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DECEMBER 2, 2009

Pianist Joel Fan performs Bolcom, Carter, Kirchner in bold recital

There weren't any minimalist composers on **Joel Fan's** all-contemporary recital Tuesday night at **An die Musik**. The minimalism came from the audience -- all five of us (including two employees from the store, drafted for duty). I think this is now my own personal record for a concert with low attendance, but it also turned out to be one of the most satisfying piano performances I've heard.

It's absurd that there aren't more folks in Baltimore willing to turn out for a program of William Bolcom, Leon Kirchner and Elliott Carter -- three of the best known, most distinguished composers in American music history. The fourth composer Fan chose, Derek Bermel, has a significant presence on the contemporary scene, too.

At the very least, where were the students from Peabody? Don't they want to hear a first-rate keyboard artist -- a Peabody alum, at that, with a substantial international career -- play incredibly demanding repertoire that doesn't turn up every day? Pitiful, just pitiful.

Oh well, our intimate little gathering heard

some hot playing, and Fan didn't seem to mind the tiny turnout at all. He shook everybody's hand, chatted amiably and informatively about the pieces, and played the heck out of the program. Carter's still-astonishing Sonata from 1946 (the same year he joined Peabody's composition faculty for what turned out to be a short stay) was delivered with uncanny technical skill, even at the greatest velocity. Fan ensured that the ingenious thematic material (some of it sounding almost Copland-esque in its stark harmonic outline) and vast tone-color range registered vividly throughout. It was a nice pre-birthday salute to the composer, who turns 101 next week.

The superbly crafted gems that make up Bolcom's Nine New Bagatelles were delivered with abundant nuance. Fan, who recently made the premiere recording of the work, shaped the "Valse Oubliable" and "Pavanne" movements with particular vibrancy.

The late-Leon Kirchner composed his Sonata No. 3 ("The Forbidden") for Fan. The work derives a sweeping power from its distinctive fusion of atonal and tonal languages, its struggle between lyrical repose and unbridled animation. Fan handled it all with elan. Bermel's colorful, agitated "Funk Studies" received a taut performance as well.

Fan, who played the same program Wednesday at the National Gallery in DC, even rewarded his faithful An die Musik listeners with an encore, one far away from the program's stylistic world -- Liszt's "Rigoletto" Paraphrase. I wasn't as crazy about the playing this time. The pianist curiously pounded out



About Tim Smith

Born and raised in Washington, D.C., I couldn't help but develop a keen interest in politics, but music, theater and visual art also proved great attractions. Music became my main focus after high school. I thought about being a cocktail pianist, but I hated taking requests, so I studied music history instead, earning a B.A. in that field from Eisenhower College (Seneca Falls, N.Y.) and an M.A. from Occidental College (Los Angeles). I then landed in journalism. After freelancing for the Washington Post and others, I was classical music critic for the Sun-Sentinel in South Florida, where I also contributed to NPR. I've written for the New York Times, BBC Music Magazine and other publications, and I'm a longtime contributor to Opera News. My book, The NPR Curious Listener's Guide to Classical Music (Perigee, 2002), can be found on the most discerning remainder racks.

I joined the Baltimore Sun as classical music critic in 2000 and, in 2009, also became theater critic, giving me the opportunity to annoy a whole new audience. In 2010, my original Clef Notes blog expanded to encompass a theatrical component -- how could I resist calling it Drama Queens? I hope you'll find both sides of this blog coin worth exploring and reacting to; your own comments are always welcome and valued (well, most of them, at least).

Think of this as your open-all-hours, cyber green room, where there's always a performer or performance to discuss, some news to digest, or maybe just a little good gossip to share.

Note: Tim Smith now writes about the fine arts at baltimoresun.com/artsmash. This blog will be kept in place as an archive for an indefinite period. Please visit the new location to get the latest Mid-Atlantic arts coverage. [View the Artsmash blog](#)

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the initial melody, missing the vocal quality of the line entirely, but his subsequent bravura flights were certainly impressive.

