the context of a violin recital, with the pianist in the background and the violinist very much the star of the show, even in the act of backing ostentatiously out of the limelight.

It wasn't so on Sunday evening at Herbst Theater. Pianist Mitsuko Uchida was presumably the "draw" for this recital of four Mozart violin sonatas — her reputation as a Mozartean goes back to major-label recordings of the solo sonatas and the concertos that are now a couple of decades old, whereas her partner, Mark Steinberg, is the first violinist of a very fine but young and not terribly well-known string quartet (the Brentano). Add the full-up piano lid and what have you got? An imbalance of power?

Violinistic personality, violinistic humility

Well, no. Steinberg didn't try to out-shout the piano. He soared above it where Mozart gave him the opportunity; but he also blended right into the keyboard sound where he should have. I haven't encountered before a violinist with the humility to do that — really to vanish into the middle of a pianistic texture rather than throw up a signal flag to the audience: "I am here!" It was all the more remarkable in that when he was out above the texture and on his own, he had a distinct and strong personality. It wasn't centered in tone — his sound is lovely but not especially powerful or rich — it was a matter of articulation and inflection. There were places where he was technically dazzling (the closing movement of K. 526 comes to mind), and others where the ease and naturalness were a greater thing than any pyrotechnics could have been, like the ineffably sweet, simple second variation of the second movement of K. 379.

And Uchida? It was fascinating playing, full of inflection and deft articulation, especially in the bass, but not uniformly "delicate" — when she chose to take off, it was with a vengeance. K. 379, for example, saw her in several moods. The marvelous slow introduction, with its harp-like rolled chords (there's a place where I can't help but recall Strauss' "Morgen!"); the intensity of the minor-mode Allegro; and then the second-movement variations, where she was serene and agile and impish by turns. The first variation (which is for piano alone) might almost have been the accompaniment to an especially seraphic Schubert *Lied*; the next to last, delicately embroidered with violin pizzicato, has playfully-delayed top notes to the piano runs in its second half, which Uchida delighted in delaying just that tiny bit longer even than written. And then the return of the theme, only Allegretto rather than Andantino, and seeming just as natural in the faster tempo.

Close partnership, serious fun

Two things were obvious throughout the recital. One was that Steinberg and Uchida were communicating intimately. It wasn't just that certain phrases were coordinated exquisitely between one of the pianist's hands and the violinist's bow; it was that you could see it happening. There was none of the frosty "soloist-plus-accompanist" demeanor that too often accompanies recitals. It made for spellbinding playing. The treacherous central movement of K. 526, for example — the violin dogging the left hand's steps, and for once actually blending with it, and the great span of the movement not seeming a bit too large. The theme of the variations of K. 302 (half of which sits on a single pitch in the violin) feeling really like a theme, driven half by the repeated note on top, and half by the harmonic movement below.

The second is that serious fun was being had. You needed only to glimpse Uchida's face at the end of a movement. It wasn't the look of a professional who had successfully logged another 40 hours. It was naked glee. (Understandable; half the time I was feeling it myself.) The way the pair tore into things like the opening and closing movements of K. 526 spoke for itself. Ditto the first movement of K. 377.

The encore was the mysteriously beautiful second-and-last movement of another Mozart sonata, K. 304, in E minor, a key Mozart hardly ever used. I've heard it many times before; I've played it; but I've never heard it quite like that. It was gentle, quiet, understanding, and devastating.

(Michelle Dulak, editor of *San Francisco Classical Voice*, is a violinist and violist who has written about music for *Strings*, *Stagebill*, *Early Music America*, and the *New York Times*.)

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