Charming and fluent

IMAGINATIVE: LARGE-SCALE PERFORMANCE THRILLS AND MOVES

Talented artist makes the most of strong programme.

Michael Traub

As part of the recent Johannesburg International Mozart Festival, the French-Israeli pianist Jonathan Gilad played two adjacent Mozart sonatas, No. 12 in F major and No. 13 in B-flat major.

These were large-scale performances, using plenty of pedal and going for a big sound. No Dresden china delicacy here, except in passing.

The shortage was in the softer levels of tone; there was not enough contrast between the really soft and volume levels slightly above that. The best movements of the two works were the Finales, which had charm as well as fluency.

Liszt's transcription of the closing scene of Wagner's Tristan und Isolde, the Liebestod (Love-Death), demonstrates how an imaginative composer can get an orchestral richness of sound out of a piano.

Gilad drew refulgent tone from a piano that was smaller than a concert grand, and one hardly missed the extra sonority in this relatively small venue.

The highlight of the evening, however, was Liszt's mighty Sonata in B minor, one of the peaks of the Romantic period and intended to range over a vast spectrum of emotions, from the tenderest intimacy to the most extravagant explosion of feeling.

Gilad showed that he had the technical proficiency to manage the many physical difficulties for the executant; more importantly, perhaps, he displayed complete emotional identity with the sentiments of the composition. A very few wrong notes were excusable in the heat of the moment.

The Sonata was exciting and moving by turns.