

# Whiz, Bang, Tzinng!

By Kyle Gann

## Composers' Forum

This critic is skeptical of performers who belatedly take up the pen. Yet when a veteran pianist suddenly brings out a work of his own as sturdy and original as Yvar Mikhashoff's *Shaman*, which he played at Merkin Hall September 15, this critic is embarrassed by his own cynicism. Not to deny that *Shaman's* form—crescendo, climax, decrescendo—was simplistic in a noncomposerly way. But without any pretentious theatrics, *Shaman* conjured an atmosphere of Rudhyarian mysticism in which sharp, elemental bass motives punctuated quick Papago Indian melodies in the treble. Every 13 beats (per the program notes, I wasn't counting) a short glissando whizzed to a motive on the piano's highest keys, and while you couldn't hear that the structure was determined by numbers from the Fibonacci series, the pacing was audibly elegant.

So was the piano writing, for Mikhashoff added level after level of complex counterpoint, building a quasi-orchestral texture through the intricate division of each line between his two hands. I have no context of Mikhashoff's other music to place *Shaman* in, but it earned its energetic effect without sounding like anything else I've heard.

All three of the well-known new-music pianists Composers' Forum hosted—Mikhashoff, Ursula Oppens, and Anthony De



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Ursula Oppens: the piano series' main course

Mare—outdid themselves on this installment in their piano series. I've heard Mikhashoff churn out perfunctory repertoire, but here he brought a depth of feeling to Alvin Curran's *For Cornelius* that no other pianist (Rzewski and Oppens included) has given it. Curran's memorial to Cornelius Cardew begins with mock-Satie coyness, but Mikhashoff drew it with a dark lyricism of contagious mournfulness. Then he began the long tremolo passage unbelievably slowly, more like waves than tremolos, turning up the wail by heart-rendingly subliminal increments. *For Cornelius* had never seemed profound until this performance.

So to speak, Mikhashoff was the concert's wine, Anthony De Mare its dessert; Ursula Oppens was the main course, by virtue of her repertoire and her playing, mercurial and sure-fingered. *Mayn Yingele*, the set of variations on a Yiddish folk song Oppens wrestled to the keyboard, showed once again that no American composes better than Frederic Rzewski—which is not to say no one writes better music. One stunning effect followed another: mordantly Beethovenian surprises, steely counterpoint, and a first variation in which the theme disintegrated so gradually and illusionistically you looked around the room to see where it had disappeared to. Nev-

er cerebral, the writing writhed with soul and anger, yet each variation contradicted the previous one, and kept the whole from accumulating power. The piece ended with a growl but flatly, remembered as a succession of incredible moments.

Oppens may still be debating how to interpret the *Two Canons for Ursula*, written for her by Conlon Nancarrow, which requires her to play canons-within-canons and cross-tempos as complex as 25 against 28 in an overall 5 against 7. This reading was gentler and more controlled than her 1989 Town Hall premiere, though with dissonances pounded in the first canon and a hotter approach to the second's ripping glissandos. *Two Canons* is a fascinating late-Nancarrow structural study, but not as delightfully idiomatic as his *Tango?* (which Oppens has recorded). It may end up best heard on piano roll, like most of his works.

As for his 1941 *Sonatina*, blues-flavored and Bartókian, Nancarrow has declared it too diabolically un pianistic to perform as written, and prefers it in Mikhashoff's four-hand arrangement. De Mare set out to prove that 10 fingers could play all the notes, and, miraculously, he did; what he *didn't* prove was that 10 fingers could keep the piece's superfast chord explosions intelligibly thematic. The performance was warm and gutsy, with an occasional tendency to blow up. Equally amazing and more gratifying, De Mare played and sang his way through Meredith Monk's minimalist vocalises that no one ought to be able to negotiate but herself. "I still have my mind! I still have my telephone!" he cackled while play-

ing, but the laugh that sounds so whimsical and childlike from Monk's throat was now sinister.

The concert's centerpiece was *Before Sleep and Dreams* by Aaron Jay Kernis, the afternoon's only younger composer and one of New York's most widely performed. Deadly conservative as ambitious young composers are these days, Kernis stole his aesthetic wholesale from an Old Master, and provided quotations in case you couldn't guess who. After hundreds of arpeggios' worth of brummagem impressionist elegance, the finale was a near paraphrase of Debussy's *Engulfed Cathedral*, with a couple of phrases thrown in from *Clair de Lune*. Luckily, one note of Merkin Hall's piano developed a buzz while De Mare played, and audience members I talked to afterward had all, as I had, made listening for that "tzinng!" a kind of meditation to get through the experience.

The lifesaving note was fixed by the time Mikhashoff played his piano versions of Italian opera arias, and by dashing out I barely escaped having to hear some Bellini, which my religion strictly forbids. Mikhashoff may have come to composition late, but Bellini, in his brief life, never came to it at all.

In my most recent Consumer Guide I highly recommended CDs of microtonal/polytempo music by Erling Wold and Larry Polansky, and several readers (all right, five) have complained that the labels are impossible to locate. Wold's music is on Spooky Pooch, 5618 Ludwig Avenue, El Cerrito, CA 94530; Polansky's disc is on Artifact, 1374 Francisco Street, Berkeley, CA 94702. ■

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