

Audience cheers Barry Hannigan, Pied Piper of the piano

MUSIC REVIEW

By Francis Church
News Leader music critic

If Barry Hannigan played the flute, he would be called the Pied Piper of the University of Richmond.

But Hannigan, 36, is a pianist. Last night he had the students smiling, sitting on the edges of their seats, crowding around the Steinway and, finally, cheering at the end of his recital in the university's North Court Recital Hall.

The soloist, who is on the faculty of Bucknell University in Pennsylvania, delivered a two-hour program of musical heavyweights from the past decade or so of the 20th century.

The first course was Makrokosmos I, a set of 12 pieces for amplified piano by George Crumb, the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer who made most of his waves in the 1970s.

The pianist not only must play the keyboard. He also must pick the strings, some of them prepared with pieces of felt to dampen the sound. Then he must stroke them with a finger wearing a thimble to create the airy effect of harp or hammered dulcimer.

He must knock on the sounding board. Then he must bring the strength of his arms and elbows to practically knock the piano off its feet. He must talk to the piano, raising his voice to a shout with the Latin words, "Animus, veritas." He must whistle to it.

Finally, as the storm calms, he must recall the Chopin of his childhood. "The Fantasy

Impromptu" forms one of the last telling statements of this compelling score.

The performance brought many in the audience of 75 to the piano at intermission, so Hannigan could explain how he made all those wondrous sounds.

Microphone and felt removed, Hannigan turned after intermission to a monster of a work by Frederic Rzewski called "The People United Will Never Be Defeated."

It's a theme with 36 — yes, 36 — variations that goes on 53 minutes, twice as long as any Beethoven sonata. Unfortunately, not enough is there to sustain one's interest.

The whole piece has plenty of revolutionary overtones. The theme is a 1973 Chilean protest song. Brief references are made to

tunes adopted during the Spanish Civil War and Hans Eisler's solidarity movement in Germany in the 1930s.

The gargantuan dimensions of "The People United" harked back in scope and technical demands to such musical behemoths as the "Sonata Teutonica" and "Sonata Psychologique" by John Powell, the Richmond composer of the early 20th century.

Powell was no revolutionary, nor is Rzewski, when one gets down to the music of it. He tosses out a few dissonances here and there, but mostly his piece consists of leaps and fast dynamic changes and materials that have been around for a few generations.

Hannigan was a wonder to watch and hear. His performance was one of the best by any musician so far this season.