

ZEALnyc



Review: With Jaw-Dropping Technique, Cellist Andrei Ioniță Dazzles at Zankel Hall

By Joshua Rosenblum, Contributing Writer, April 23, 2018

Andrei Ioniță, a Romanian cellist who won first prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in 2015, dazzled the audience at his April 19 Zankel Hall recital from the instant he started playing. His opening piece, Pietro Antonio Locatelli's Cello Sonata in D Major, starts with eleven rapid-fire pick-up notes, a phrase that recurs frequently throughout the first movement. The amount of control required to play this figure with up-bow spiccato—wherein the bow bounces lightly on the string without changing direction—is considerable. Later in the movement, however, Ioniță played an entire six bars of spiccato running eighth notes (or forty-eight individual notes) in one bow, to astonishing effect. Ioniță continued to show absolute technical mastery throughout the piece, especially in a virtuoso succession of upper range arpeggios, harmonics, and double stops in the third movement. It all seemed nearly effortless.

But beyond his jaw-dropping instrumental technique, Ioniță plays with a passionate intensity that is transfixing. He clearly experiences the music on a profoundly meaningful level, in a way that would be difficult to put into words. (Of course, one could say that is part of the point of making music—to communicate things that cannot be verbalized.) In the eloquent slow movement of the Locatelli piece, he played with sweet tone and perfectly centered pitch, approaching every phrase as if it were a vital event. In general, his music-making seemed organic and flexible throughout the evening—spontaneous and full of life, quivering with its own potential.

Typical of Ioniță's creativity and individuality was the familiar first movement of Stravinsky's *Suite Italienne*, the composer's adaptation for cello and piano of his *Pulcinella* ballet. In the opening theme alone Ioniță presented a broad range of dynamics, bow strokes, vibrato speed, and articulations. As a result, he appeared to be showering the phrases with a torrent of sparkling detail and variety. In the lilting *Serenata* movement—played on oboe in the original orchestration, but absolutely gorgeous on cello—he seemed to see a world of possibility in every bar and phrase. When repeating a section, he sometimes produced a wispy, ghostly sound by lightening pressure on his bow and playing close to the bridge of the instrument. Not necessarily the prettiest of timbres, this effect was certainly intriguing in terms of color and contrast. Ioniță and Naoko Sonoda, his elegant pianist, tore blisteringly through the “*Tarantella*” movement with electrifying ensemble precision. Sonoda, a consummately refined musician, delivered unfailingly shapely phrases with balletic-like arm movements, but she proved capable of thundering just as ferociously as Ioniță when needed.

The second half began with Bach's *Cello Suite No. 2 in D Minor*. Ioniță's rendition of the first movement's stately opening passages was carefully considered but not overly intense or indulgent. As the piece proceeded, however, the music seemed to overtake him, and he started playing with more abandon, and more deeply into the strings. Clearly, it was an emotional experience for him, and thus it was for the audience as well. Sometimes it almost seemed like he was in a trance—his eyes stayed closed for several seconds at the end of the *Courante*, which he took at a bat-out-of-hell tempo, before he began the mournful, meditative *Sarabande*. Ioniță clearly did not necessarily feel that every note had to sound with absolutely beautiful tone—much more important were meaning, depth, creative variety, and authenticity.

Shostakovich's *Cello Sonata*, also in D Minor, concluded the program. The piece, composed in 1934, starts out in an almost throwback, Romantic vein, with a broad, lyrical opening melody, and a slower second theme that arches inquisitively and sublimely upward. The movement's unusual recapitulation section brings back the opening themes in slow motion, with staccato accompaniment in the piano. Ioniță rendered this as if he were, with great reverence, channeling Shostakovich directly. In the demonic, three-quarter time *Allegro*, he seemed almost possessed, but it didn't come off as superficial histrionics—it was more like an internal, deeply personal experience, as opposed to something for the audience's benefit. The third movement, with its stark and barren beginning, was a remarkable display of Ioniță's individuality—sometimes he would change tone and intensity several times over the course of a single note, but always thoughtfully rather than capriciously. The last movement, flashy and bravura but introspective and brooding (vintage Shostakovich, in other words), features an unusually difficult piano part, which Sonoda tore through with ferocity. These two top-rank musicians have greatly contrasting artistic temperaments, yet they were nonetheless marvelously well-matched duo partners, and nowhere more so than in this gripping movement. When Ioniță and Sonoda played the famous Bach *Arioso* from *Cantata BWV 156* as an encore, it was as if they and the audience were discovering a rare treasure for the first time.