

Evgeny Kissin mesmerizes with Bach, Chopin, and Shostakovich at Severance (May 7)



Russian pianist Evgeny Kissin performed a program of Kissin's J.S. Bach, Chopin, and Shostakovich, plus encores, at Mandel Concert Hall at Severance Music Center on Wednesday, May 7. (Photo by Roberto Serra - Iguana Press/Getty Images) Getty Images

by Kevin McLaughlin | Cleveland Classical

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Few pianists today elicit the kind of eager expectation, borne of star-power and reputation, that Evgeny Kissin does the moment he takes the stage. There is a quality to his presence — austere and shy yet fully possessed — that electrifies a listener before a single note sounds. In Mandel

Concert Hall at Severance Music Center on Wednesday evening, May 7, Kissin's program of J.S. Bach, Chopin, and Shostakovich, plus encores, had something to satisfy every fan's wish.

Bach's *Partita No. 2 in C minor* began the evening on low heat, with an understated approach to the *Sinfonia*'s long, elegant lines. But it wasn't until the final *Capriccio* that the pianist's rhythmic and technical polish fully enlivened Bach's polyphony without diminishing its architectural integrity.

If Kissin's Bach was crystalline and slightly abstract, his Chopin was warmly personal. The *Nocturne in C-sharp minor*, Op. 27, No. 1 revealed itself as he teased out the disquiet beneath its exterior lyricism. In its companion, the *Nocturne in A-flat major*, Op. 32, No. 2, Kissin sustained an exquisite pianissimo throughout the opening theme, conjuring a delicate, almost whispered intimacy, only to have the music erupt in the dramatic middle section.

The *Scherzo No. 4 in E major* again reminded us of Kissin's formidable technique — and of Chopin's devilish complexity. With fleetness and glittering filigree, the pianist summoned poetic lilt out of the second theme.

After intermission came a striking pivot to Shostakovich. Kissin has long championed this composer, but on this occasion, he gave him pride of place. The *Sonata No. 2 in B minor*, was the evening's center of gravity — an inventive and compelling work that resists easy resolution. Now wearing glasses and assisted by a page-turner, Kissin leaned into the keyboard so as not to miss any of the sonata's twists and turns. With its wandering melancholy, the second movement resembled a jazz ballad, though one less tonally or emotionally resolved. The finale begins with a lengthy unaccompanied theme in the right hand followed by several variations, whose psychological outcome both Shostakovich and Kissin seemed unwilling to give away until the very end.

The pair of *Preludes and Fugues* from Op. 87 — first in D-flat major, then in D minor — revealed even further depths. In the D-flat major Prelude, Kissin relished the sly charm that briefly softens Shostakovich's characteristic irony. But the D minor Fugue was something else: a slowly emerging, magisterial edifice, culminating in a breadth of sound that, in Kissin's magical hands, seemed positively organ-like.

The Mandel audience cheered and applauded wildly, earning themselves three encores: Wilhelm Kempf's transcription of J.S. Bach's *Siciliano*, BWV 1031, and Chopin's *Scherzo in B-flat minor* and *Waltz in C-sharp minor*.

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