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Vadim Gluzman, Angela Yoffe, Wigmore Hall

Husband-and-wife duo scours the soul in Prokofiev and dazzles in brighter music

by David Nice | Sunday, 29 December 2013



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There were two strong reasons, I reckoned, for struggling to the Wigmore Hall during the interstitial last week of the year. One was an ascetic wish to be harrowed by the mind and soul of winter, both within and without, in Prokofiev’s towering D minor Violin Sonata, after so much Christmas sweetness and light. The other was the memory of Ukrainian-Israeli violinist Vadim Gluzman’s 2008 Tchaikovsky Concerto performance with Neeme Järvi and the London Philharmonic Orchestra – not just a great performance, of which there are plenty every year, but a great partnership, one of half a dozen that stick in the memory.

Surely on that evidence Gluzman would choose a duo partner of equal musical intelligence (and his must be one of the highest in the world)? He did. Angela Yoffe, Riga-born and Tel Aviv-based, is one of the most compelling and radiant pianists it’s ever been my pleasure to watch; you can hardly take your eyes off her vivid expressions even when Gluzman’s rich sound and perfectly intoned phrasing are beyond belief. Why so perfectly wedded to his seemingly effortless but phenomenally disciplined technique? Because they’re married, it transpired when I read the programme on the way home (and yes, I know I ought to know their recordings, but I’ll rectify that now).

The equilibrium was especially necessary in a light-and-dark first half. Mozart must have astonished the world when he produced a stream of sonatas giving the piano absolute parity with the violin, and the F major Violin Sonata K377 has plenty of idiosyncrasies. The *moto perpetuo* triplets of the first movement were done with lightness of touch but an underlying tension in the sparkle, Yoffe watching Gluzman like an especially vivacious hawk. Lines shared in the central D minor variations were unbelievably seamless, whether in consonant turns and trills or in the nuances of a unison legato.

That prepared us, to a degree, for the darker adventure to come in Prokofiev's most troubling masterpiece, a titan to equal the three so-called "war" sonatas (though there is even less sign of external impetus here). Gluzman and Yoffe have sounded the depths in a striking contemporary monument, Lera Auerbach's 24 Preludes, and they made this stunner of the 1940s seem as if it had been composed yesterday. No applied atmosphere or pathos here, only the thunder of the piano's left-hand octaves, the uniquely dry, unearthly pizzicati and the flawless muted runs against distant bells which Prokofiev told David Oistrakh, the work's awesome dedicatee, should sound "like wind in a graveyard".

Those supernatural runs return at the tragic end of the work, but in between this duo found a savage exultation in the grim scherzo's dissonances, an eerie focus rather than a Ravelian water-music in the slow movement and a driven quality to the only two proper songs in the entire piece. I've heard at least one other live performance equally great – Leonidas Kavakos's and Enrico Pace's in the same hall – but none as spare in its expressiveness as this.





In the second half, there was one introspective beauty to match Prokofiev's harsher world – the *Méditation* which Tchaikovsky originally planned for his Violin Concerto before substituting it with the Canzonetta. It seemed to me, from Gluzman's phrasing, that this is the more personal melody – he told a lovely little story before playing it of running through the piece at the St Petersburg Conservatory looking out on a birch sapling with two birds sheltering from a downpour beneath it – and Yoffe wrought her magic in the wistful introduction and the loving counterpoint so typical of the composer in the refrain.

The two other pieces in Tchaikovsky's little compendium for his patron Nadezhda von Meck were smaller beer, like the rest of the surrounding high jinks, though still done with the same seeming ease

that distinguished the whole recital. There was more exquisite dovetailing between violin and piano in the *Suite Italienne* Stravinsky wrought from numbers in his Pulcinella ballet, and presumably only a pianist of Yoffe's calibre would permit the excursion of a demented crowd-pleaser, Castelnuovo-Tedesco's harmonically dizzying transcription of the "Largo al Factotum" from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*. The violinistic tricks showed Gluzman just as equal to Heifetz's panache as he had earlier been to Oistrakh's philosophic depth.

A grindingly brilliant encore, Schnittke's Polka from his music to Gogol's *The Nose* (not to be confused with Shostakovich's opera), reminded me happily of 2013's most revelatory work from that composer. And now, it seems, I need to revise yesterday's classical "best of year" to include this duo's Prokofiev.