

Danbury Concert Association starts season with brilliant performance by pianist Fan

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American pianist Joel Fan kicked off the Danbury Concert Association's season Sunday with an adventurous, wide-ranging program. Eastern mysticism, jazz-flavored Americana and all-around virtuosity made for an engaging and pleasing Ives Hall recital.

Fan is a personable performer who speaks casually before many of his pieces, introducing the music and giving hints of what to listen for. On a program with lots of less-familiar works, this is a good approach.

The Iranian composer Dia Succari's "La Nuit du Destin (The Night of Destiny)" led off in a mystical, dreamy mood. The 1978 work establishes an insistent main theme in both left and right hands, with an improvisatory section that moves away from the theme.

Eastern scales give a distinct flavor, and the piece comes nearly to a stop in its more delicate passages. The main theme is fractured into a different guise as it starts up again. Much is left to the pianist in this improvisational work, and Fan gave structure and coherence to its mysteries.

Fan described Scriabin's Piano Sonata No. 5 as an "orgy" of mysticism. His big technique proved to be up to its demands (the great pianist Sviatoslav Richter said it was one of the hardest pieces ever written), as he caught both the roiling drama and the far-off quality of the softer passages. The rhapsodic climax was stirring and convincing.

The first American piece on the program was Margaret Bonds' "Troubled Water" from 1967. This African-American pioneer made use of the Negro spiritual tradition in her compositions, and "Troubled Water" is a set of variations on the familiar "Wade

in the Water."

Fan swung gently through the jazz-tinged opening and into a brighter major-key variation, effectively catching the growing boldness as the piece moved on to its satisfying close.

Both halves of the concert ended with familiar works from the standard repertory. In Rachmaninoff's Piano Sonata No. 2 the big opening theme and simple, lyrical second theme were effectively contrasted. The second movement's quiet, ruminative opening built in intensity to the fiery finale, especially striking in Fan's driven performance.

The all-American second half started with William Bolcom's short, characterful "Nine New Bagatelles" from 2006. Fan told the pieces' stories and then brought them out in his playing with spirit and wit.

From that same year came Leon Kirchner's last piece, Sonata No. 3, "The Forbidden." Fan had been Kirchner's student at Harvard and commissioned the sonata from him. It is full of turbulence, always edging forward, rarely at rest, and the student expressed his teacher's intentions admirably.

The solo piano arrangement of "Rhapsody in Blue" that ended the program may be by Gershwin himself or by the Russian emigre songwriter Vernon Duke. Fan gave the opening a languid touch and played with a rhythmic acuteness and broad tonal palette that made the piano sing with orchestral colors. A brilliant end to a rewarding program.

Read more: <http://www.newstimes.com/news/article/Danbury-Concert-Association-starts-season-with-2177867.php#ixzz1bhpcZjBo>