

The Washington Post



Fan gives fantastic close to National Gallery's American Music Festival

December 3rd 2009

By Joe Banno

Pianist Joel Fan (a member of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble) played a terrific lunchtime recital at the National Gallery on Wednesday of works by American composers who have embraced both the romantic past and a more dissonant present.

Elliott Carter's seminal 1945 Piano Sonata may have ranked as the program's most significant work -- a watershed piece that shows his early Copland-esque style morphing into the 12-tone rigors of his later years -- but the afternoon's highlight was Leon Kirchner's 2006 Piano Sonata No. 3. A work commissioned, premiered and recorded by Fan (a former student of the composer's at Harvard), the sonata is one of those intoxicating Kirchner cocktails of Lisztian rhapsody, Straussian opulence, mercurial shifts of emotion that evoke Mahler, and 12-tone structures that only rarely yield harshness.

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Sets of miniatures by William Bolcom (who uses dissonance only as a seasoning in his wry "Nine New Bagatelles") and Derek Bermel (weaving Thelonious Monk harmonies, swung rhythms and atonality into the pungent "Funk Studies") completed an uncommonly cogent and absorbing program. Nothing in these daunting scores -- the Carter most punishing of all -- ruffled Fan's commanding technique, and he deserves special praise for the spontaneity, wit and emotional urgency he drew from music that in other hands might sound merely thorny.

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