

Percussive pianists

UB students' performance features a retrospective of John Cage's music for 'prepared piano'

By **Mary Kunz Goldman**

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Late on a sunny afternoon, when sane people would be outside, UB pianist Eric Huebner and three of his students are in Lippes Concert Hall gathered around a beat-up Steinway grand piano.

It is not just any old Steinway grand.

Wedged under and between its strings are...objects. Felt. Bolts. Oddments.

On Wednesday, Huebner and his students are performing an hourlong retrospective of John Cage's Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano. And preparations are finally complete.

Cage (1912-1992) was known for his experimentation. One of his most famous innovations was the "prepared piano"—a piano adjusted to produce unusual sounds.

It was born out of necessity. Cage came up with the idea in the 1940s so he could get the sound of a percussion ensemble. (In keeping with his shoestring spirit, Wednesday's concert is free.)

The composer was working a lot with dance troupes, and dance, along with Indian philosophy, inspired him. There are shards of the Baroque — trim little ornaments, tiny trills — and dance rhythms. The items among the piano strings produce soft jingles and gong sounds. There are African beats and twinkling treble lines.

You could debate whether the pieces are actually music, or if they are instead montages of sound effects. Arguments over that break out frequently on YouTube.

You could also call prepared piano "quaint." UB, after all, has a history of the avant-garde. Cage himself was no stranger to our town.

But there is no denying the instrument's entertainment value. And if the prepared piano never caught on among other composers, Huebner says, that is because Cage owned the concept.

"Cage got there first," he says. "He was like an actor in a TV show."

Hours of toil

UB allows only old pianos to be “prepared,” because of the chance of damage to or strain on the instrument. Huebner toiled alone for a few hours one night readying the piano at the Lippes in Slee Hall on the North Campus in Amherst.

He worked diligently from Cage’s score, which details which object — Medium Bolt, Furniture Bolt, Screw, etc. — is to be placed where.

“It’s really quite amazing. The measurements are very, very specific,” Huebner says. Still, even Cage realized you can be only so specific. “There was nothing you could do to prevent each performance from sounding a little different.”

The idea for the Cage concert was his. His students, though, took the challenges in stride.

“Now that I’m at UB, I’m playing more contemporary music,” says Ana Lia Vafai. In her early 20s, Vafai is already a noted local musician, a violinist as well as a pianist.

The students involved in the Cage project are also all studying pieces from the height of the Classical era. Vafai and Antonella Di Giulio are exploring major Beethoven sonatas. Mo Su, for an upcoming recital, will be playing late Mozart.

They calmly took on the Cage when Huebner asked them to. The pieces, Vafai says, have their own charms.

“I like the freer ones,” she says. “In the more rhythmic pieces, the piano acts like a drum set. They accentuate the percussive aspect. It’s great if you’re a pianist, and want to be a drummer,” she laughs.

“You find beauty in anything,” she says. “Anything can be music.”

‘A miraculous thing’

Ask Huebner’s students if they can memorize this music, and they burst out laughing. The scores are dense, arcane and intimidating.

Listening to the pieces is a lot easier.

They are tonal, unlike a lot of the “new music” heard at UB over the years. You could sing some of the melodies. Cage wrote them early in his career, before he became involved in music that was atonal or created from chance.

The music benefits from a live setting, because Cage’s innovations can be subtle.

Some strings are left untouched, providing for contrast between “normal” piano and prepared piano. Huebner points out that Cage tended to concentrate on the treble notes. Most of the pieces are on the quiet side, probably because Cage wanted to avoid jarring, buzzing sounds.

“What is really cool about it to me, you always hear that the piano is basically a percussion instrument, or part of the percussion family,” Huebner says.

“If there is a piano as part of the orchestra, it’s in the back, next to the percussion. But finally, in the Cage, it actually is transformed into a genuine percussion instrument by strings and bolts inserted between the strings. It’s like a whole percussion ensemble at your fingertips.”

Preparing the piano gave Huebner new insights into Cage’s imagination.

“It’s like having a new instrument all of a sudden in front of you,” he marvels. “It’s this magical instrument that can do all kinds of interesting sounds, diverse sudden levels of control depending on how you strike the key.”

“It’s kind of a miraculous thing that I think Cage in a way stumbled upon,” he reflects. “I don’t know that he really set out to alter the piano. It was kind of a process of discovery.”

His glowing reflections beg a question.

Like his students, Huebner also explores Beethoven, Brahms, and other older masters. What is it like to remove the nuts and bolts, and go back to unprepared piano?

He laughs.

“It’s not quite as fun.”

Piano Concert

Eric Huebner and University at Buffalo students perform John Cage’s Complete Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano; 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Lippes Hall in Slee Hall, UB North Campus. Admission is free. Info: 645-2921.

mkunz@buffnews.com