

A Precise, Serious Pianist

By Alan M. Kriegsman

The start of this year's International Piano Festival at the University of Maryland last night — an all-Mozart program in Tawes Recital Hall — brought us face to face again with the strange case of Lili Kraus.

Kraus, an artist of long-standing international repute, is clearly a pianist of quality. Her playing is distinguished, thoughtful, meticulous. It is right in so many respects, and yet, for these ears at least, it is ultimately a curiously drab and unsatisfying listening experience.

It is not easy to see why this should be so.

Her pedigree is impeccable—studies in her native Budapest under Kodaly and Bartok, and later in Vienna with Steuermann and Schnabel; a praiseworthy devotion to the refinements of Viennese classicism, and an impressive roster of recordings covering a broad swath of the classical literature, including the complete Mozart concertos.

Her conceptual grasp of

the music she plays compels admiration. Her knowledge and observance of classical style is above reproach—her Mozart is neither a dainty rococo figurine nor a romanticized, Byronic hero. Her playing is instructive, too, in its clarity and intelligence. And finally, one must respect its unquestionably serious demeanor.

The line between the serious and the grim, however, can sometimes be perilously thin. I suspect that much of my reservation about Kraus' playing had to do with the gap between what she intends and what she actually gets from the keyboard. It is hard to believe that she really wants to brutalize her forte playing as often as she does, but that's the way it comes out. Her dynamics, in general, frequently sound eccentric—the loud passages too heavy and clangorous and the soft ones too fuzzy for the surrounding context.

But beyond these technical miscalculations, there are other, less tangible but perhaps more crucial shortcomings. Mozart, it is true,

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was no plaster cherub. But there was always something of the child in his nature, a spontaneity, a wonderment and a doting warmth. Of such attributes, Kraus' playing gives little sign.

In a program which encompassed, among other things, sonatas in A Minor, A Major (K. 310) and C Minor (the latter with its companion Fantasia), Kraus' interpretations seemed almost too sophisticated, too thoroughly pondered to do justice to the softer sides of Mozart's genius. What was lacking was a certain affectionate ease, without which Mozart becomes a discipline, rather than a lyric, outpouring.

Kraus has a decided gift for stark, dramatic effects, and the minor key sonatas were quite successfully projected from this standpoint. But by far the most winsome playing of the evening came in the benign little A Major piece, where the temptations to cataclysmic statement were at a minimum, and where the most gracious features of the artist's approach stood to the fore.

