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Music Review | 'When Brahma Sleeps'

Building a Mountain of the Avant-Garde and Smoothing Its Surface to Please

By STEVE SMITH

The versatile pianist Donald Berman is known as a champion of feisty upsetters like Charles Ives and Carl Ruggles. Similar tendencies might have been anticipated in “When Brahma Sleeps,” a program of recent works for electronically enhanced piano that Mr. Berman presented at Le Poisson Rouge on Sunday night.

Instead, most of what he played was rooted in decades-old trends from the classical avant-garde and the fringes of pop; nearly all of it seemed eager to please.

That is not meant as condescension, nor would Mr. Berman be likely to take it as such: in a program note, he confessed to having discovered Bizet’s “Carmen” on an album titled “Everything You Always Wanted to Hear on the Moog (but Were Afraid to Ask For).” Classical and popular creators have long stolen licks from one another; add technology, and distinctions start to blur.

“Remembering Seven,” a delirious electronic work by Mark Wingate, reinforced that point as recorded improvisations by Srini Rajagopalan, an Indian singer, slithered and oozed as if tweaked with Auto-Tune, a pitch-correction program that is all the rage among hip-hop producers. Another electronic piece by Mr. Wingate, “Welcome to [Medicare!](#),” was a gleefully sadistic collage assembled from automated voice-mail menus.

Mr. Wingate’s compositions involving Mr. Berman were more conventional, if no less clever. In “Sombras,” notes played by Mr. Berman were sampled, altered and volleyed in patterns approximating those of Latin American dances. The results were like hearing “Tequila” from the bottom of a swimming pool.

Mr. Wingate’s effects in the meditative “When Brahma Sleeps” amounted to a digital upgrade of Cage’s junk-drawer preparations and Stockhausen’s ring modulator.

Other notions were similarly rebooted. “U-Don Rock,” by Su Lian Tan, extended a jump-cut aesthetic associated with Carl Stalling and [John Zorn](#). Eric Chasalow’s “Due (Cinta)mani,” a lively descendant of the Columbia-Princeton Studio’s card-punch electronica, surrounded pointillist piano figures with taped fizzes, sputters and quacks.

“Hey Mr. Drummachine Man,” by Eric Moe, pitted Mr. Berman against a hyperactive programmed beat and ended in a draw. Two further works by Mr. Moe relied solely on manual labor: “Dance of the Honey Monkey” matched stuttering left-hand rhythms with right-hand bebop stabs, and “Where Branched Thoughts Murrur in the Wind” was a spare reverie.

For David Rakowski, too, conventional sounds sufficed. Parallel lines played simultaneously on piano and celesta drifted in and out of sync in his Étude No. 71 (“Chase”), inspired by the jazz pianist [Erroll Garner](#). In Étude No. 72 (“Dorian Blue”), an ancient Jewish devotional chant played with the left hand was embellished and occasionally bullied by right-hand flourishes.

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