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World-class Pianist Joel Fan plus Unimaginative Hagen Première

by [Leslie Gerber](#)

Now that Maverick Concerts has a conductor as its music director, Alexander Platt has revived a very early Maverick tradition with chamber orchestra performances once per season. For the past few years he has brought us chamber reductions of large orchestral works, including Mahler. This year we had a relatively new piece of music that required a piano soloist. I wound up more grateful for the soloist than for the new music.

Joel Fan seems to be best known as a member of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble. You don't get tapped for a role like that without being an excellent musician, but until now I had no idea how fine a pianist Fan is. For the first half of the program, he took on major sonatas by two of the anniversary celebrants of this season, Chopin and Barber, and Fan showed himself to be a world class player.

We've heard many of the great pianists play Chopin's "Funeral March" Sonata (No. 2, in B-flat Minor). Fan belongs in the company of the best. His approach to the first movement was surprisingly and gratifyingly free, conjuring up memories of some of the "Golden Age" pianists. I would have liked to hear that startling exposition repeat which is sometimes taken now but which Fan skipped. Aside from that, my notes are a catalog of virtues. Fan has a huge dynamic range and tremendous facility. He played the *Scherzo* with power and accuracy which almost matched my gold standard in this music, the 1929 Rachmaninov recording. The central section was very strongly and effectively contrasted. The March itself was dignified and very expressive without a trace of sentimentality. And in the surpassingly strange final *Presto*, Fan gave us the weirdest, and thus the best, performance I've ever heard, with blurry articulation and heavy use of the pedal producing a chilling effect.

This Barber skeptic still has a good time with the composer's only *Piano Sonata*, perhaps because it shows such strong influence of Prokofiev's wonderful "War Sonatas." Fan tore into the opening movement with great energy and a tone that verged on steel but never clanged. He played the entire sonata with the same kind of concentration and virtuosity, especially impressing with the reckless speed of the finale that never led to any loss of control. I think I would like this finale better if it weren't labeled "Fuga"; it's a poorly constructed and confusing fugue — but a marvelous toccata.

Daron Hagen's *Seven Last Words* was written for piano left hand and orchestra and was first performed by Gary Graffman. After Fan played the work with Platt and the Wisconsin Philharmonic, Platt asked the composer to prepare a chamber version that could be played at Maverick, and it was premiered at this concert. Apparently mine is a minority opinion on this work, which has drawn wide praise. I don't doubt the composer's sincerity, but I heard a progression of unimaginative musical materials, including at one point a single note drone played in turn by string instruments and treated as the main material.

The orchestral scoring, or as much of it as survives in this reduction, is very impressive, and provides the

main interest. But without distinctive themes, this half-hour piece winds up sounding to me like movie music, designed to reinforce impressions rather than to produce them. Aside from what sounded like quotes from Shostakovich's *Trio* and Ravel's *Concerto for Left Hand*, this work is not enough substance and too much surface.

I don't suppose you could ask for a better performance. What I could hear of Fan's playing (he was sometimes obliterated by brass and percussion, which might have been the point) sounded as fervent as his solo playing. Platt coordinated the ensemble with his usual skill, and the individual players were splendid. The piece just didn't melt this curmudgeon's heart the way it was obviously designed to.

Leslie Gerber lives in Woodstock, New York. He has been reviewing professionally since 1966, for such venues as Performance Today, Fanfare, and Amazon.com. He also publishes the Parnassus Records label.

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