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Berman stretches, then reaches the limits

Reprinted from late editions of yesterday's Globe.

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DONALD BERMAN, PIANO
At: Paine Hall, Harvard University,
last night

CAMBRIDGE — Donald Berman, renowned as a performer and director of the hot new-music group Dinosaur Annex and the founder of "Firstworks," an annual First Night concert featuring brand-new music, is a pianist of stupendous abilities, both athletic and intellectual. His recital last night at Harvard's Paine Hall, titled "Pioneers and Premieres," was designed for maximum rigor in both categories; not a meat-and-potatoes kind of concert, but a bone-and-tendon-and-gristle kind of concert.

The program was packed with rugged individualists like Charles Ives and spiritual descendants like Arthur Levering; the audience was packed with composers, illustrious pianists, and hip Harvard kids (Berman is a tutor at Harvard's Pforzheimer House), ready to absorb whatever Berman wanted to fling at them. The pianist commenced with the Second Sonata for Piano (1948) by American composer Robert Palmer.

Berman's big warm tone, wonderful voicing, and sense of narrative made the oceanic calm of the first movement and the dense sonata of the second a joy to hear. His hyperkinetic performance of Dana Brayton's madly oscillating, slowly coalescing "A Little Travelling Music" kept you alert.

The centerpiece of the program was a group of small pieces by Carl Ruggles and Ives, of whom Berman has made exhaustive study with the aid of his teacher, the pianist-editor John Kirkpatrick. Berman played a wonderful premiere of Ruggles's "Visions," reconstructed by

Kirkpatrick from the composer's sketchbooks. Its passionate, almost angry theme evolves through thunderous climaxes and yearning lyrical episodes.

Ives's studies for piano constitute some of his thorniest music-crashing chords, polytonal and polyrhythmic carryings-on, thick blizzards of notes from which emerge pop tunes, bugle calls, church bells, and hymns. Berman looked on calmly while his hands, fingers, and feet went their separate ways, pricking out Ives's and other peoples' tunes from the melee.

In the lovely Study No. 6, the soprano and bass echo phrases of "Nearer, My God to Thee," over (and under) a liquid arpeggiated accompanying figure. In the crash-fest of Study No. 20, there were respites of arching lyric beauty. Ruggles's "Valse Lent," also a premiere, turns out to be almost wistful, or as wistful as Ruggles ever allowed himself to get.

Berman made Bright Sheng's "My Song," with its riots of twittering and local-color pentatonic tunes, sound more important than it perhaps is. He closed with a frightening, aggressive performance of Levering's "School of Velocity," another kinetic cocktail of huge hammer strokes, grand flourishes, and a dry, fast, obsessive finale that would kill a lesser performer. Not an easy concert, but a big serious one.

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CLASSICAL. Donald Berman has long been one of Boston's most respected players of new music (he's a regular with Dinosaur Annex Music Ensemble). At Harvard's Paine Hall, he'll present a typically Berman-esque program: four works by American musical pioneers Carl Ruggles and Charles Ives (including two Ruggles premieres), Robert Palmer's 1948 Second Sonata for Piano, and a selection of work by major baby-boom composers: Dana Brayton, Jeff Nichols, Bright Sheng, and Arthur Levering. Paine Hall is in the Music Building, behind the Science Center, on the Harvard campus. The performance begins at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$10, or \$6 for students. Call 495-9859.