

CHRISTOPH von DOHNÁNYI

CONDUCTOR

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CHICAGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Pianist Lewis shines in debut with CSO

REVIEW | From prodigy to mature artist

WITH CHRISTOPH VON DOHNANYI AND PAUL LEWISI • HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

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BY ANDREW PATNER

With no hype and even very little standard promotion, Liverpool, England-born Paul Lewis has emerged in recent years as one of the world's finest pianists. At 37, he no longer should be judged as a "younger pianist" but simply as the great artist he is increasingly showing himself to be.

Two years ago, Lewis made his superb Chicago debut with Colin Davis and the London Symphony Orchestra in Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto. A year ago, he made his Orchestra Hall recital debut in a rich, challenging solo program. On Thursday night, he at last played as soloist for the first time with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

For those who have been following this thoughtful musician, whether live or on his many recordings, all expectations were confirmed by his playing of Mozart's A Minor Concerto No. 12, K. 414. Lewis somehow marries intellectual insight with total technical command and a true soulfulness. For those new to this soft-spoken player who manages to be a non-nonsense performer *and* capable of transmitting joy and subtle humor in his interpretations, he must have been a revelation.

The K. 414 is a work filled with booby traps that only the most careful pianists can avoid. There is an unusual back and forth between soloist and orchestra, a mixing of delicate and stirring passages and a lightness that is deceptive in sounding easy to achieve. Lewis navigated all of these -- and even managed to integrate his own blend of the two sets of cadenzas Mozart wrote for this 1782 work along with some of his own figurations -- as if the work were written just for him. Audience and CSO musicians demanded several curtain calls.

Veteran German guest conductor Christoph von Dohnanyi was backing Lewis every step of the way, breathing with him and shaping the reduced orchestra to match the pianist's take. On his own, Dohnanyi led a sobering -- though never dull -- performance of Bartok's 1939 Divertimento for String Orchestra, often seen, as its name indicates, as a light and joyful work. Dohnanyi, who was turning 10 when this work was written on the eve of World War II, and 15 when his own father was executed in 1945 for his role in the failed plot to kill Hitler, knows better. It was good, too, to hear the CSO strings showing their best after the Berlin Philharmonic's famed sections played here on Monday night.

Dohnanyi closed with the Schumann C Major Second Symphony, Op. 61, giving the Romantic work more structure than it probably has and making it much more interesting and fulfilling to hear than it often is.

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