

The hammer and how to swing it - Symphony nails season shut with Chopin and Beethoven

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Maybe it's just baseball fever, but there was something clean and mighty, something Hank Aaron-like, about the way the Lansing Symphony Orchestra and guest piano soloist Ivan Moshchuk got down to business at the symphony's season closer Tuesday night.

They could have fussed, spat tobacco and scratched themselves if they'd wanted to; the hyper-expressive music on Tuesday's slate offered plenty of opportunities for that. But Moshchuk, 19 years old, played Chopin's second piano concerto with such clarity and fluidity the piano seemed to disappear.

We're told the piano is a big box of hammers — a percussion instrument — but Moshchuk played it as if it were a prism and his fingers were beams. The notes were there, crisp and clean, but utterly thunkless.

As one of two pianists designated as a Gilmore Young Artist this year by the prestigious Gilmore International Keyboard Festival, Moshchuk is on a heady victory lap of recitals and concerts this spring, but he doesn't act like it. Tuesday night, he might as well have been alone in his room, communing with music he clearly loves. He wasn't out to conquer or charm, and that brought the audience even closer to him.

Not content with dissolving his own ego, Moshchuk also managed to distill Chopin's romantic self-absorption into a crystalline chain of emotional logic. Chopin puts up a tough front — he'll throw in a few stern chords now and then, just to command your respect — but there's a wet, undulating udder under his music most pianists can't resist milking.

Moshchuk didn't go for wet. Instead, he sprinkled rosin on the floor and turned the concerto's virtuosic runs and loops into a lean, light ballet. He played out enough line for the more languorous passages, but always kept the chain of logic taut. The disciplined emotion paid off in audience attentiveness. Toward the end of the slow movement, Moshchuk sprinkled a few notes down, like snowflakes on a crisp December morning, and the effect was so beautiful nobody in the hall dared to breathe, let alone cough.

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