

URSULA OPPENS

Pianist

The New York Times



July 23, 2005

Escaping From Liszt's Shadow

By [ALLAN KOZINN](#)

An attraction of the International Keyboard Institute and Festival at the Mannes College of Music is the diversity of its roster. Even as this year's festival seems, at times, to be a celebration of Liszt, several decidedly non-Lisztians have been given their share of the spotlight. Ursula Oppens, in her recital on Wednesday evening, spoke for those more interested in the musical world before and after Liszt - although anyone looking for Liszt's shadow in her program might have found it in Frederic Rzewski's "Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues" and in "La Valse," Ravel's swirling and sometimes muscular evocation of the ballroom.

She began, though, in the more gracious world of late Classicism, with two Beethoven sonatas - No. 12 in A flat (Op. 26) and No. 13 in E flat (Op. 27, No. 1). Both were composed in 1802, and Ms. Oppens characterized them as a revolution in progress, as if Romanticism dawned in the pages of the second.

Her clean-lined, focused account of Sonata No. 12 painted it as not entirely free of Haydn's influence but pushing the edges. Even so, the work's funeral march, meant to evoke a procession for a fallen hero, shows the distance Beethoven still had to travel. The funeral march of the "Eroica" Symphony, composed only a year later, is also that of a fallen hero, conveyed with immeasurably greater depth.

In her reading of Sonata No. 13, Ms. Oppens retained the measure of Classical restraint in the opening movement, but then showed Beethoven blowing that courtliness apart as this hybrid sonata and fantasia unfolds. By its finale, the work moves decisively toward Romantic free-spiritedness, a leap Ms. Oppens showed through fluid dynamics and tempos, a striking contrast with her comparatively prim performance of this work's predecessor.

From Beethoven she jumped to modern times for "Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues," which first evokes the mechanistic din of the mill, then moves through a Gershwin-esque fantasy on the song it was named for toward an eerie finale.

Ms. Oppens gave incisive, transparent performances of Conlon Nancarrow's texturally spare but rhythmically thorny "Two Canons for Ursula." She closed with Ravel's waltz fantasies, the poetic "Valses Nobles et Sentimentales" and the bright-hued "La Valse." Her readings, if not note-perfect, capture the music's spirit vividly.

Colbert Artists Management Inc.

111 West 57th Street, New York, New York 10019
(212)757-0782 - Fax (212)541-5179 - West Coast (858)794-0182
E-mail: NYColbert@ColbertArtists.com