

Pianism in the afternoon : Classical pianist Zeynep Ucbasaran presented a dynamic display

By JOSEF WOODARD NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONENT

November 30, 2010 11:48 AM

Chamber music has a new venue to add to the classical music map in Santa Barbara. As of this season, the long-standing "Song Tree" concert series at the "Live Oak" Universalist Unitarian Church - mostly focused on singer-songwriter and folk music performers in its nighttime slot - has branched out into periodic classical afternoons. These are Sunday afternoon musical encounters worth putting on one's radar.

As amply and artfully demonstrated on Sunday, through the dynamic display of pianist Zeynep Ucbasaran's recital, the new building makes for a wonderful setting for chamber music. It's a splendid new chapel, an open-feeling space surrounded by trees and daylight filtering through strategically placed windows, making for slowly shifting shapes around the room over the course of the recital.

Apart from the fact that the baby grand piano was a bit boxy, the music befitted sonic grandeur and the context seemed ideally suited to a performance of works by Mozart, Chopin, Schubert and Liszt - Liszt being one of this pianist's specialties. Ms. Ucbasaran's appearance was, in fact, a substitution for guitarist Chris Judge, who had a scheduling conflict. The performance afforded listeners a too-rare chance to hear a prominent classical pianist who travels the world but has lived locally since 1996 (and has recorded some of her several recordings at the local Hahn Hall).

Born in Istanbul and trained in Europe and at USC, the pianist has a glorious, lived-in and wise touch, and a ready command of the material. On Sunday, she presented a moving, musicality-enriched approach, in ways both over-arching and finely detailed.

For this occasion, the pianist opted to switch out the original program's one piece by a contemporary composer, Robert Muczynski, for Schubert's Impromptu No. 2 in E-flat, an exciting early romantic blur of a piece. While it would have been nice to hear the pianist in more living composer mode, the switch did make for a more contiguous 19th-century program.

From her days at the Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest on through her prizewinning performances in the Los Angeles Liszt competitions, Ms. Ucbasaran has been an avid and avowed Liszt-ian interpreter. On

this afternoon, she took on the composer's "Vallée d'Obermann," from his set of suites, "Années de pèlerinage (Years of Pilgrimage)." The pianist expertly tackled the compact but complete miniature's high-contrast landscape, from rubato lyrical brooding in the intro and high-yield emotionality and pianistic tumult. She approached the score with all due bravura and insight.

More poetic showpiece action entered the picture, on either side of intermission, through dazzling scherzos by Chopin, the No. 3 in C-sharp Minor and No. 4 in E-flat. The former piece was particularly wowing, as the pianist easily conveyed its mercurial spirit, riding its storming octaves, stately melodic statements and shimmering keyboard latticework.

Despite the prominence of 19th-century piano musical thought this afternoon, to these ears, the best came first, as the pianist opened the proceedings with a cleanly and passionately surveyed Mozart's Fantasie in C Minor and Sonata in C Minor, KV 457. Here, her working admix of virtuosity and expressive subtlety seemed most finely tuned. Not incidentally, her Mozart also seemed the most in keeping with the meditative stillness of this inspired new musical "chamber" in the area, and in synch with its dreamy slow-mo sunlit light show.