

URSULA OPPENS

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MUSIC REVIEW

Live: 'Night Fantasies' at the Colburn School

Ursula Oppens takes an exhilarating turn at Elliott Carter's complex piece.

By Mark Swed, Times Music Critic April 10, 2008

Elliott Carter's "Night Fantasies," completed in 1980, was the first major work for solo piano by the composer since his 1946 Piano Sonata and the first major work by him after he turned 70. At the time, the fiendishly difficult score, which captures the unpredictable flickering of neurons in the sleepless brain at night, suggested the onset of an impulsive late style. Now we're not so sure, since Carter has had nearly 30 more years of capricious evolution and is still writing as [his 100th birthday](#) approaches in December.

Four brilliant American pianists commissioned "Night Fantasies." One of them, Charles Rosen, who is also one of our foremost musical authorities, has called the piece "perhaps the most extraordinary large keyboard work written since the death of Ravel." Well, it is at least *one* of the most extraordinary. The other commissioners were Paul Jacobs, who died in 1983; Gilbert Kalish; and [Ursula Oppens](#), who gave the first performance of "Night Fantasies" in Bath, England, just two weeks after Carter had finished it. She is one of Carter's favorite interpreters and has played the work often since. As a special guest of the Piano Spheres series, she played it once more Tuesday night at the Colburn School's Zipper Concert Hall.

In writing for four pianists, Carter made sure no one would own "Night Fantasies." Its complexities alone could keep you up at night. At a public conversation with Carter at USC, shortly after the piece was completed, Rosen proudly revealed that he had discovered two rhythmic sequences that continue in the insane ratio of 24 to 25. The many sections that flow in and out of one another have their harmonic basis in all-interval chords, the identification of which helps provide an occupation for music theory post-docs.

Carter was unimpressed by such analysis. He spoke of poetry, emotion, Schumann, the unsettled state of the modern world, jazz. "Night Fantasies," he said, is nothing more than his fascination with the hyperactive brain in the deep of night when nothing distracts it and nothing can stop it.

Oppens' performance Tuesday may have been the most hyperactive that "Night Fantasies" has ever received. Her 1989 recording lasts 21 minutes and 32 seconds, about an average length for the piece. **She has now shaved a full five minutes from that. She did not give the impression of speeding but rather of exhilaration.**

Typically in "Night Fantasies," exquisite slow music and bell-like sonorities are temptations to repose interrupted by iridescent fast music. But Oppens reversed the balance. The brain raced, slowed, then picked up again. Air had been removed from the music; this was a warm, humid, occasionally

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delirious night. You knew from the start that sleep was going to be out of the question.

Probably only a computer could gauge to what degree Oppens had manipulated all of Carter's complex-fraction tempo changes. But why bother? **Oppens has so internalized this music that she makes a work for which there exist more than a thousand pages of sketches sound spontaneous.**

Oppens built her program Tuesday around music by friends, most of it written for her. These composers are today around the age that Carter was when he wrote "Night Fantasies," although their compositions are dated from 1980 to the present. None of these composers are like any of the others. Charles Wuorinen's "The Blue Bamboula" is thorny music with a colorful bite. Joan Tower's "Holding a Daisy" and "Or Like a . . . an Engine" are seductive confections.

William Bolcom's Ballade, a beautiful 12-minute piece that Oppens premiered this year, catches the often upbeat composer in a gloomy mood. She ended with a short recent Carter work, "Caténares," a single line taken so fast that melody blurs into harmony.

But before that, Oppens played Frederic Rzewski's "Mayn Yingele," written for her in 1988. A reflection on the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht, these extravagantly inventive variations on a Yiddish ballad capture, in a fleeting dozen or so minutes, the sleepless nights of Jews trying to regain a culture lost to the Nazis.

Once more, Oppens left no time for contemplation. She played the piece in about half the time that Rzewski takes. **But when she reached the disturbing tremolo at the end, she produced such a stabbing sound that it, like so much of "Night Fantasies," continued to penetrate long after the resonance had ceased and became an unforgettable memory.**