

URSULA OPPENS

PIANO

Music review: Elliott Carter celebration

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If you can judge a prophet by his followers, maybe you can judge a composer by the quality of musicians who are inspired to champion his music. And if that's so, then Elliott Carter - the subject of a weekendlong celebration at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in advance of his 100th birthday Thursday - is doing something right.

The two-day bash, sponsored by San Francisco Performances, included a showing of Frank Scheffer's documentary film "Elliott Carter: A Labyrinth of Time" and lectures by musicologist Robert Greenberg. But the chief focus, naturally, was the music, which got bold, impassioned and strikingly eloquent performances from artists devoted to Carter's work.

Saturday's concert by the Pacifica Quartet - violinists Simin Ganatra and Sibbi Bernhardsson, violist Masumi Per Rostad and cellist Brandon Vamos - was a complete tour through Carter's string quartets, from the expansive breakthrough of the String Quartet No. 1, written in 1951, to the Fifth Quartet, which joined the catalog in 1995.

And on Sunday afternoon, pianist Ursula Oppens gave a similarly comprehensive overview of the composer's keyboard works. The recital was anchored by his two major piano compositions - the Piano Sonata (1945-46) and "Night Fantasies" (1980) - and bedecked by a handful of shorter pieces dating from the past 15 years.

What came through most stirringly in both events was the devoted sense of advocacy that Carter seems to engender in performing musicians. As difficult as much of his music is for the listener, the difficulties it entails for instrumentalists - from both a technical and interpretive standpoint - can only be more profound.

Yet here were artists clearly delighted and eager to dedicate themselves to making the best possible case for this music - and succeeding in doing so.

The Pacifica, which coincidentally earned a Grammy nomination last week for its recording of Carter's First and Fifth Quartets, played with a stunning combination of rhythmic unanimity and tonal splendor. Particularly in the Second and Third Quartets, which are all about establishing the diversity of voices within an ensemble, the players were able to make their own contributions distinctive while still presenting a united front.

And **Oppens' steely fingers and tender, inviting sense of lyricism infused the pieces on her program with athleticism and grace. The rapid shifts in direction of the "Night Fantasies," or the spidery repeated notes of "Catenaire" (the second of Carter's "Two Thoughts About the Piano"), burst forth with infectious energy.**

As for Carter's music itself, I have long resigned myself - along with many other listeners, I'm sure - to a state of bewildered incomprehension.

Devotees of this work assure us that they feel not merely admiration for its structural rigor or awe at its ambition and scale, but actual love - deep-seated, ardent and committed love - in response to its beauty, its humaneness and its communicative verve. The rest of us can only answer this with the kind of discreet silence we reserve for a friend in love with someone to whose charms we remain blind.

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