



Bella Hristova, violinist

 Oberon's Grove

Bella Hristova at Merkin Hall

-Philip Gardner | Oberon's Grove | March 16, 2015

I've gotten to know something of the lovely young Bulgarian violinist Bella Hristova's artistry thru her appearances with Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Tonight at Merkin Hall, under the auspices of Young Concert Artists, she presented a recital of solo works by Bach, Ysaÿe, and Joan Tower (world premiere) and then joined the redoubtable pianist Joseph Kalichstein for a performance of the Beethoven sonata #10 in G-major.

Gowned in deep violet, Ms. Hristova's opening Bach (the Partita No. 1 in B minor, BWV 1002) displayed both her mellow, redolent tone and the amazing deftness of her virtuosic coloratura technique.

Eugene Ysaÿe's Sonata No. 4 in E Minor (1923) is one of a set of six solo sonatas that the composer created for specific violinist/friends; a fabulous violinist himself, Ysaÿe placed countless technical challenges in these works, which can be successfully played only by accomplished virtuosos. As music, they are perhaps more impressive than actually enjoyable to hear; one admires the player's leaping of the various hurdles but not much spiritual satisfaction can be derived, at least not for me.

The 4th sonata, known as the Kreisler, was imbued with both passion and perfume by Ms. Hristova tonight. She succeeded in making musical sense out of the piece, though one still had a feeling of the composer throwing "everything but the kitchen sink" at the soloist in the taxing final movement.

Similarly demanding but somehow far more congenial was the wildly successful world premiere of Joan Tower's *Second String Force*. Ms. Tower is among my favorites on the contemporary composing scene; to date everything I have heard by her has been both finely crafted and truly enjoyable - something you can't honestly say about many of the new works that come along these days.

Ms. Hristova is commissioning six works from today's composers, and if the other five are half as satisfying as Ms. Tower's creation, they will be truly worthwhile. Opening with a pensive, almost hesitant feeling, the violinist is soon sent scurrying in passages featuring a plentitude of trills. At one moment soaring into an upward drone, Ms. Hristova then spirals downward into a super-sustained trill and on to a swirling motif; she trills up and down the range before again sailing to the stratosphere with a high shimmer. A brief soulful interlude is followed by buzzing scalework, increasing in volume. Arpeggios glisten off her strings, culminating in a poignant rising theme.

The audience embraced the work heartily, and both soloist and composer were re-called for extra bows as cheers rang out. During the interval we had a chance to congratulate Ms. Tower, whose "Bach" evening at The Miller Theatre last year we had so enjoyed.

The Steinway was then rolled out, and pianist Joseph Kalichstein joined Ms. Hristova for the Beethoven sonata for piano and violin, No. 10 in G-major, Opus 96. The violinist was at her most engaging here, deeply expressive in the flowing *adagio*. She and Mr. Kalichstein struck up an admirable rapport, and though once in a while it seemed the piano was overwhelming the violin a bit, one needed to recall that this sonata is for "pianoforte with violin accompaniment" and thus the keyboard's prominence was perfectly understandable. The two musicians displayed their obvious affection for the music in a richly 'sung' and savorable performance. Persistent applause called them out again and again, but they wisely eschewed the option of an encore, leaving us with the Beethoven resonating in our souls.

