

# Pursued by Chords

BY KYLE GANN

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Two, three, many keyboards

photo: Cary Conover

Lewis Carroll, who wrote math textbooks as well as *Alice in Wonderland*, loved to concoct specious math problems. Like: "If one cat can kill one rat in six minutes, how long would it take a million cats to kill one rat?" In answering, he admitted that most of the million cats would probably never even *see* the rat. September 25 at the Winter Garden I encountered my own version: If one critic can review one pianist in two hours, how long will it take him to review 21 pianists at once? Because from where I was sitting I could only see 15 of the pianists stationed at the two immense semicircles of gleaming Fazioli pianos, and only eight of their keyboards. And who knows how many I was really hearing as the massive welter of sound came slouching toward me?

If more than spectacle, the 21-piano concert was still a little less than music. The program was three pieces, all for 21 pianos, by Italian composer Daniele Lombardi: two four-movement Sinfonias from the 1990s, and a brand-new *Threnodia* dedicated to the victims of September 11 premiered across the street from the tragedy site. Lombardi is no facile showman, but a historically savvy inheritor of the Italian and Russian Futurist traditions, and a pianist who's made his own recordings of bangy, tone-cluster-filled music by Antheil, Ornstein, and others. The spirit of Antheil's *Ballet Mécanique* pervaded the Sinfonias, with sweeping glissandos up and down the keyboard, fists pounding the highest notes, bass keys struck in unison on all pianos at once. Nor did Lombardi neglect subtle effects: Some of the headiest pleasures were fingertips

strumming the strings, and canons of twinkly high notes roaming from piano to piano.

The problem was, some of these effects came back in every movement, making the whole 75 minutes too much of an undifferentiated wash of glissandos, clusters, and tinkly sounds. The Second Sinfonia was better delineated in this respect than the First: It opened with a long pitch row played in unison, was marked off by Bartókian melodies, and in the slow movement arrived at the lovely effect of chords changing beneath a high drone pitch. This work I heard from the back of the audience, where I could hear each piano equally well through the loudspeakers, necessary for cutting through Winter Garden's boomy echo chamber. The other works I heard more acoustically from the edge of stage right, and I'm glad I did, for one effect in the *Threnodia* was by itself worth the trek to ground zero: a series of chords starting at the opposite side of the stage and ominously coming toward me, piano by piano. It is the general tendency of pianos to stay put, and to hear a piano chord sneaking up on me was deliciously creepy.

The 21 pianists—Mirian Conti, Kerstin Costa, Jed Distler, Stephen Gosling, Alpin Hong, Eri Kang, Sachiko Kato, Claudio Knafo, Jenny Lin, Anthony de Mare, Greg McCallum, Blair McMillen, Beata Moon, Lisa Moore, Marc Peloquin, Frederic Rzewski no less, Ronen Segev, Dmitri Shteinberg, Cristina Valdes, Olga Vinokur, and Miri Yampolsky—included a lot of dynamite new-music-scene figures, and one yearned to see them let loose in more virtuosically synchronized pyrotechnics than this. Antonio Ballista conducted heroically. One doesn't attend a monster concert of pianos thinking that it's going to be the most soulful experience of one's concert life; as with similar 19th-century extravaganzas staged by Gottschalk and others, you expect a certain amount of noise and theatrical tricks. But Lombardi gave signs that he's a good enough musician to know that there's more he could do with this medium, and I hope when he comes back with his Third Sinfonia, it's a little sharper on musical content. Being chased by pianos is wonderful, but they can do more than just growl.

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