

Uchida's Piano Sings, Often Well

by Stanley Ezrol

Pianists can be roughly classed as “singers,” those who coax polyphonic choral performances from their instrument, and bangers, who have a different approach. Even without seeing pianist Mitsuko Uchida singing along with her piano, you can tell she is a “singer.”

“You hear that I love playing the piano,” she says. “I even adore practicing.”

Her December 4 Kennedy Center performance, sponsored by the Washington Performing Arts Society, of **Schubert's Piano Sonata 18 in G major, D. 894**, and the Mozart sonata movement she played as an encore, were wonderfully articulate and poignant. The rest of the program, however, was not without problems.

She opened with **Beethoven's Sonata No 27 in E minor, Op. 90**, which she has not performed as much as the Mozart and Schubert works. The result was a certain freneticism, particularly on *forte* and *fortissimo* entrances of the first movement, and a tendency to over-pedal the second *cantabile* movement.

Her performance of Robert Schumann's delightful **Carnaval, Op. 9**, which is a sort of musical delicatessen (or carnival) consisting of twenty-two short “movements,” was uneven in its effect, marked, as was the Beethoven, by a certain tendency to melodrama.

The “Chopin” movement in the style of its namesake was, however, superb. The triumphant closing “Marche des Davidsbuedler contre les Philistins” (March of David's band against the Philistines), was wonderfully exuberant and brought the audience to its feet for an extended ovation.

The other item on the program, by atonalist Anton Webern, was performed as well as it can be. Unfortunately, in the case of a performer as thoughtful and skilled as Ms. Uchida, this was not an item forced into the program by kinky impresarios, but reflects her own thinking.

Ms. Uchida was introduced to German classical music through Wilhelm Furtwaengler, Arthur Schnabel, Lotte Lehmann, and other recordings her father brought to Japan with him in the 1950s on his return from a diplomatic post in Berlin. He decided that all of his children should learn the piano, and all three did. Mitsuko, the youngest, began at age three. She moved with her family to Vienna at twelve and studied there at the Vienna Academy of Music.

In Vienna, she developed and nurtured a passion not only for Mozart and the other classicists, but for the so-called “Second Viennese School,” the atonalists Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern. Her most important teacher, Richard Hauser, was a disciple of the latter.

Ms. Uchida is renowned for her Mozart interpretation, and calls Mozart “the greatest of composers.” She has recorded the complete Mozart piano sonata series for Philips, and performed it for Lincoln Center's Mozart bicentennial commemoration. Now, she is, unfortunately, determined to integrate more of the atonalist product into her repertoire, along with expanding her performance of Beethoven, Schubert, and other composers of music. ●