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## Fantasies at Dusk

New York  
BargeMusic  
05/31/2019 -**Nadia Boulanger: *Vers la vie nouvelle***  
**Aaron Helgeson: *Through Glimpses of Unknowing***  
**David Rakowski: *Twiff* (world premiere)**  
**Timo Andres: *How Can I Live in Your World of Ideas?***  
**Robert Schumann: *Kreisleriana*, Opus 16**  
Donald Berman (Pianist)

D. Berman (© Etienne Frossard)

*“The poet’s eye, in fine frenzy rolling,/Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;/And as imagination bodies forth.*

*The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen/Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing/A local habitation and a name.”*

William Shakespeare, from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

Donald Berman’s recitals always embrace different universes. One of the great Ivesians of our time, he can play with (and around) the composer with the verisimilitude of both scholar and artist. He can take Berio and Fauré, contrast them with Bach, and the results are equally enlightening.

Never being “cute” in his choices, Mr. Berman’s programs, enigmatic to read on paper, have their own reason. And he has both the chops and sagacity to make them live.

Last night, at one of his favored venues, BargeMusic, it soon became evident that his motif might have been fantasy. And by its very word, fantasy was to take us out of our own minds to others. His fantasies embraced the

synchronicity of desolation and hope; the hidden harmonies of musical notes; the presence of old music peeping through new music; and the craziness of simple tunes almost falling on their heads!

The first was a composition of a woman known more as a teacher and keyboard player than composer. But both Boulanger sisters visualised the 20th Century through their own famed Bach performances.

In *Towards the New Life*, Nadia Boulanger was, according to Mr. Berman, grieving over the illness of her sister as well as the Great War destroying France. And indeed the first half resembled the sadness of Chopin's "Raindrop" prelude, one obsessive note a lament overshadowing all others.

Not to fear. Boulanger saw the sun behind the rain, and Mr. Berman played a lucid (not to say limpid) ending of restrained joy.

Two works by American composers made their goals clear, though not precluding the fantastic.

Aaron Helgeson, in the audience, presented what first sounded like tone clusters on the top and bottom of the keyboard. Ah, but Mr. Helgeson had another goal in mind and this one quite mystical. Not mystical in a sober Chinese Buddhism but with whimsical Japanese mysticism.

To wit, Mr. Helgeson in *Through Glimpses of Unknowing*, was studying the secrets of notational overtones. Now every piano student knows that a key is pressed, a pedal is stepped upon, the key is released and we hear all kinds of notes. I didn't see the score, but Mr. Helgeson must have written detailed instructions on how Mr. Berman could bring together, overtones and undertones, secret notes ringing with keyboard notes, the cluster transformed into *aural* "glimpses of unknowing". By the end, those "secret" notes had formed their own music, isolated from the keyboard. A magical concept!

After that came one of the apparently endless bagatelles written by David Radowski. Not as profound as, say, a Beethoven *Bagatelle*, but in an algebraic, loga-rhythmic (pun intended), way, each one a proposition in logic which proves itself in the notes.

In *Twiff*, we had a plainly written work which was lopsided, ungainly, a bit drunken, but always managing to stand up and walk...or stroll...or run. If one had a fantasy here, it would have been George Gershwin telling his brother Ira about the music, suggesting that they could simplify the counterpoint, add some words and call it...well, *Fascinatin' Rhythm*. Which it was.

(I didn't understand the "Twi" of the title, but the last notes were absolutely "fff")

The fantasy of Timo Andres lies partly in the ungainly title—*How Can I Live in Your World of Ideas?*, but mainly in the ideas themselves. Mr. Andres' music turns up, like a radiant gold coin, in the most unlikely of places, with outlandish titles, happily quirky creations, much like David Rakowski. In this work, Mr. Andres presented a puzzle resembling "Find the Animals in the Picture".

Though not exactly. Usually those musical puzzles give us a few disguised measures, or, as in Berio's *Sinfonia*, gorgeous transformations in word and notes. Mr. Berman started this with no quotes at all, simply a repeated line in the bass, which—instead of a cadence—suddenly burst up., Out of this came melodies which seemed original, but gradually resembled works which we should have known.

I was far too intrigued to share in this guessing game (after all, Mr. Berman was playing the piano, not playing *Jeopardy*). But one couldn't resist the Mozart turn of phrase, then some Chopin, a Beethoven-style dashing run down the keyboard and possibly we had some Brahms? Schumann? I didn't care one way or another: it was a careful, delightful study in the dimensions of centuries and jaunty piano playing.

When reading about the works on the program, the one piece which didn't make sense was Robert Schumann's *Kreisleriana*. The four preceding works, even the Boulanger, were firmly of the 20th and 21st centuries. What on earth could this mid-19th Century stalwart have in common with the others?

Like a rube, I'd forgotten what Mr. Berman explained before the playing. *Kreisleriana* was inspired, like the others, by fantasy. The singular original stories by E.T.A. Hoffmann.

Of course virtually every Schumann piano work is a *Phantasiestück* but Hoffmann was the ultimate fantasist. That made programmable sense, and Mr. Berman is celebrated for pairing music of different aeons.

Still, I was a bit uncomfortable, after listening to the previous pieces, with a grand, massive and firmly Romantic masterwork. After four teaspoons of caviar, sturgeon in champagne sounds unreasonably heavy.

Mr. Berman never let that interrupt a dramatic and brisk octet of Hoffmann anecdotes told with fiercely moving fingers and emotions. Granted, I rarely was granted to the "eternally undulating sea from which Kreisler sought haven." After all, this was the young Schumann whose ensuing suicidal schizophrenia was a decade away, and here the split in emotions was purely pianistic.

Did Mr. Berman reach these undertones? In the slower sections, his artistry pursued those jewel-like Schumann themes unerringly. For the rest, it was fine pianism and artistry, lacking perhaps the skull beneath the skin.

Never mind. Donald Berman, as always, had created another world. Worlds themselves are imperfect, and he came as close to meeting his ideals and ideas as any mortals are allowed.

Harry Rolnick

Recommender 0

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