

URSULA OPPENS

PIANO

The Boston Globe

A composer's century, as viewed from the keyboard Ursula



Oppens (seen earlier this year) performed Elliott Carter's complete works for solo piano on Tuesday night. (Hilary Scott/file)

By Jeremy Eichler
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It's not quite breaking news, but in case you're a new-music fan who has spent the last year distracted by the election or trapped beneath a Grove dictionary, the composer Elliott Carter turns 100 this December, and ensembles - especially those based in Boston - have been celebrating with abandon. Tanglewood's Festival of Contemporary Music this summer became a five-day, 47-work, all-Carter bash; the Boston Symphony Orchestra has another Carter world

premiere scheduled for December; and other institutions around town are pulling out the stops. Most recently, on Tuesday night, the Boston Conservatory presented the articulate pianist and stalwart new-music champion Ursula Oppens in a recital given over to Carter's complete works for solo piano, which she has also recorded on Cedille Records. That her disc contains only about 70 minutes of music makes clear that the solo piano genre has not been as central for Carter as has, for example, the string quartet. Still, in addition to the handful of brief pieces from the last two decades, Carter has written two important long-form works - the Piano Sonata and "Night Fantasies" - that seemed to either announce breakthroughs in his progress or consolidate the results of many years of evolution. On Tuesday, these two daunting works formed the heart of the recital, staring out at each other from across the intermission. "Night Fantasies," written in 1980, concluded the first half, with Oppens brilliantly drawing out its vivid play of textures: dark hazy sonorities and sudden squalls of dissonance, stretches of fitful insomniac lyricism and quasi-Romantic gestures rendered in a thorny modern language. If the music of "Night Fantasies" inhabits a kind of shadowy, liminal space - half awake, half dreaming - then Carter's landmark Piano Sonata of 1945-46 is a clarion burst of morning light. It is full of bright-hued, boldly declarative music that stands poised between the composer's past as a populist neo-classicist and his future as a radical modernist. Listening to it is like walking along a narrow ridge from which you can survey two completely distinct valleys. The Sonata's movements flirt with traditional forms but Carter seems to be pushing them up to and beyond their breaking points, and then deftly shuffling around their pieces. Oppens dispatched this work with musical intelligence and a fearless technique; the first movement's heavily knotted runs and clumped passagework came across with both clarity and sweeping virtuosity. The rest of the recital was a nimble dash through the short pieces that complete Carter's solo piano catalog, including the breathless "Caténares" and the spirited "Matribute," written in 2007 for James Levine. In her spoken introduction to the latter work, Oppens dropped a hint suggesting that Levine had commissioned two other Carter piano pieces that were as yet unpremiered. Stay tuned, no doubt, for birthday surprises.

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