

TODAY'S ZAMAN

Italian harpist Tassini's splendid recital

Patrizia Tassini, a harpist from Udine, Italy, was invited by the Arp Sanati Derneđi (The Society for the Art of the Harp) of İstanbul to play a solo recital on May 24 at the Italian Cultural Center.

The society wanted to commemorate the fact that the first harp teachers in Turkey were sent by the Italian government to teach at the Ankara Conservatory in the 1950s. The two teachers stayed for seven years to train the first generation of Turkish harpists and those students then went on to train the next generation in Turkey. If Tassini's vigorous and consummately artistic performance is indicative of the kind of training those students received, then Turkey's harpists are in good stead.

Tassini's program led us chronologically through time beginning with the 17th century, showing how compositional styles changed along the way. She opened her concert with an anonymous "Partita," an appealing suite of antique airs and dances originally written for the lute. The four sections: Preludio, Balletto, Pastorale (containing the well-known melody "Greensleeves"), and Galliarda, were played with splendid style and clarity. After hearing them played on the modern harp with its full-bodied resonance, I imagine this to be a welcome improvement over the less powerful lute. Also, the amazing acoustics of the concert hall in this building were just perfect for hearing a solo instrument. No carpeting or other absorbent materials were present to spoil the reverberation necessary to hear the full range of overtones.

The harpist continued with "Sonata in C Minor" by Italian composer Giovanni Pescetti, originally composed for the harpsichord. This mid-18th century work borrowed from the Baroque era the Bach-like styling of the opening Allegro, but then put its feet squarely into the Classical era with the "Alberti bass" figures (repetitive broken triads as the accompaniment) of the following Andantino. Another "Sonata in C Minor," but this time by Czech composer Jan L. Dussek, represented the next generation. This late 18th-century composer was known for his works in the early years of the newly invented piano. This sonata showed a clearly identifiable change in compositional style that led to the romanticism of the 19th century.

Plunging into that romanticism was a plummy arrangement of Czech composer Bedrich Smetana's orchestral piece "The Moldau," titled here as "Fantasia on the Moldau Theme." And what a perfect choice of instruments it was, conveying

the feel of flowing water, as “Moldau” is the German name for the Vltava River that runs through Prague. This piece, especially on the harp, requires plenty of muscle and endurance throughout, as the player must maintain constant movement as it paints a magical picture of a journey down the river. If anything, this is Tassini’s hallmark as an artist. Far from possessing the delicate fingers associated with so many fairy creatures at the harp, she is a gutsy player with plenty of pluck.

Tassini concluded with two pieces by Spanish composer Isaac Albéniz -- “Granada-Serenata” and “Torre Bermeja” -- and “The Mandoline” by British composer Elias Parish Alvars, all 19th-century dreamy escapades with sparkling virtuoso elements.

Before one of her three encores, Tassini explained that May 24 is the date of Italy’s yearly celebration of Italian Infantry Day, the day when Italy’s troops entered World War I in 1915. To honor this occasion, she played “Leggenda del Piave,” a popular Italian song from 1918 that celebrates the military’s victory at the river Piave. She managed to transform an awkward piano score into something playable on the harp.

This was the only piece, incidentally, for which she used a score; all other pieces (some quite lengthy) were played from memory. This tradition is getting lost on the concert stage these days, and it is a pity. Playing from the pages, excepting complicated contemporary scores, doesn’t allow the performer to disengage from watching the notes, and instead devote the inner compass to interpretive freedom and communication with the audience. In the 1800s, Franz Liszt started the tradition of memorization of scores. He required it from all of his pupils, who passed on this requirement to their pupils. Thus, pianists and singers have primarily been trained for many generations to memorize recital programs. Tassini is carrying on this artistically important practice. Let’s hope all the Turkish harpists (and other musicians) are paying attention.

Vivaldi in Topkapı’s garden

İstanbul music impresario Hakan Erdoğan extended his “Bach Before and After” series, this time with “Pastoral Concerts” in the gardens of Topkapı Palace. The gardens were an ideal setting for the event, which was subtitled “En Yeşil Bahar, En Güzel Yaz” (The greenest spring, the most beautiful summer), but unfortunately the weather didn’t cooperate. The first concert on May 26 was uncomfortably cold, so cross your fingers for good weather during the May 30 concert.

This concert paired up the Bulgarian ensemble Sofia Soloists, led by Plamen Djouroff at the harpsichord, with Japanese violinist Sayaka Shoji in a program of Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” and a potpourri of potboilers from the top 40

classics. Perhaps it was the cold air, but there were some ragged moments throughout that threatened the purity of the performance.

Shoji shone vividly in her technically solid performance of this Vivaldi classic suite of four mini-concertos devoted to the descriptions of the year's meteorological changes. The Sofia Soloists employed some of the country's finest string players, all of whom were closely miked for this outdoor concert. There were moments where their perfect intonation and astute synchronization were spoiled by some bizarre occurrences at the maestro's harpsichord, which otherwise might not have been noticed except for when he clearly started off in the wrong key. Shoji was the crystal-clear jewel of the evening with her clean and accomplished rendition of Vivaldi, a stalwart accomplishment despite the weather's unfriendliness.

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Muhabir: ALEXANDRA IVANOFF
