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Pianist conquers two towering works

By Glenn Giffin
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Barry Hannigan is a credit to his school. In an alumni recital Sunday afternoon at the University of Colorado Music Hall, Hannigan ripped into two towering works of the 20th century with verve, splashy virtuosity and engaging energy.

The opener, George Crumb's "Makrokosmos, Vol. I," extends the sonic potential of the modern piano; the other work, Frederic Rzewsky's "The People United Will Never Be Defeated," shows conclusively that traditional pianism of the Lisztian variety is unlikely to go out of style.

Crumb once taught at CU, though he had left by the time his Makrokosmos was written. Besides calling on all the traditional techniques of the keyboard, Crumb also goes inside the piano, asking the performer to hand-mute some strings (which tends to sound like a musical thud), pluck others and, on yet others, tap and rasp with guitar picks and sewing thimble.

Besides the exoticism of the re-

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sulting sounds — amplified, by the way (static is a professional hazard, unfortunately present) — Crumb has set up a structure both poetic and rigorous. The subtitle of the piece is "12 Fantasy Pieces After the Zodiac."

The symmetry is that of three groups of pieces, and looking closer, Crumb tries to give musical voice to human history, from creation and Judeo-Christian accounts (running from "Primeval Sounds" of Cancer to "Crucifixus" of Capricorn) of the first segment; a suggestion of Western Europe in "The Phantom Gondolier" of Scorpio; and on to the future, as the whole ends with a contemplation of the "Spiral Galaxy" of Aquarius.

Besides going inside the piano, the player is required to chant and sing. In "Dream Images (Love-Death Music)" of Gemini, Crumb quotes tunes quite appropriate for Valentine's Day.

The Rzewsky is another matter. This is virtuoso pianism of the highest demands. Rzewsky is a very international composer. American by birth and Polish by descent, the title of his work comes from a Chilean political song, and the score was published in Japan.

It is a set of 36 variations that, like Beethoven's "Diabelli" Variations, take a simple tune through a daunting variety of transformations.

The musical idioms are mixed, from folk to serial to jazz to Bachian figures. The result, all 50 minutes or so of it, is fascinating.

Rzewsky, Hannigan explained, groups the variations into sixes, each group exploring a different technique of music and sound; the final variations recapitulate the whole with increasing density and complexity.

How Hannigan had the stamina to do this program is his secret. But the stunning results mark it as a highlight of the year.