

January 14, 2016

Lukas Geniušas – brilliance and maturity

In a recital of unshowy expressiveness, the young Russian revealed why he has taken prizes in both the Chopin and Tchaikovsky piano competition

St John's Smith Square, London - Lukas Geniušas's appearance in the Southbank's international piano series – which has partly decamped to St John's while the Queen Elizabeth Hall is refurbished – was an arrival. His London debut last year, in the Wigmore Hall's Sunday-morning sherry slot, was somewhat under the radar for a pianist who had won silver at the 2010 Chopin competition. He went on to take silver again at last summer's Tchaikovsky competition, and the garlands are well deserved. At 25, Geniušas plays with a prizewinner's brilliance, yet with a mature ability to recreate a work's architecture, and an expressiveness that doesn't overtly draw attention to itself.

He began with Beethoven's Sonata No 5 in C Minor, the opening crisp and almost bald-sounding, the sweet, smooth answering theme its ideal foil. The middle movement had an eloquent simplicity, and if passages of the finale were slightly scrambled, all was resolved in the weight and control of the ending.

In Brahms's Sonata No 1, again, he seemed to have a long view of the piece in mind. The opening movement was as sonorous as it was rhythmically obsessive, the third movement explosive; nothing outstayed its welcome.

Then came some miniatures: Bartók's Three Burlesques, dispatched with effective understatement. The second, entitled Slightly Topsy, was a little unsteady on its feet, then tumbled over gently at the end; the third whirred along with hummingbird lightness. Geniušas gave us no time to brace ourselves before launching into Prokofiev's wartime Sonata No 7 and its unstoppable march theme, skittish yet brutal. The uneasy second movement gave way to a finale that initially seemed heavy and mechanical, and perhaps a fraction slow. Again, though, Geniušas made it work, setting the whole instrument ringing towards the end while maintaining that same momentum. He signed off with Chopin – a wistful mazurka, and a waltz that was a touch too swift for comfort, but brilliant nonetheless.

by Erica Jeal