MARINO FORMENTI

CONDUCTOR/PIANIST

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Liquid Lyricism of Marino Formenti, Demon Pianist

By MARK SWED

Marino Formenti is the loudest, softest, most dynamic and most ethereal pianist I ever recall encountering, and also the most impatient. He is, in short, a phenomenon. And his two-week survey of mostly late-20th-century music at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which ended Thursday, turned into an addiction.

Few had likely heard of this young Italian before the event. He has not yet made solo recordings. If he is known at all, it is as the pianist for the new music group Klangforum Wien, in his adopted hometown of Vienna.

So, initially, the attraction was the music. Each of the four programs, sponsored by the Monday Evening Concerts series, was devoted to a single nation - France, Italy, Austria, America - and to a quirky mix of important works and novelties.

But, in the end, Formenti had less to say about national character in music than about his personal taste for composers who can expand the sonic possibilities of the piano. And when the composers didn't go far enough in their sonic imaginations, Formenti didn't hesitate to help them along. He also happens to be among the most willful performers around.

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Try to imagine a Glenn Gould for the 21st century, a visionary for whom the usual limitations of either technique or tradition are not an issue, and you might get some idea of this spectacular pianist.

Formenti inhabits the extremes of the keyboard. An ideal piece for him was the Fifth Piano Sonata by the contemporary Italian composer Salvatore Sciarrino. It begins with spidery webs of sound so delicate that Formenti's hands barely seemed to touch the keys, straining audibility. Then it explodes, the pianist's hands like jackhammers banging clusters at the opposite ends of the keyboard in a mad, mechanical dance. There was simple amazement in observing man and instrument break their bounds, but there was also a deeper amazement as the sounds at the borders of dynamic perception took on unimagined hallucinatory powers.

This was even more the case in an Austrian piece, "Hommage a Gyorgy Ligeti" by Georg Friedrich Haas, in which Formenti pounded out superhumanly fast repetitions, this time on two pianos placed at right angles and tuned a quarter-tone apart. A tintinnabulation was set in motion that seemed to have an echoing, rebounding life of its own. It lasted around seven minutes, which seemed both an eternity and a single breath.

It is this extraordinary ear for sonority that appears to drive Formenti. He has an affection for liquid lyricism and sometimes can't seem to stop himself from producing miracles, whether appropriate or not. For instance, he played Schoenberg's Three Pieces, Opus 11 with an exotic, lush sensuality that made these early Expressionist masterpieces practically unrecognizable.

A similar dreamy sensuality infected Formenti's approach to John Cage and Morton Feldman on the American program, as did the pianist's impatience. Cage's "One" is timed to last exactly 10 minutes, with long resonating notes from two chords organized within specified time brackets and framed by silences. Formenti made this a soup of gorgeously colored sonorities, but without silences or a stopwatch. He played it in seven minutes.

Feldman's "Piano" also was speeded 'up by about a third, to 20 minutes. As with Cage, Feldman's music can create the sensation of stepping outside of time. Formenti gave it a more real-world flow, but the compensation was the fleshy beauty of his sound and the sense of eroticism in the intertwining chords (always an element in Feldman's music but rarely realized in the typical superserious performance). In an Italian classic, Luigi Dallapicolla's "Quaderno Musicale'di Annalibera," Formenti's delicacy of touch produced a marvelous, buttery lyricism.

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The other side of Formenti is his savage percussive athleticism. His zealous banging through George Antheil's eminently bangable "Airplane" Sonata and "Sonata Sauvage" would have made Jerry Lee Lewis jealous. In the U.S. premiere of an exciting new work, "Incidendo-fluido," by a young Austrian composer, Olga Neuwirth, for prepared piano and electronics, Formenti seemed downright demonic as he whacked repetitive small motifs.

Such demonic pianism, usually followed by a shy smile, seemed the most authentic condition of Formenti's imagination, a feisty refusal to be tied down to the score. Complexity doesn't scare him. He tossed off such knuckle busters as Dorrance Stalvey's "Changes" or Luigi Nono's "sofferte onde serene ..." with apparent ease. But he seemed especially engaged when he could do his own thing, as he did with the graphically vague notations of Sylvano' Bussotti's "Five Piano Pieces for David Tudor' and Roman Haubenstock-Ramati's "Catch II." In these works, he was a human octopus, using the flats of his hands and his arms to bang the keys, and diving repeatedly inside the piano to attack the strings.

Also on the festival were the world premiere of "What the afternoon and the mountain said," by the Portuguese composer Antonio Chagas Rosa (slipped in on the Italian program), with sweet arpeggios followed by dramatic climax; the fragile and poetic "Voicelessness -- the snow has no voice" by the Austrian Beat Furrer; and a magisterial performance of Ives' Three Page Sonata.

And there was also the unanswered question. What might Formenti be like in the standard repertory? At the close of the final program came a hint, when he followed Feldman with a Bach encore, a small saraband. It was enchanting and visionary Bach, heavily pedaled yet fancifully ornamented, with chords voiced in original ways and notes seamlessly flowing into each other as if they were meant for an underwater ballet. As George Szell said of Gould:.'"This nut is a genius."

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