

URSULA OPPENS

Pianist

Concert review: Edge pianist interprets new works

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By Eric Haines

Far too many arts patrons know what they like and like what they know. As a result, edgy, groundbreaking theater companies or orchestras need years or even decades to become established and build audiences. A prime example is Pitt's Music on the Edge series, which is devoted to the performance of contemporary works. While still underrated, MOTE can attract some of the area's finest professionals for the ad hoc Music on the Edge Chamber Orchestra, as well as guest artists of international stature.

Such was the case Thursday at Bellefield Hall Auditorium in Oakland, where MOTE featured pianist Ursula Oppens. The doyenne of contemporary piano music in the United States would undoubtedly be a household name had she concentrated on the limited canon of traditional concertos. Fortunately for the small but appreciative audience, the concert featured two works that allowed Oppens to showcase her specialty.

Amy Williams' "Sala Luminosa" for piano soloist and chamber orchestra is a beautiful paraphrase of a work by Argentine tango master Astor Piazzolla. Williams expanded Piazzolla's characteristic block-like sectional structure, harmonic progressions, repeated rhythmic patterns, ornamental gestures and melodic fragments into a modified rondo. The "A" section is marked by fast, toccata-like figures in the high registers that Oppens played brilliantly, with hands displaying equal virtuosity.

Oppens took the concert to a higher level of excellence on Elliott Carter's "Dialogues for Piano and Large Ensemble," essentially a self-defining concerto that resembles an argument in various stages of rage. Again, Oppens' playing was seamless across the keyboard, and her tone was expressive in the heated solo passages.

Conductor Roger Zahab led the Music on the Edge Chamber Orchestra in Hans Abrahamsen's "Winternacht," a four-movement work that is almost classical in structure. It is best characterized by the second movement, which is dedicated to the eccentric lithographer M.C. Escher. Depicting an Escher drawing, the section's multilayered meanderings led to an extended, quiet conclusion, suggestive of viewer fatigue.

Eric Moe's "The Shocked Music of Pearls" for string quintet is based on his observation that Grimm's fairy tales were often variations of each other. Zahab's proletarian stick technique veiled his ability to elicit the essence of the music from the orchestra, which responded with precision and clarity.

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