

# URSULA OPPENS

PIANIST

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## THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS

Classical music review: Pianist Ursula Oppens full of surprises in recital at Fort Worth's Modern Art Museum

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By **SCOTT CANTRELL**

FORT WORTH – Proof that life isn't fair was offered again Saturday afternoon at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. In recital, presented in the Cliburn at the Modern concert series, was pianist Ursula Oppens, one of the foremost interpreters of contemporary classical music. But the small auditorium looked barely half full and, shockingly, none of the area's prominent piano professors was in attendance.

Oppens thoughtfully paired pieces, mostly written for her, by four living American composers. There was also a single piece by the late Fort Worth-born jazz saxophonist and composer Julius Hemphill. Interspersed were dialogues between Oppens, who's both articulate and entertaining, and pianist Shields-Collins Bray. The discussions were certainly enlightening, but also overlong.

Oppens was smart to open with William Bolcom's gentle *Graceful Ghost Rag*, the first and last sections played fairly "straight," the middle with more "swing." She went right on to Bolcom's *Ballade*, whose arresting musical tale seems to take up right where Samuel Barber's Piano Sonata leaves off.

The program abounded in surprises. Disjunct gestures and added-note harmonies in Hemphill's *Parchment* only momentarily suggest jazz. Tobias Picker's *First Nocturne for Ursula* actually sounded jazzier, after which *First Etude for Ursula* was a diabolical bump-and-clatter affair.

John Corigliano's *Winging It* is a triptych the composer wrote down from his own recorded improvisations. The first movement contrasts mechanical motifs with freer passages; the ruminative second builds to an unsettled climax, then relaxes in beauty; the finale is crazed boogie-woogie with staccato punctuations.

Corigliano's *Fantasia on an Ostinato*, commissioned for the 1985 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, is more academic, and less satisfying: an exploration of repeated notes only gradually revealing their source, the second movement of Beethoven's Second Symphony.

Finally came Elliott Carter's knotty but provocative *Two Thoughts About the Piano*, "Intermittences" all fits and starts, "Catenaires" all perpetual motion. Throughout, Oppens played with authority and panache. More people should have heard her.

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