

URSULA OPPENS, PIANIST

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CLASSICAL MUSIC IN REVIEW

Celebrating Schoenberg Rarity And Recent American Pieces

*Frederic Rzewski and Ursula Oppens,
pianists
Society for Ethical Culture*

Now nearing its end, the Rock Hotel PianoFest drew a good-size and lively crowd to the Society for Ethical Culture on Saturday night for something special: a collaboration between the distinguished composer-pianist Frederic Rzewski and the excellent Ursula Oppens. Their program was mostly of recent American pieces, but they started with a thoughtful and luminous account of a Schoenberg rarity: the two-piano version he made of his Second Chamber Symphony. In this scoring the piece suggested how close Schoenberg was to Busoni, just before he found the new path of atonality.

After that, Ms. Oppens gave a dashing account of Elliott Carter's "Two Diversions," and the two players came together again in Lois Vierk's "Spin 2." Here they ladled out generous helpings of sound by working with their hands directly on the bass strings, and the same fullness continued when they sat to chase after each other in brilliant repeated arpeggios.

Finding in virtuosity a means to do something simple but extraordinary, Ms. Vierk's piece provided a key to the second half. This began with Christian Wolff's "Fragment," a jumping but persuasive sequence of knots and tussles in which the two players would be fixed on a few notes, like two compulsives bound to share each other's drives.

Finally came some of Mr. Rzewski's own music. He played his solo piece "The Days Fly By," integrating knocks on the wood into rippling keyboard figuration. Then Ms. Oppens joined him in "When the Wind Blows," with breathing noises and whistling adding both a wistful note and a warning of a colder world outside the concert hall. They ended with his classic "Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues."

As the warm-up act, Eric Huebner provided excitements of his own, bringing a firm sense of melody and shape to Stockhausen's Piano Pieces I-IV and a startling decisiveness to Ligeti's first study, "Désordre."

PAUL GRIFFITHS