

# URSULA OPPENS

## PIANO

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### FINANCIAL TIMES

#### **Ursula Oppens, Yerba Buena Center, San Francisco**

By Allan Ulrich

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It did not seem anti-climactic for San Francisco Performances, the city's leading presenting organisation, to wind up its centenary weekend tribute to Elliott Carter with a survey of his solo piano music. Although it can all be performed in little more than 70 minutes, the composer's keyboard output nevertheless ranges over seven decades of his extraordinary career (through 2007). In its modest way, his stylistic evolution parallels his harmonically and metrically innovative approach to the chamber and orchestral spheres and the dark poetry Carter has conjured in those media.

Thirty-five years separate the two landmarks of the composer's piano explorations. The 1946 Piano Sonata represents a summing up and a retrospective glance at an era when American music wore its identity on its sleeve, was vigorous in its pronouncements and fearful of slipping its bonds to tonality. Carter infused the scheme with a dense polyphony and a massive fugue that sought a kinship with the European tradition. The 1980 Night Fantasies is a dreamscape, anchored in a single chord, yet volatile in the profusion of moods it evokes. Since then, Carter has delivered a series of epigrams, all structurally rigorous and prepared for specific performers or occasions.

**This is not easy fare, but Oppens embraces it almost rapturously. Among her many gifts is the sense of unity she confers on this disparate collection, shunning chronological order in favour of a sequence that both makes dramatic sense and leads the willing pilgrim into the eye of a hurricane. Her reading of Carter's pointillistic tribute to Goffredo Petrassi on his 90th birthday prepares us for Retrouvailles (a birthday gift for Pierre Boulez), and for the deceptive simplicity of Two Diversions. Thence to the craggy peaks of Night Fantasies, which the pianist scales with an intuitive feeling for destination and a formidable technique that allows no expressive possibility to elude her.**

Oppens brings an expansive, even playful quality to the sonata, alternately suggesting Scarlatti and boogie-woogie, aerating textures while sustaining a flow. An encore reading of Matribute, a recent commission for James Levine, suggests we have not heard the last of this centenarian – or one of his most ardent advocates.

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