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Many-Faceted Dreams of That Time Round Midnight

Emanuele Arciuli, an Italian pianist who plays a good deal of American music, had an unusual idea for a commissioning project: a program of variations on a single theme that would represent the passage of time from morning to afternoon and evening. He settled on Thelonious Monk's "Round Midnight," a jazz standard that Monk composed in the 1940's, and he solicited contributions from composers of every stripe.

The concept, and the resulting collection of works, seemed tailor made for the adventurous Miller Theater at Columbia, and Mr. Arciuli presented his "Round Midnight Variations" there last Thursday evening. All told, 20 composers weighed in on the Monk tune. Most found enough in it to offer surprising or illuminating twists, and Mr. Arciuli addressed what proved a hefty program with an ironclad technique as well as unflagging energy and imagination.

As it turned out, only the second half of the program was devoted to the times-of-day series. The first half was given over to recent arrivals - variations on the Monk tune that Mr. Arciuli has not yet fitted into his thematic concept. The Miller Theater commissioned two of the new scores: Eric Reed's "Variation" and Fred Hersch's "Little Midnight Nocturne" approach the melody from a jazz pianist's perspective. For Mr. Reed, that means bursts of melody supported by a steady, almost Bachian bass line. For Mr. Hersch, it means keeping the chord progression but supplying a new melody. Uri Caine's "Variation" offers a more forceful, virtuosic view, as does Aaron Jay Kernis's dense, fleet "Superstar Étude No. 2." "The Monk and Me," a ruminative piece by Alberto Barbero, treats the melody more gently: if this opening group were a sonata, it would be the adagio. And in George Crumb's "Eine Kleine Mitternachtmusick," a nine-movement suite for amplified piano, Monk's theme is examined through many prisms. As he often does in his piano works, Mr. Crumb asks the pianist to play inside the instrument, strumming, plucking and drumming on the strings, and he paints some vivid pictures, within which fragments of the Monk theme make periodic appearances.

Mr. Arciuli's idea of presenting the Monk variations as a progression from morning to midnight did not entirely work: Nothing in the music suggested the different times of day, but the suite worked nicely as an extended variation set. Matthew Quayle's "Monk Sits Down to Write a Tune . . ." which opens the set, is a fantasy about Monk's composing process; "Round Midnight" begins to gel amid improvisatory figures. The closing work, Joel Hoffman's "Cadenza e Finale" is a conclusive tour of the theme, with allusions to the "Goldberg" Variations.

Some great ideas floated around between those bookends. Frederic Rzewski's comparatively easygoing, pointillistic "Variation" gave way to Milton Babbitt's vehement deconstruction, "Gloss on 'Round Midnight.'" In "Slinking Around Midnight," Roberto Andreoni imagined Louis Armstrong (in a bass line phrased with verve) and Ella Fitzgerald (in a treble line that imitated scat singing) performing the song as a duet. Michael Torke's "Variation" uses repeating

figuration to suggest a Minimalist view of the theme, and Michael Daugherty's "Monk in the Kitchen," with its hefty bass and rollicking pianism, ornaments the theme with rock 'n' roll moves.

Space limitations preclude even a cursory description of all the works, but there were also inventive and involving contributions from Augusta Read Thomas, Filippo Del Corno, Carlo Boccadoro, John Harbison, David Crumb, William Bolcom and Gerald Levinson.

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