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CULTURAL COMMENTARY

## In With the New

It's time we took more risk in new music programming.



Shai Wosner recently recorded “Isabelle Eberhardt Dreams of Pianos.” *MARCO BORGGREVE*

By **BARBARA JEPSON**

A piano half-buried in sand. A young Swiss woman riding horseback in the North African desert around the turn of the 20th century, remembering the sounds of pianos from her comfortable childhood. These scenarios were imagined by composer Missy Mazzoli as she wrote “Isabelle Eberhardt Dreams of Pianos,” a soul-stirring work for amplified solo piano and pre-recorded soundtrack inspired by Eberhardt’s real-life adventures as well as the music of Franz Schubert.

The piece, which received its premiere in 2007 by contemporary music specialist Kathleen Supové, has now been recorded by the insightful “mainstream” pianist Shai Wosner. Recently released on Onyx, the album is otherwise devoted to Schubert’s Piano Sonata No. 20 in A Major and six of his “Moments Musicaux.”

This coupling of old and new should be the norm today. But while Pierre-Laurent Aimard, Inon Barnatan, Jeremy Denk and Mr. Wosner are among those in recent years to include works by living composers on their single concert programs or discs, most new music is still segregated from the standard repertoire in performance.

Consider the nation's most prestigious piano recital series—the 13 “Keyboard Virtuoso” concerts at Carnegie Hall, which continue through May. As currently advertised, none feature any repertoire later than Bartok. Similarly, the two solo piano entries on this season's “Great Performers Virtuoso Recitals” at Lincoln Center range from Rameau to Rachmaninoff.

The pianists being presented on both series are superb artists, which heightens the desire to hear them play music by living composers. Especially since events like these at major venues are what core classical audiences are most apt to attend, not smaller spaces with more venturesome offerings like Carnegie's Zankel or (Le) Poisson Rouge in Greenwich Village.

Here, then, are several audience-friendly recommendations that would lend variety and freshness to standard recital programs without scaring timid concert presenters or alienating their subscribers. These suggestions do not constitute a compendium of “best contemporary piano pieces.” Nor do they include memorable solo piano fare from the first half of the 20th century that has already entered the canon, such as Samuel Barber's Piano Sonata, Olivier Messiaen's “Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jesus,” or Dmitri Shostakovich's 24 Preludes and Fugues, though these works are not heard in traditional recitals as much as they should be. Rather, they reflect my constantly evolving, personal playlist of compelling music by mostly living composers. All have been recorded, mainly on smaller labels.

One of my favorites, apparently available only on a 1986 vinyl LP or on YouTube, is “For Cornelius” by Alvin Curran. A tribute to a dead friend, it begins with a wistful melody over waltz chords, followed by an extended chordal finger-buster and a funereal coda. Another is Randall Woolf's “Dancétudes”—a brilliant take on the Baroque suite that substitutes a rag and a shuffle for the customary gavotte (or minuet) and gigue. A recent discovery is Daniel Crozier's “Winter Aubade,” which has abstract elegance, structural coherence, and, by the end, tender feeling.

Meredith Monk's brooding “St. Petersburg Waltz” would be a great addition to a grouping of waltzes by multiple composers of the past. In fact, mixing music from past and present often provides insights for performers and listeners alike. The inventive “Three Mazurkas” of Thomas Adès would be fascinating if juxtaposed with those of Chopin. Similarly, Jörg Widmann's

knottier “Intermezzi” (which Mr. Wosner has played in concert), might complement their Brahmsian predecessors.

György Ligeti’s *Études for Piano* distill worlds of expression in highly chromatic language; “Automne à Varsovie” (“Autumn in Warsaw”) with its air of mystery and daunting uber-forte passages, is particularly effective. And for encores, how about Morton Gould’s “Boogie Woogie Etude” or Aaron Jay Kernis’s “Superstar Etude No. 1,” inspired by the piano shenanigans of rock ‘n’ roll “Killer” Jerry Lee Lewis?

Last but not least on my list, there is “Isabelle Eberhardt Dreams of Pianos,” which I find curiously addictive. Like Ms. Mazzoli’s widely admired chamber opera “Song From the Uproar,” it was inspired by Eberhardt, an author and intrepid traveler who was beyond unconventional for her time. Born in 1877, she studied Arabic, converted to Islam, disguised herself as a man and roamed the desert, perishing in North Africa during a flash flood at the age of 27. Her life has attracted filmmakers and others who see her as a symbol of unfettered female spirit.

Mr. Wosner, who will explore the influence of Schubert on living composers in two programs at the 92nd Street Y in January, puts the Mazzoli work in the middle of his otherwise all-Schubert Disc. “Isabelle Eberhardt Dreams of Pianos” opens with distant prerecorded and processed keyboard sounds. Using simple musical materials—a plaintive melody over gently rocking, repeated notes and occasional chordal exclamations in the bass register—Ms. Mazzoli conjures nostalgic longing in her own 21st-century voice. Chords increase in frequency and intensity to a musical apex that the composer describes in the score as “Exuberant! Unleashed!” Muddy harmonies abetted by over-pedaling, the natural overtones of the piano, and the subtle soundtrack itself—unfortunately not as “present” as the one on Ms. Supové’s recording of this piece—add to the aural mix. Near the end, the pensive opening theme of the Andantino from Schubert’s Sonata in A Major is briefly stated. Then the music fades, as Mr. Wosner writes in his liner notes, with echoes of “a disintegrated Andantino and the digitally diffused sounds of pianos . . . joined together into a kind of musical time warp.”

He also commissioned and recorded Ms. Mazzoli’s “A Map of Laughter,” a short bonus track available by download to those who purchase the digital album from iTunes or Amazon. Both pieces are rendered with impressive fluency and empathy, qualities also evident in Mr. Wosner’s lilting Schubert. The Onyx disc heightens expectations for his next performances, live or recorded. What other intriguing “Moments Musicaux” of the present will he bring to greater prominence?