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## Valery Gergiev's back in town -- with the Kirov Orchestra -- and the thrill is definitely not gone

By Joshua Kosman  
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Local music lovers with even moderately long memories will recall -- probably with a little rush of adrenaline -- the days when conductor Valery Gergiev used to visit regularly at the San Francisco Opera. A residual taste of that excitement was on offer in Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall on Saturday night, when Gergiev and the Kirov Orchestra of the Mariinsky Theatre played the first of two all-Russian concerts.

Immediately, all the familiar virtues were on display, made even more direct by being channeled through the orchestra that has been Gergiev's principal collaborator since 1988. Here again were the fearless emphasis on dramatic impact, careering rhythmic momentum and vivid instrumental color, tempered by unpredictable bursts of intimate sentiment.

Gergiev's take-no-prisoners style of conducting is a high-risk undertaking that doesn't always pay off -- his previous visits with the orchestra have sometimes sounded boisterously out of control -- but this time around, the Kirov went through its paces like a wild but sufficiently broken mustang. The results were invigorating.

Saturday's lineup, presented by Cal Performances, was perfectly planned to show off this vein of explosive power. (Sunday night's follow-up, part of the San Francisco Symphony's Great Performers series, featured music by Tchaikovsky, Borodin and Mussorgsky.)

It began and ended with Rimsky-Korsakov's two familiar showpieces, the "Capriccio espagnole" and "Sheherazade," in performances that brought out the composer's hardier edge. In between came a display of breakneck piano virtuosity, Prokofiev's First Piano Concerto with Daria Rabotkina as the dynamic soloist.

Those were the major bricks in the program, but the mortar was just as rewarding: Borodin's short pictorial sketch "In the Steppes of Central Asia," and "Islamey," Balakirev's famous exercise in finger-busting keyboard Orientalism, done in Sergei Liapunov's orchestral version. The waltz from Tchaikovsky's "Sleeping Beauty" made a sonorous encore.

Throughout the evening, Gergiev kept pushing the boundaries of loudness, speed and all the other attributes that can make his performances so hair-raising. Yet he seemed determined to maintain a certain decorum in the music, so that not even the most full-throated, rhythmically untrammelled passages ever sounded crude or blustery.

Rimsky-Korsakov's music was the most interesting beneficiary of his approach. With its combination of orchestral suavity and rhetorical grandeur, this is music that can seem to hover somewhere between the urbane symmetries of Tchaikovsky and the rough-hewn eloquence of Mussorgsky.

Many conductors tend toward the former pole, but not Gergiev. He emphasized the music's raw vitality, sometimes at the expense of tonal finesse; but the trade-off was worth it.

The opening and closing movements of the "Capriccio" were full-on orchestral blasts, with interludes of intense instrumental color, especially from the woodwinds. "Sheherazade" got a vibrant, edgy reading that was miles removed from the languorous sensuality that usually marks this piece. Concertmaster Ilya Konovalov lent grace and ardor to the curlicued violin solos, and the woodwind players again infused the score with a dark, smoky sonority that was exciting to hear.

Rabotkina, rattling through Prokofiev's show-offy one-movement concerto, found an appealing balance between the music's sheer juggling and the elusive melodic charm that lurks somewhere just below the surface. Gergiev and the orchestra, once past some overloud playing in the opening section, gave her sensitive support.