

THE BOSTON GLOBE • WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 7, 1992

Donald Berman: Adventurous, substantive

Reprinted from late editions of yesterday's Globe.

By Anthony Tommasini
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

CAMBRIDGE - The only problem with gaining a reputation as an informed advocate of new music, as the young Boston pianist Donald Berman has, is that people start to pigeonhole you. Of course, the qualities that a pianist needs to play new music are the same as those for all music: technique, intelligence and imagination. Berman has all three. His playing Monday night in the first of this season's Dudley Profiles recital series at Harvard's Dudley House was exemplary.

That Berman is an adventurous and substantive musician was immediately clear from his performance of a Bach fantasy and fugue, not the famous "Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue" but a seldom-heard and equally masterful work in A minor. The fantasy element comes from the freedom with which Bach handles the work's intricately contrapuntal first half and the complex, self-contained double fugue. The music is filled with unconventional melodic twists and unexpected harmonic shifts and Berman was alert to all of them. This was organic, full-bodied, freely pedaled Bach, bold yet lifting and luminous.

Two of Hungarian composer

DONALD BERMAN, pianist
At: Dudley House, Harvard University,
Monday night

Gyorgy Ligeti's recent piano etudes followed the Bach with surprising effectiveness, especially in Berman's compelling performance. "Cordes Vides" is an ethereal, swirling sound piece. This is how Ravel might have been writing if he had lived in Eastern Europe in the 1980s. "Fanfare" is a wonderfully chaotic mix of asymmetrical scale passages and pungent chordal themes. And was that a bit of honky-tonk that Berman found in the piece's stride-like rhythms?

Liszt's transcriptions of Schubert's songs might get played more often if they weren't so difficult. Somehow in the midst of the shimmering, right-hand colors and undulant bass lines of "Liebesbotschaft" and "Gretchen am Spinnrade," the pianist must articulate the singer's tune with his thumbs (divvying it up mid-range) and his outer fingers. Berman handled them with impressive naturalness. For once, the tremulous arpeggios of Liszt's "Un Soopira," which followed, sounded easy by comparison. Berman closed the group with another Liszt transcription of Schubert, "Soirees de Vienne No. 6," an oom-pah-pah waltz adorned with pianistic curlicues. The music seemed all the more delightful for the nonchalance Berman brought

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to it.

Berman studied Schubert's Opus Posthumous Sonata in B-flat major with his teacher, the great pianist Leonard Shure, who had learned it from his teacher, Artur Schnabel, a revered Schubertian. So Berman's analytic understanding of the music's structure and content was thorough. Yet here most of all Berman showed himself to be a pianist attentive to the music of his own time, for he made this sonata, beloved for its melancholic lyricism, seem also like the daring music it is. The first movement's sudden stops and abrupt harmonic shifts were stunningly done. The aching Andante was the more beautiful for Berman's unsentimental way with it. The Scherzo was delicate but rhythmically inexorable. And the first F-minor outburst in the final movement was not just emotionally but *musically* disturbing.

A large audience turned out for Berman's recital. Once again, the Dudley Profiles series is off to an auspicious start.