

Schumann Performed as Others Hear Him



Brian Harkin for The New York Times

Miranda Cuckson of the Argento Chamber Ensemble during a version of Schumann's Symphony No. 2 at the Chelsea Art Museum on Tuesday.

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Most performers commemorating the Schumann bicentenary are playing his music straight up. Not so Michel Galante, the founder and director of the Argento Chamber Ensemble. When Mr. Galante and his players paid tribute to Schumann on Tuesday evening at the Chelsea Art Museum, they looked at his music — or, in one case, his style and persona — through the eyes of other composers.

Liszt's transcriptions of Schumann's songs are not the recital staples they once were, but pianists still include them on programs occasionally, or offer them as encores, usually to pleasing effect. They are, in a way, perfect hybrids. Liszt preserved the poetic impulses of the Schumann originals and often

their delicacy as well; but in combining the vocal and piano lines he also took the opportunity to add the virtuosic flair that characterizes his own music.

Joanna Chao opened the Argento program with two Liszt transcriptions: the sweetly melodic "Widmung" and the flighty, decorative "Frühlingsnacht." Her readings were carefully shaped and had a graceful sweep — particularly "Frühlingsnacht" — but the museum's reverberant gallery is not an ideal space for a solo piano performance, and balances that might have sounded fine in drier acoustics seemed askew here.

Ms. Chao was heard to much better effect in Gyorgy Kurtag's "Hommage à R. Sch.," a 1990 meditation on Schumann's imaginative collections of vignettes ("Kinderszenen" for example), in which she was joined by Carol McGonnell, the clarinetist, and Stephanie Griffin, the violist.

In this quirky score the piano writing is often a whisper, except in the vigorous but brief third and fourth movements, with their magnified Schumannesque eccentricity. And the writing for clarinet and viola is fragmentary, mysterious and sometimes eerie. Little in Mr. Kurtag's dissonant score sounds like Schumann. But the music's shape, its evocation of Schumann's alter egos, Florestan and Eusebius, and its hints of madness had the quality of a whimsical modernist portrait: Schumann as seen by Warhol, perhaps.

Mr. Galante closed the concert with a fascinating chamber reduction of Schumann's Symphony No. 2, arranged for 11 instruments by Kimmy Szeto. Chamber versions of symphonies inevitably seem suspect, if only because they reverse a composer's intentions by transforming grand gestures into intimate ones. Mr. Szeto avoided that. Through skillful allocation of his resources — a string quartet, bass, flute, clarinet, oboe, bassoon and a pair of horns — he found ways to suggest orchestral heft when necessary. Here the gallery's acoustical brightness was helpful. Chordal passages, which the Argento players executed with tight precision, resounded through the room.

But the real beauty of Mr. Szeto's rescoring was in the symphony's more ruminative and lyrical sections, which thrive in reduced proportions. The Adagio espressivo was particularly successful, thanks largely to magnificently sweet-toned solo playing by Miranda Cuckson, the violinist; Ms. Griffin, the violist; Keve Wilson, the oboist; and Lance Suzuki, the flutist.

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