

Music Review: Oppens optimally renders Ligeti concerto

Thursday, December 04, 2003

By Andrew Druckenbrod, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Too many music lovers believe that contemporary composers ruined classical music by making it needlessly complicated. The composers carry some blame, but so do full-size orchestras and opera companies, which effectively disabled the flow of ideas in the 20th century by concentrating on a limited canon of older works.

Pushed out of the mainstream, composers of the past 50 years have written most of their best music for the chamber setting. Organizations such as Pitt's Music on the Edge best connect new music to today's society. How else does one explain that one of the greatest piano concertos of our time, Gyorgy Ligeti's, is a chamber work and that one of our most remarkable pianists, the new-music advocate Ursula Oppens, hardly has the name recognition of equals who play exclusively on large stages?

Tuesday night at Bellefield Hall Auditorium in Oakland brought this issue out in style, but a modest, approachable style. No pomp and circumstance here. Not even an appearance by the composer, Ligeti, whom the concert feted on the occasion of his 80th birthday. In their place was just the electric playing of adventurous music that was as enjoyable as it was demanding.

Oppens, the concert's special guest, was amazing to behold. A steadier performer you're not likely to find. Showcasing a composer who influenced Ligeti, she performed two ultra-difficult canons by Conlon Nancarrow. This is a composer who primarily wrote for player pianos -- machines, mind you -- and these canons are not much easier. Oppens' right hand perfectly mimicked the accents and flavor of the left hand, which didn't lose focus at all when both were going. Oppens couldn't have been bested by a piano duo.

Ligeti's Piano Concerto was written in the mid-'80s, but it is nothing like the minimalism trendy then, not to mention the synth pop. It, too, is a challenging work to play, but not to hear, especially when performed with the clarity brought out excellently by conductor Roger Zahab. You could "see" right through the piece, a credit to the performers of the Music on the Edge Chamber Orchestra, with Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra violinist Jeremy Black as concertmaster.

Transparency is crucial, not because you'd be able to discern the structure of updated medieval talea units or better hear the influence of African polyrhythms, but because Ligeti wanted the illusion that time had stopped. The five-movement concerto opens as if it has already been playing for some time and ends abruptly without fanfare. Things happen, but they don't progress like a Beethoven symphony. The piece isn't going anywhere, per se, but it sure is a fantastic ride.

In between, it balances continuity with contrast and transforms colors, not themes. Ligeti's concerto reminds one of a kaleidoscope: You know that all the material is just being reordered and recycled, but the view is spectacular all the same.

Oppens has less of a role here than in a traditional concerto, but watching her still revealed plenty of moments. The third movement found her playing dry chords with the left hand and dainty, staccato notes with the right, such that it seemed like two pianos. She meshed well with the others in creating color, especially with the xylophone at the end.

The concert opened with three works by Ligeti spanning the shifting aesthetics of his career. He is still best known for his early period, made famous by the soundtrack to "2001: A Space Odyssey." Black and violinist Jason Posnock gracefully performed the medieval-sounding "Ballad and Danse," cellist David Russell and Black played the short "Hommage a Hilding Rosenberg" and a fuller ensemble performed his "Ten Stucke." The latter, from 1969, is almost a series of technique studies. Zahab again gave it clarity while bringing out the wit as well.

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