

InConcert Sierra's Joel Fan: Music explained and illuminated

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A Joel Fan concert is not just a performance, it's a musical education.

There were two themes in his sparkling recital when Fan returned to InConcert Sierra's Third Sunday series. "What happens," he asked in his fascinating pre-concert discussion with Aileen James, "when tonality and harmony break down?"

Classical music was once rooted in keys and rules about harmony. By the 1850s the rules were being stretched. By the 1900s, tonality seemed exhausted. Enter Schoenberg and his experiments in composing without keys or conventional harmonic centers. Four major pieces explored different aspects of Fan's question.

Liszt's *Funeral March* of 1849, a year of political upheaval and the year his friend Chopin died, portrays pensive yearning and turbulent outrage. It has a key but a lot more black notes than the key specifies. Result: romantic eloquence.

Scriabin's 1907 *Fifth Sonata* also has a key (the last of his sonatas to have one) but it's never clear what the key is in this orgy of unsettling creativity, searching for an elusive still-point in a fiery furnace of ideas. The great pianist Richter called it the most difficult piece in the repertoire, but that wasn't evident in Fan's performance; there was no time to consider its difficulty, only to reel in its passion.

Schoenberg's 1924 *Three Pieces Opus 11* goes further: no key at all, an atonal exploration in which, Fan said, "we think about the emotional storyline, not worry about what key it's in." There are shifting moods, melancholy, playfulness, and sad beauty, teased out by Fan's unnerving ability to turn in an instant from delicate introspection to tumultuous unease.

Could American Samuel Barber have written his 1949 *Sonata* without Schoenberg offering a new path? It has a key but it's also atonal, and in the dark slow movement there is a 12-tone component, using Schoenberg's method of composition. There is a recurring wistful two-note phrase; a crazy scherzo; a dissonant dirge; and an intense and furious fugue. Fan and Barber seemed as one, Barber speaking through Fan.

A second theme was "the meaning of the Americas". We tend to think of classical, even modern, music ("modern" is relative: much "modern" music was written 100 years ago) as Western. Fan played pieces by Brazilians Ernesto Nazareth and Heitor Villa-Lobos, and Argentinean Astor Piazzolla. They not only incorporate rhythms and dances of their native lands, but show that there is still vigorous life in tonal, accessible, not over-intellectual music. Fan is as comfortable in a tango as in a fugue.

It was a "modern" piano recital: multi-ethnic music, music by men, women, white, black, ("Troubled Waters" by pianist Margaret Bonds, in 1933 the first black American to solo with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra), demanding, user-friendly. It was a showcase for Fan to show how many different things you can do with a piano.

Charles Atthill lives in Alta Sierra. He recently acquired a grand piano. It may improve his playing. Or not.

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