



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 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.