

Off-balance performance of Mozart duo sonatas

- [Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic](#)

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It's a truism that Mozart's duo sonatas are written for piano with violin accompaniment rather than the other way around (like those of Brahms, say). But it's rare to hear the point made as forcefully as it was in Sunday night's oddly lopsided recital by pianist Mitsuko Uchida and violinist Mark Steinberg.

In an all-Mozart program presented in Herbst Theatre by San Francisco Performances, Uchida reaffirmed her status as one of the great Mozart interpreters of our time. Her playing was endlessly fascinating -- by turn robust and delicate, and graced throughout with an elegance that turned each measure into a thing of beauty.

Steinberg, by contrast, seemed to be merely along for the ride. What contributions he made were tentative and often unfinished, and there was something almost apologetic about his playing.

The resulting imbalance was too pronounced to be anything but intentional -- surely Uchida and Steinberg must have set out to restore the emphasis in these pieces back to the keyboard, where it belongs.

And as far as it went, the point was well taken. Uchida's nimble, rippling triplets enlivened the first movement of the F-Major Sonata, K. 377; she lent a stirring rhetorical grandeur to the opening of the G-Major Sonata, K. 379; and the encore, the second movement of the E-Minor Sonata, K. 304, glowed with the melancholy splendor of her touch.

Again and again, a listener could hear these familiar works not as duets at all, but as a whole repertoire of music for piano that shared many of the attributes of the solo sonatas but with a little extra ornamentation from the violin.

Still, it was hard not to feel that a violinist closer to Uchida's caliber could have added something a little more vital to the mix. Most of Steinberg's playing sounded thin and subdued, like that of a boardinghouse tenant anxious not to disturb the neighbors.

When he did come to the fore, as in some of the theme-and-variations movements, his tone tended to be wheedling and his intonation uncertain.

The contrast with Uchida was most striking in passages that found them playing in counterpoint -- as in the opening of the A-Major Sonata, K. 526 -- or taking successive turns at a single melody. In those cases the depth and richness of Uchida's playing registered all the more gloriously.

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Mitsuko Uchida stole the show with her compelling playing.