All in all, Fan's generous, show-must-go-on spirit proved to be a class act. It deserved to be heard by a lot more people.

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Posted by **Tim Smith** at 12:25 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(8\)](#)



Comments

I wish I had gone. The concert program was not listed on the An die Musik website. They only listed the time and Joel's bio, so I had little idea what I was missing.

In that case, be sure to give Henry a what-for. TIM

Posted by: Matthew | **December 2, 2009 2:37 PM**

Thanks Tim. Usual good, unbiased review.

I was one of the other of the five attendees (who actually paid to attend) and I believe this was my low-audience-turnout record as well. The performance was wonderful and Mr Fan didn't seem to care at all that he was playing for just a handful of people. If anything, he had more audience interaction, offering insightful explanations and examples of what to listen for in these challenging works.

So where was everyone? How could nobody at Peabody (for example) be interested? I know Henry always posts his flyers there. This is a city of 600,000 people, to say nothing of the surrounding area.

I was embarrassed by the turnout.

What's wrong here? This was a great pianist playing, pieces you probably won't hear again any time soon and nobody shows up...

Thanks very much for the comments. I wouldn't have expected a full house, of course, and I'm quite used to being one of 15 or 20 folks there for some of the more challenging programs, but that turnout still came as a shock. Oh well, we few sure were well-rewarded that night. TIM

Posted by: Larry | **December 2, 2009 4:34 PM**

I attended this excellent program at the National Gallery today. I didn't do a count of the turn out, but I am glad to report it was certainly respectable.

Sam

Thanks for the report. TIM

Posted by: Anonymous | **December 2, 2009 5:05 PM**

Bravo, Tim.

Joe promise to perform the Beethoven's Diabelli Variations, a more familiar piece at his next visit.

I apologized for the missing program on the web site. It came late and I just simply forget to add it to the web site.

Posted by: henry | **December 2, 2009 8:27 PM**

The students from Peabody don't go to any concerts! Not even ones their teachers play. The ones they do go to, of their friends, are attended with cell phones so they can text message the whole time.

Pathetic. I agree.

Peabody students aren't alone in this sort of thing; seems like college-level music students all over the place routinely ignore opportunities to expand their horizons. Students who don't make time to hear lots of performers and lots of repertoire are destined to become superficial musicians (at best). TIM

Posted by: anonymous | **December 2, 2009 11:45 PM**

Yesterday afternoon, about 100 turned out at the National Gallery of Art for the same program. It received a well-deserved ovation.

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Thanks very much for the report. TIM

Posted by: [Brian Reimer](#) | **December 3, 2009 5:13 AM**

Sorry I missed this one but had commitments this week. So what's coming up at An die Musik next week? A pianist playing Messiaen; the Evolution Contemporary Music Series; harpist Jacqueline Pollauf... Wish I could go to all three! And there's interesting stuff going on at the Peabody, too.

Posted by: [Clayton](#) | **December 3, 2009 9:56 PM**

My homeschooled daughter and I thoroughly enjoyed Joel Fan's concert at the National Gallery. His playing was superb and was a great introduction for my daughter to some modern masters. Even though my ten-year-old does not have a great deal of exposure to this type of music, she could tell right away that he was a gifted player and turned to me and said, "Boy! He's really good." Now a critique from what I think was the youngest member of the audience: I thought the music was exquisite, and Joel Fan got tons of applause and he did an encore; by the way, does anyone know how old he is?

Thanks for the uplifting report. I'll let others snoop around for the pianist's age, having reached an age-sensitive period myself. TIM

Posted by: [Jen and Kath](#) | **December 6, 2009 3:01 AM**

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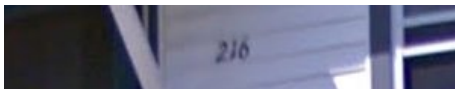
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