

# Musical magic

## Round midnight at Festival Miami 2004,

Thelonious Monk was one of the most original, inventive jazz artists of our time. At once an avantgardist and a classicist, Monk infused jazz with the gossamer textures of Debussy. *Round Midnight* was Monk's most famous composition. A bluesy, languorous theme, *Round Midnight* seems to spring from Monk's creative heart and soul. The piece became both the dramatic and musical thematic material for a moody, blues tinged film (starring jazz great Dexter Gordon) by the French director Bertrand Tavernier in the late 1980s. In 2000 the extraordinary Italian pianist Emanuele Arciuli collaborated with a cornucopia of American and European composers on a series of *Round Midnight Variations* -- a remarkable homage to Monk's fertile musical invention. On 27 September 2004 Arciuli presented his *Round Midnight* program at the University of Miami's Gusman Concert Hall in Coral Gables, Florida, USA -- the opening event of Festival Miami 2004.

In many ways the *Round Midnight* concert encapsulated what Festival Miami is all about: cultural fusion, a celebration of the creative spirit, and a forum for remarkable artists who embrace the future as well as the past. Arciuli is definitely an artist for the 21st century. A scrupulous musician and scholar, both a creative and performing artist, Arciuli is a champion of modernity. Yet his rigorous musicianship and keyboard technique is second to none. Always striving for new artistic limits, Arciuli was the perfect artistic incubator for the Monk project. The heart of the program's first half -- *Waiting for Monk* -- is a suite of nine variations by the octogenarian composer George Crumb. Crumb's *Rumination on Monk's Theme* opens with an eerie, haunting nocturnal theme. The pianist plucks the piano strings and strikes them with a mallet -- 'purple haze' effects that enliven the score's third section premonition. *Cobweb and Peaseblossom* is a witty, technically daunting *Scherzo* that recalls Bartok's Second Piano Concerto. The 'Incantation' section is an imaginative gloss on a theme by Glazunov (from the ballet *Raymonda*) -- an *avant garde* composer's backward glance at the nineteenth century Russian musical heritage. The *Burlesca -- Golliwog Revisited* -- quotes Debussy's *Golliwog's Cakewalk*, Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, and Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel* with a touch of Louis Moreau Gottschalk thrown in for good measure -- a delightfully satirical view of pianistic delights and beyond. *Blues in the Night* is a tribute to the great jazz piano tradition which Thelonious Monk embraced and transfigured. The wonderful, harp-like sounds of the strumming (by hand) of piano strings in *Cadenza with Tolling Bells* sets up Crumb's magical finale *Midnight Transfiguration* -- a glistening, evocative fusion of jazz and post Messiaen modernism. Few pianists possess the incredible technique to encompass George Crumb's futurist musical visions. Arciuli not only met every challenge but played with gleaming tone, a patina of coloristic variety, and heartfelt conviction -- artistry on the highest level! Crumb's masterful études are preceded by a jazzy riff on the main thematic material by Eric Reed; a passionate, Rachmaninoff-tinged *Little Midnight Nocturne* by Fred Hersch; and *Superstar Etude No 2* by Pulitzer Prize winner Aaron Jay Kernis -- a thorny, dissonant pyrotechnical display marked by relentless driving rhythms -- played with bravura panache by Arciuli. The program's second part *Round Midnight Variations* opened with a coolly cerebral statement of Monk's immortal tune followed by Matthew Quayle's *Monk Sits Down to Write a Tune* -- light music Leroy Anderson style replete with tone clusters and a rollicking stride piano finale. *In the Morning* comprised a surprisingly light, airy

contribution from the usually cutting edge Frederic Rzewski; a jazzily atonal gloss by Milton Babbitt; and Italian composer Roberto Andreoni's *Slinking around Midnight* -- an Impressionistic view of jazz improvisation. *In the Afternoon* opened with a rigorously modern, abstract arabesque by Augusta Read Thomas. *Precious Time* by Filippo Del Corno evoked the mystical, post-Romanticism of Alexander Scriabin. Michael Torke added a pop inspired minimalist vignette. *Diversions: Three Midnight Variations* by Carlo Boccadoro traversed Prokofieff's steely rhythms and Gershwin's pounding, jazzy pianistic displays (with a direct quotation from the composer's Concerto in F). Boccadoro's mini divertimento brought a dazzling display of sheer keyboard virtuosity from the remarkable Arciuli.

*In the Evening* opened with *Monk Trope*, a dreamy, rhapsodic, highly Romantic rumination from the usually austere John Harbison. David Crumb (George Crumb's son) wrote a variation that fuses American blues and misty Gallic sophistication in equal measure. *Monk in the Kitchen* by Michael Daugherty (a composer celebrated for his pop icon based scores) is a clangorous, rock-infused showpiece. Award winning composer and musicologist William Bolcom's *Just 'Round Midnight* is a mock keyboard exercise -- roll over Carl Czerny. *Midnight Dream* by Gerald Levinson is French modernist (*à la* Messiaen) trance music -- the perfect midnight riff. The *Cadenza and Finale* by Joel Hoffman returns to the music's modern jazz roots -- soulful, tranquil, and beautifully evocative!

The patrician, deeply probing artistry of Emanuele Arciuli produced a unique musical event. A supreme pianistic colorist, Arciuli infused every note and stylistic diversion with the most elegant, shimmering pianistic glow. A rare evening indeed -- the concept and artistry of a genius!

**reviewed by LAWRENCE BUDMEN**

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