

# MARINO FORMENTI

CONDUCTOR/PIANIST

## NEW YORK TIMES

April 20, 2004

### MUSIC REVIEW; Face to Face With Violence and Subtlety in Uncharted Territory By BERNARD HOLLAND

Sometimes the place defines the concert. Think "elevated, isolated and select," and then think of the pianist Marino Formenti at Lincoln Center on Saturday night, seven stories above the general flow of human traffic, playing Karlheinz Stockhausen, Messiaen and Jean Barraqué for about 100 devoted listeners.

This was the first of three evenings for Mr. Formenti at the tiny Clark Studio Theater, titled "Islands of Fire," "The Foretaste of Freedom" and "Nothing Is Real," but they might as well have been called safaris into 20th-century music's heart of darkness.

The route maps that start with Strauss in 1900 have given out by the time we get to the music of Helmut Lachenmann (tomorrow) or John Cage and Salvatore Sciarrino (on Saturday). The avant-garde can argue all it wants about links to the past and tradition brought forward, but these composers are new territory, and they should be grateful to Mr. Formenti, an experienced river pilot in this sort of thing, for bringing them together and allowing them the pleasures of their own company.

With the looks and the pianistic style of a middleweight prizefighter, Mr. Formenti met aggression with aggression, hostility with hostility, and yet when Messiaen opens his heart in the two items from the "Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus," he was both tender and exquisitely aware.

The Barraqué Piano Sonata after intermission was stunning in several senses of the word, not least for the labyrinthine complication and sheer length. With astonishing energy and concentration, Mr. Formenti battled admirably against music armed with equally energetic stores of subtlety and sheer violence.

One should do a study about the triggers that generate happiness and humor in listeners. Serial music and its close cousins -- here they were the Frenchman Barraqué and the German Mr. Stockhausen -- may be eloquent purveyors of anger, anxiety and despair, but one heard in the sonata and in Mr. Stockhausen's five "Klavierstücke" attempts at playfulness or whimsy that never quite get past atonal music's institutional frown. Maybe it is the language's isolation from old musical grammars that dictates seriousness and disallows the frivolous.

Should one be frustrated that music like this has little chance of getting past handfuls of listeners like those on Saturday? Largely young and probably musicians themselves, they showed the attentiveness and the insider's perspicacity that will happily keep this music alive. On the other hand Schoenberg's century-long track record with general audiences discourages hope that Barraqué will someday add himself to the "Three B's" of public reputation.

Taken together, these are three fascinating events for any curious musical mind. Do Barraqué and Mr. Stockhausen represent lonely prophets of a grand new future or wrong turns headed toward dead ends? Undecideds should take the elevator up to the rarefied air of the Clark Studio Theater tomorrow and Saturday and fill those 130 seats.

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