

Pianist handles musical challenges

Music Review

As Friday evening's concert unfolded, it came as no great surprise that the guest artist, pianist Ursula Oppens, is considered one of the world's foremost keyboard artists, bringing with her a legacy of music awards received and hundreds of performances at the major music centers and festivals in the United States and Europe.

This concert was in the majestic sanctuary of Second Congregational Church in Rockford sponsored by Mendelssohn Performing Arts Center and the Irene A. Glasford Memorial Fund.

Oppens' specialty lies in her commitment to maintaining the heritage of great music of the masters as well as exploring the unique styles that characterize the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Two sonatas by Ludwig van Beethoven opened the program, his A-flat Major, Opus 26 and his E-flat Major, Opus 27, No. 1. Both, in four movements, showcased Oppen's artistic ability to master the many difficulties inherent in Beethoven's sonatas. Within the sonatas lie challenges demanding extraordinary dexterity in rapid-fire cascading passages, warmth of expression in adagio movements and the strength and power of the great chordal passages. Bent over the keyboard, as was her unique style, she met all the challenges flawlessly.

Before intermission, she introduced the audience to "The Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues" by contemporary composer Frederic Rzewski. The work was bi-

zarre, unusual and yet very captivating and mesmerizing. Of course, one expects "fingers" to play the piano. Right? Well, not only were all her fingers and thumbs used, but also her palms, fists, elbows and arms to create the unusual factory sounds in an old cotton mill.

She began the work by singing blues lyrics — though singing was not her forte. Then began the rumbling sounds in the lowest part of the keyboard in very close digital ramblings. From there, it went to whatever was available from the elbows down to create the cacophony of the factory. What melodies were present, were characteristic of blues, with a hint of Gershwin. Or so it seemed!

With every key on the piano having been used in a variety of ways and means, the work ended as it began, subdued rumblings, (maybe grumblings) in the low bass. It was an exciting work, and was well received.

Following intermission, "Two Canons for Ursula" written in 1988 by Colon Nancarrow were presented. Both posed extreme complexities in rhythm as explained by Oppens prior to their performance. Once into the works, it was obvious what she meant. Both hands needed to and

did work totally independent of each other, meaning that rhythmically, what the left hand did was totally different from what the right hand was doing. Harmonically, the work was quite dissonant, which exponentially increased its difficulty. Again, Oppens proved her well-documented artistry in these works.

The final presentation was linking two works by French composer Maurice Ravel, "Valses Nobles et Sentimentales" and "La Valse." These two masterpieces were the highlights of the evening, again focusing on Oppens great agility, dexterity and mastery of texture and col-

or in keyboard communication.

It was obvious throughout the evening, that Oppens loved what she did. She entered with a radiance and engaging smile, sat at the keyboard, and went right to work. It was a great evening, an evening that every serious piano student in the region should have experienced. Those who did were thrilled with what they heard. In Rockford, we continue to have some of the best in the world of the performing arts. How privileged we are!

— Nat Bauer

Nat Bauer is music director at First Presbyterian Church of Belvidere.