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Tedi Papavrami' sets hearts on fire with İstanbul State Symphony

In the world of solo violinists, the competition is fierce. The ones on the global concert and recording circuit now are, for the most part, brilliantly accomplished, expertly trained and rock-solid musicians. But then one comes along that literally knocks your socks off, tears well up in your eyes and you can't believe what you have just heard. This was my response to Albanian violinist Tedi Papavrami.

Is it Papavrami or Paganini? Sometimes it's hard to explain why someone's performance leaps up and zaps you in the heart. Perhaps that describes the mystery of the great Niccolò Paganini, the legendary 19th-century violin virtuoso who achieved the equivalent of superstar status in his time. Combining wizard-level artistry and palpable ardor (which might have included the sight of his wild mane of black hair), he became such a romantic figure that women often fainted at his concerts. In the 20th century alone, at least 23 films have been made about him. Billed by his advertisers as a phenomenon and a modern Orpheus, Paganini said at the height of his career, "I am not handsome, but when women hear me play, they come crawling to my feet."

That almost happened to Mr. Papavrami, who came to İstanbul last week to perform with the İstanbul State Symphony Orchestra (İDSO), conducted by Alexander Rahbari. In an all-Brahms program that included the composer's Serenade No. 1, Papavrami performed his great Violin Concerto in D major. The same mystique that (I hear) Paganini had, Papavrami has. Although he's handsome, tall, thin and muscular (he was wearing a stretch jacket that hid nothing) it's not all cosmetic. Mr. Papavrami can play, as they say in the music industry. The İDSO program was subtitled "Sevgililer Günü" (Valentine's Day), and what a romantic occasion it was! Papavrami's intensely shimmering tone sent shivers down the spine, and I witnessed couples around me

grabbing each other's hands. His vivid, exciting performance, replete with thrilling dramatic contrast and technical prowess, left jaws agape. His muscular command of the concerto, as seemingly easy as if it were his morning warm-up, almost spoiled us for hearing future interpretations of the same piece.

This concerto, known primarily for the infectiously joyful melody in the third movement, reminiscent of a gypsy dance, is the essence of late 19th century German Romanticism. Brahms wrote it for his friend Joseph Joachim, an important soloist and pedagogue at the time, and it is considered one of the four great classical violin concertos. Its expansive and expressive development of delicious themes throughout keep the listener hooked on its energy and brilliance, partly due to the fact that it's in D major, a key for which the four strings resonate most sympathetically. The second movement offers an extended lovely oboe solo (beautifully played by Sezai Kocabiyik), which is soon echoed by the violin. The exciting finale in the last movement sent everyone into a frenzy as Papavrami's violin set itself on fire and conductor Rahbari smartly encouraged the conflagration. I was also thrilled to see lots of children in the audience -- apparently specifically to hear Papavrami -- who got to witness a truly worthy musical genius playing such a great piece of music.

It's Paganini and Papavrami

His encore was -- no surprise -- Paganini's Caprice No. 24 in A minor in which he amazed and mesmerized the audience with some of most fiendishly difficult violin music on the planet. It's chock full of octave études, exercises in thirds, plucking the strings while bowing other notes, athletic leaps and trills, and all based on a prizewinner of a melody: Rachmaninoff took it and created his famous "Variations on a Theme by Paganini" for piano and orchestra. It's one thing to play all the notes correctly; it's another to own them. Papavrami's inherent proprietary position on Paganini's 24 Caprices, Op. 1 is being actively established; he has been playing all 24 in one concert -- a feat not many violinists would attempt -- and he recorded them last year on the Aeon label. His audacious performance, I should point out, was also partly augmented by his superb instrument's exquisitely responsive tone; it was made in 2005 by luthier Christian Bayon.

Rahbari's vivid serenade

The audience, somewhat minus the hordes of kids who came for the violinist, got to enjoy a different kind of romantic musical adventure on the stage: Brahms' entertaining Serenade No. 1. It's a work characterized by a kind of jovial countryside atmosphere that's painted in six scenic sections. At first a pastorella, an idyll that opened with a horn call, then a merry folk dance, followed by a sunset in the forest suggested by rich cello and bass sonorities, two sprightly minuets and a wild fox hunt with hunting horns announcing their quest. Flutist Bülent Evcil, clarinetist Ayşegül Kirmanoğlu and French hornist Ertuğrul Köse ably contributed numerous lively solos throughout. The piece galloped along with rich style and color, skillfully driven by Rahbari, who always demands a fully committed and gutsy sound from the orchestra. A master chef, he had the good sense to allow another tune-up between sections when the need arose. Rahbari's dynamic conducting is good for the İDSO, and the orchestra rises to his artistic demands. **ALEXANDRA IVANOFF □ İSTANBUL - 18 February 2010**
