

A viola performance that burned bright

By Jeremy Eichler
GLOBE STAFF

As string instruments go, the viola was a late arrival to the party. Until the 20th century, the list of

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important solo works written for the instrument could fit on a postage stamp. Even today, there are very few violists who have made substantial careers as soloists.

Kim Kashkashian is one of them. This excellent violist also teaches at the New England Conservatory and is an active chamber musician. Sunday afternoon at the Gardner Museum, she was joined by the pianist Lydia Artymiw for a rewarding recital of music by Kurtag, Brahms, and Shostakovich.

The Hungarian composer Gyorgy Kurtag is a master of Weberian compression; he pours vast quantities of emotion into the smallest of musical spaces. His style calls to mind Isaac Babel's writerly dictum that a sentence is complete not when there is nothing more to add but when there is nothing more to take away.

Kashkashian and Artymiw began their program with a sharp and vital rendition of a suite of

Kim Kashkashian, viola
With Lydia Artymiw, piano
At: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum,
Sunday afternoon

miniatures culled from two Kurtag works: "Signs, Games, and Messages" and "Jatekok." These short pieces call for some unconventional techniques — at one point the violist plays purposefully out of tune, at another she uses a practice mute to dampen her sound to a whisper — but one never feels that Kurtag is merely striving after exotic effect. The gestures telegraph a rare urgency of expression as well as a rugged sense of beauty.

The duo followed the Kurtag with Brahms's much-loved E-flat Major Sonata (Op. 120, No. 2); their playing was boldly contoured and at the same time well-grounded. Kashkashian's tone was full but not pressed, mellow yet singing. Artymiw responded in kind.

But perhaps inevitably, the recital's center of gravity was its concluding work: Shostakovich's extraordinary Viola Sonata, his very last composition, written only weeks before his death in



RUTH WALZ/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Violist Kim Kashkashian performed music by Kurtag, Brahms, and Shostakovich at the Gardner Museum.

1975. The last movement is a tribute to Beethoven, and its haunting luminosity and spiritual grandeur suggest that the two composers shared a secret in their final hours. The mood at the end is bleak, and yet there is no denying that this is

music limned with a profound sense of hope. The final notes on Sunday burned like bright embers drifting up into a darkened sky.

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