

URSULA OPPENS

PIANO

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MUSIC REVIEW | URSULA OPPENS

An Energetic Pianistic Program With Wine as Accompaniment

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Nostalgia for the vanished tradition of salon concerts appears to be on the rise. Two years ago a series of piano recitals at the Rainbow Room put listeners at dinner tables with glasses of wine, and the Baryshnikov Arts Center and [Lincoln Center](#) (in its post-Mostly [Mozart](#) concerts) has been doing the same. Last year Arium, a hybrid restaurant, gallery and concert space on Little West 12th Street in the West Village, began presenting recitals for which the ticket price included a glass of wine, hors d'oeuvres before the performance and dessert afterward.



Nan Melville for The New York Times
Ursula Oppens playing at Arium.

The atmosphere at Arium is relaxed, but judging from Ursula Oppens's recital on Sunday afternoon the performers are asked to make no compromises. Ms. Oppens played a hefty program with music by [Beethoven](#), Schubert and Ravel interspersed with works by Tobias Picker.

Three of Mr. Picker's scores were arrangements of works for larger forces. "Where the Rivers Go," based on a section of his 1996 opera, "Emmeline," is suffused with a neo-Romanticism that evokes the opera's 19th-century New England setting. Yet stripped of its orchestral coloration, the music has a sharper, more contemporary edge. The short,

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involving “Old and Lost Rivers” (1986), originally a symphonic score, matches an angular, range-jumping melody to a nonstop vigorous counterpoint. And “The Blue Hula” (1982), arranged from a similarly propulsive chamber piece, draws on jazz and stride piano moves.

Many currents in these three works come together in “Four Études for Ursula” (1997), Ms. Oppens’s closing piece. Calling them études seems wrong; these are character pieces as vivid as the others, and they don’t seem calibrated to particular technical challenges. Not that they make no demands. The first is as freewheeling and rhythmically vital as “The Blue Hula.” Another sounds almost French in spirit, with an undercurrent of early Stravinsky; the last two dance between lyricism and muscularity.

Ms. Oppens has been performing Mr. Picker’s music since the mid-1970’s, when he was just out of the conservatory, and she was the pianist in Speculum Musicae. These technically spiky, picturesque works suit her, and her imaginative use of the piano’s color and dynamics made a persuasive case for them. She also offered an inventive, high-contrast performance of Beethoven’s Sonata in E flat (Op. 27, No. 1), an unusually hard-driven reading of Schubert’s Impromptu in B flat (D. 935) and a powerful, often poetic account of Ravel’s “Valses Nobles et Sentimentales.”

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