

Violist shows rare artistry

Kashkashian plays well-chosen pieces with beauty, depth

By Joshua Kosman
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Viola virtuosos are a rare breed, and all the more precious for their scarcity. Kim Kashkashian, who gave a wondrous recital Sunday afternoon at San Francisco State University's McKenna Theatre, is one of the rarest — an artist who combines a probing, restless musical intellect with enormous beauty of tone.

REVIEW

The free recital, the final offering in the school's invaluable Morrison Artists Series, was as striking for its programming as for its depth of execution. Accompanied deftly if reticently by pianist Tatevik Mokatsian, Kashkashian served up music by Bach, Hindemith and Rebecca Clarke, as well as a few all-too-brief solo offerings by the 75-year-old Hungarian master György Kurtág.

To each of these pieces Kashkashian brought a distinctive string tone, at once warm and assertive, and combined it with plenty of rhythmic vitality, precision and rhetorical clarity. The results were invigorating and often thrilling.

Violists have always looked out for one another, helping to add to the instrument's relatively meager solo repertoire, and the most

idiomatic and imaginative writing came in the sonatas by Hindemith and Clarke — both violists who understood how to show the instrument to best advantage.

Hindemith's F-Major Sonata, from his Op. 11 grab bag of solo sonatas, has a little of the careful fastidiousness that clings to many of his instrumental works, but the affection he lavishes on the viola carries the day.

The opening "Fantasie," in which the viola goes off on a long, dreamy monologue graced by arching phrases and quick, purling ornamentation, contains the work's most affecting writing, and Kashkashian invested it with passion and emotional freedom. She had to cool things down a bit for the crisper impulses of the ensuing theme-and-variations and the brisk finale, but here too the playing was fierce and beautiful.

Clarke was an Englishwoman of German and American parentage, and her 1919 sonata shows a similarly various range of artistic influences. Some contemporary listeners, in fact, unable to imagine a work of such stature coming from a woman's pen, attributed it either to Ravel or Ernest Bloch writing pseudonymously.

The mistake is easy to understand, though other strains are at

work here too — Debussy in the evocative opening movement, Elgar in the gaily tripping central scherzo. Yet all of it is fused into a distinctive late-Romantic style that combines rhetorical urgency with a welcome rhythmic playfulness, and Kashkashian and Mokatsian gave it the afternoon's most well-defined performance.

From Kurtág's "Signs, Games and Messages," an ever-shifting smorgasbord of tiny epigrams for string instruments, Kashkashian offered five selections. "Vagdalkozas" was a brilliant 15-second exercise in blunt concision, and a matched pair of etudes stretched the boundaries of chromatic playing and vibrato to encompass a fascinating range of pitches.

Most moving, though, was the opening "Tamar Blum," written as consolation for a friend of the composer's on the death of her husband. Here Kurtág keeps two melodic lines going simultaneously — now in unison, now diverging — as an elegiac evocation of marital love.

The afternoon opened with two of Bach's organ sonatas, in brisk, sharply etched but sometimes tentative readings.

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