



'Round Midnight Variations

Emanuele Arciuli, Pianist

Thursday, November 14, 2002 at 8:00 P.M.

### **American Piano Series**

**Miller Theatre at Columbia University**

**2960 Broadway at 116th Street**

**N.Y., N.Y.**

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**What a fabulous idea! Commission a multitude of composers to write a variation(s) on the Thelonius Monk classic 'Round Midnight. Once the works arrive on delivery the challenge then becomes arranging the disparate works into a working order that will convey emotional verisimilitude and heft. Mr. Arciuli's arrangement of the works offers just those characteristics in plenty. The premise is to go through the hours of the day ruminating on the musical possibilities and richness of the song in all of it's variational and harmonic fullness. That it works so well is homage not just to the genius of Mr. Monk but to the fertile talents of Italian pianist Emanuele Arciuli.**

The first part of the program was a harbinger of the evening's showpiece. It featured three world premieres and two American premieres as well as composer George Crumb's extended opus, Eine Kleine Mitternachtmusik.

The evening began with a suite entitled .....Waiting for Monk. First up, Eric Reed's Variation (World Premiere and the first of two Miller commissions), offered a cool series of harmonics with some dissonant voicings although not too cool. This was followed by Uri Caine's Variation (World premiere) embodied by disparate juxtapositioning of rapid arpeggiated runs offset by stabbing angular chords. A virtuosic piece expertly played by Mr. Arciuli. Alberto Barbero's The Monk and Me (American premiere), is part of a larger work and wraps itself up in a study of the harmonic fourth, a standard of jazz repertory. The work displayed very nice shape and had a warmly expressive mood. It was my favorite of the program to this point. Then came Fred Hersch's Little Midnight Nocturne (World premiere and second Miller commission). A beautifully rich and complex work that although not incorporating much of the famous melodic line, and in fact altering it completely, offered instead nuanced development, depth and lush, harmonic richness. A beautiful piece rendered to perfection. The last piece in the suite, Aaron Jay Kernis' Superstar Etude No. 2 (American premiere), improvised off of the original tune with virtuosic displays of dynamics and

sturdily stunning chordal re-workings. A tour de force ending, eliciting a healthy dose of appreciation from the Miller audience.

George Crumb's work was an extended suite entitled *Eine Kleine Mitternachtmusik* (A Little Night Music), *Ruminations on a Tune of Thelonius Monk*. (American Premiere). The composer (who was in attendance and took a well deserved bow at the conclusion of the work), asks the pianist to play inside the piano as well as on the keyboard. There are nine parts to the suite and work has an overall feeling of nighttime in a moonlit fairyland. It is evocatively persuasive leaving nothing that jars the sensibilities unduly. Mr. Arciuli was called upon to utilize all of his skills; dynamics, rapid scalar runs, stabbing chords, wonderful use of the sustain pedal, plucking and racking the strings inside the body of the instrument to striking the inner framework with a mallet. None of this was untoward in the sense of being used solely to create affect but instead was fully effective in conveying a slightly eerie and contemplative mood. A highly intriguing piece of music.

'Round Midnight Variations originally sponsored by the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music also employs multiple composers and is in two parts with an introduction. The work begins with an Introduction and Theme, *Monk Sits Down To Write a Tune*, by Matthew Quayle, and imagines Mr. Monk brainstorming at the piano, improvisatorily creating and refining the kernels of his melodic fragment. It's a neat concept and incorporates a bit of stride piano style, which was an early influence on almost every early jazz pianist. Mr. Arciuli played with a fluid lyrical side and displayed a fine sense of the jazz canon, playing with verve and nuance.

Part I is sub-titled *In the Morning* and employs three composers. Frederic Rzewski's elegant neo-baroque Variation; Milton Babbitt's very chilly *A Gloss on 'Round Midnight* and Roberto Andreoni's nicely evolved *Slinking Around Midnight* in which the composer's stated intent was to evoke an image of Ella and Louis duetting on the tune. I heard a little of the Ella but none of the Armstrong.

Moving along to *In the Afternoon* we were confronted with Augusta Read Thomas' short, pithy Variation; Filippo Del Corno's fiery rhapsodic *Precious Time*, a grandly motivic manipulative piece and Michael Torke's minimalist Variation, that proved to be highly effective and was expertly performed. The variation unfolded in cinematic fashion, like a lotus.

Dividing Parts I and II was Carlo Boccadoro's *Midnight Variations* in three parts. All three variations called for virtuoso technical facility, which was amply supplied by Mr. Arciuli. The first variation was a study of stuttering iterations in harmonic coloration. Variation two was much more contemplative and lyrical while variation three was pointillistic, all smart jabs and enharmonics.

Part II of the 'Round Midnight Variations was sub-titled *In the Evening* .....The triad of composers included John Harbinson whose *Monk Trope* adhered closely to the source material melodically. A sweetly lyrical composition. David Crumb's (son of George) painted his Variation with a strong sense of urgent dynamics and made

many of his musical points with use of expert foot pedaling. Michael Daugherty's Monk in the Kitchen was heavily pop influenced, displaying a rich sense of humor. The music was fun and reminded me of sixties t.v. spy music.

The final trio of variations entitled Just 'Round Midnight began with William Bolcom's 11:59 - think of Miles Davis playing it in F minor (First 8 bars only.....etc., you get the idea). The title was about as long as the piece which was easily the most abstract of the evening's offerings and struck me as fairly throwaway. Gerald Levinson's Midnight Dream took the basic harmonics of the original into outer space and offered not a shred of melody. I felt like I had visited a house with a frame and no foundation.

The final piece, Joel Hoffman's Cadenza e Finale brought the whole to a wholly satisfying close. Where the other two pieces in the final section lacked substance, Mr. Hoffman provided such in abundance. The work provided variations within variations and required great stamina from Mr. Arciuli. He easily surmounted the physical demands of the work, which had thrust and propulsion throughout. Pulsing ostinatos gave way, at times, to beautiful figurations in the right hand and all culminated by morphing into the original tune proper which proved to be an aptly lush climax that was emotional as well as an intellectual ending to a terrific evening.

**Mr. Arciuli established his persona early on in the program and never wavered in his focused and expressive playing. He provided overall shape coupled with a prodigious technique that dazzled the sensibilities and alternated between earnestness, wit and humor in diplomatically dispensed portions. A formidable young pianist and a challengingly rewarding program presented by the Miller Theatre in yet another of its innovative and provocative showcases.**

**by JHONN HAMMEL**

WNTI, 91.9 F.M. Mozart To Motorhead Show.

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