

REVIEW: Pianist Jeremy Denk debuts 'Medieval to Modern' program

Thursday Posted Aug 25, 2016 at 4:56 PM

Updated Aug 25, 2016 at 6:21 PM

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By Keith Powers / Correspondent

A collage can be invigorating, or damnably frustrating. A collection of various materials, woven together by the artist, can come together as an integrated, satisfying whole, or dissolve into fragmented suggestions.

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Denk teased Rockport Chamber Music Festival audiences with this program this past June — only to change his mind. He postponed offering these works back then — substituting a beautiful concert featuring Schubert and others—preferring to let these ideas percolate.

Playing without pause, with only the briefest of introductions and scant program notes, Denk ranged far afield historically and stylistically. The earliest works on the program offered uncomplicated, elegant tunes from Machaut (c. 1300-77) and Binchois (1400-60). From the medieval up through the Renaissance, he continued with sacred settings (Ockeghem and DesPrez), and secular works (DuFay, Janequin), culminating in a Voluntary from the great William Byrd.

The first half drove forward, entering the ornate Baroque until it culminated in J.S. Bach's Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue — richly interpreted, densely layered counterpoint with subtle gestures and broad dynamics offered by the pianist.

Up to intermission, Denk's unspoken point, that developments in style were recognizable, comfortably understood — an almost predictable journey, leading up to the wondrous complexities of Bach — seemed easy to follow. (Unlike the program itself; with a dozen short works in the first half alone, almost none of them familiar, the audience was clearly listening at high alert, examining each gesture and shift of musical mood for clues.)

The second half, ranging from Mozart to modern times, brought more rapid, and cataclysmic, changes in music. No surprise in that either.

A gentle, arpeggiated slow movement of Mozart's Sonata No. 5 began the journey — gorgeously played. Beethoven (the opening of Sonata No. 5) visited this with a thunderbolt — to quote Denk's own circumspect pre-concert remarks — heavily accented, chordal blasts, signifying the beginning of the Romantics, and in bold fashion, the beginning of modern times.

No longer were symmetry, faith and emotional directness enough; life was a challenge, its outcome uncertain, danger and exhilaration everywhere. The historical journey away from Beethoven created unexpected symmetries: Schumann and Chopin almost sounded derivative; Brahms, Debussy and Philip Glass (a combination one would never envision) shared emotional directness; Schoenberg, Stockhausen and Ligeti (the breathtaking etude "Autumn in Warsaw") came alive as the tonal and structural equivalents of shattered pottery.

A return to Binchois's "Triste Plaisir," one of the early delicacies that Denk had used to introduce his program, brought the evening to a close. But his implications continued to swirl about, and will engender comment for as long as Denk explores these works, which he takes on an international tour in the fall and spring.

It was, in the end, the exploration of white, male composers, mostly northern Europeans. No Spanish ideas, let alone the great classical interpretations from South and North Americans, nor the densely vernacular notions of Bartok, Dvorak and others.

But pointing out that Denk did not play this composer or that composer serves no purpose. He certainly weighed the impactful language of a Haydn, or Messaien, or Ginastera, or Copland, before beginning this journey.

Equally adept at another keyboard as a writer, Denks thinks deeply and comments astutely on the music he interprets. So his scant notes and clipped comments about style, and the overarching direction of this unusual recital, serve even more as an intellectual tease.

He did imply that style has not just evolved rapidly, but has in ways disintegrated. Such a conclusion seems abruptly reached. Styles have blurred and jumbled messily — impossible to diagnose confidently, or explore in linear fashion.

But it remains risky business to attribute ideas to such an innovator, or to extract conclusions from a program that left much unexplored. With a great artist, trust serves the listener well. And, with the pleasure gained from hearing such loving, confident interpretations, a secondary concern.

“Medieval to Modern” was a fascinating accomplishment, the collage beautifully rendered, its meanings beckoning, perhaps beyond articulation.

Jeremy Denk performed works ranging from Machaut to Ligeti on Wednesday, Aug. 24 in Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood. The next performance of this program will be Sept. 17 in London’s Wigmore Hall. The next American performance of this program comes Nov. 16 at New York’s Alice Tully Hall.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR’s ARTery. Follow @PowersKeith; email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com

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