

# MARINO FORMENTI

## PIANIST

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### SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

#### A whole new way to do a recital

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

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**It's not every day you encounter a musical event that can honestly be described as unlike any other. Sunday's extraordinary recital by pianist Marino Formenti was one.**

Appearing in the gleaming, intimate Koret Auditorium of the de Young Museum, the Italian virtuoso unleashed a steady stream of 70 short piano pieces drawn from the past six centuries. There was an intermission -- **Formenti** made that small concession to tradition -- but, otherwise, listeners were simply plunged into an unbroken, ever-shifting flood of music, pursuing a chain of overt or subliminal connections.

**What James Joyce did for the novel, Formenti seems intent on doing for the piano recital. The results were unforgettable.**

The guiding spirit behind Sunday's recital -- the first of several Formenti will give this week under the auspices of San Francisco Performances -- was György Kurtág, the 81-year-old Hungarian composer who is finally being recognized as one of the great and distinctive musical voices of our time.

Kurtág's music consists almost entirely of miniatures -- aphoristic text settings, quick pencil sketches and compact character studies -- and these formed the steady backdrop of Formenti's program. Around them came the work of more than a dozen other composers, from the medieval master Guillaume de Machaut through Bach, Schumann and Mussorgsky, to Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen and György Ligeti.

Kurtág has all of these composers, and more, on his mind at all times. His music, in Formenti's view, is an extended conversation with the history of Western music, and the program, titled "Kurtág's Ghosts," is studded with his explicitly labeled homages to his colleagues and predecessors.

But Kurtág has evidently never read Harold Bloom, for the burden of belatedness sits lightly on his shoulders. His homages are loving, tender, expressive and often hilarious; at times, they take a composer's most distinctive traits and humanize or soften them.

In this context, Kurtág comes off like a clear-eyed but forgiving mimic at a family reunion. "Remember how Uncle Johann used to come around with those endless fugues of his," he'll say, then launch into a little shtick that conveys exactly why Bach was so beloved and still managed to drive everyone crazy.

So, for instance, Kurtág's "Hommage à Domenico Scarlatti" is an uproarious burst of clattering passagework that hovers between the thrilling and the intolerable, while the "Hommage à Stockhausen" captures that composer's vivid brilliance while leavening it with the humor he famously lacks. The most extraordinary bit of mimicry is Kurtág's rewrite of Beethoven's "Les Adieux" sonata in the manner of Janáček.

Because the boundaries of Kurtág's pieces are so evanescent to begin with, they sit well in the context of a blurry series of segues. Still, a few general geographic landmarks emerged from the flood.

Formenti began with considerations of a few basic elements of music -- the single and double vocal lines of Machaut, the increasingly dense chords of Messiaen and Mussorgsky. These passed, by way of Bach, into a sequence of dance pieces before intermission.

The second half plunged into the world of emotional expressivity, with the spare, muted harmonies of Kurtág's "Tears" and a visit with Chopin and Schumann. And, finally, death reared its head: Formenti concluded with a string of elegies and memorial tributes that brought the evening to a somber, tolling conclusion.

If the construction of this program was a phenomenal creative act, Formenti proved no less formidable in the execution. Technically, he is a wizard, with a wealth of tone colors at his disposal, a huge dynamic range and the ability to get around the keyboard with terrifying accuracy and stamina.

But what proved most striking about his performance was the way he brought together the old and new repertoire in a single voice. He played Boulez and Stockhausen as though they were closet Romantics -- then turned around and probed for all the dissonance and modernity in Beethoven and Chopin.

In his coming concerts, Formenti promises a more conventional tour of the 20th century piano repertoire, from Ives and Bartók to Salvatore Sciarrino and Alvin Lucier. He is a unique artist, whose presentations should not be missed.

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