

MARINO FORMENTI

PIANIST

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Formenti displays his many moods

Fans at LACMA cheer his quick-shifting recital and the announcement that the concert series will survive.

By Mark Swed, Times Staff Writer

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Way-out Italian pianist Marino Formenti began his extraordinary recital Monday at the Los Angeles County of Museum of Art with a short, meditative minimal melody piece by the influential 14th century avant-garde French composer Guillaume de Machaut, tranquilly played with his right hand. He ended in stunned quietude with one of the ephemeral works by the laconic Hungarian composer György Kurtág, who turned 80 in February.

In between those two works came 68 other terse pieces and a lot more saturnalian and mystical mood changes. "Kurtág's Ghosts" was the title of this haunted program. It was the penultimate Monday Evening Concert at LACMA, and it embodied three mysteries.

The first, the spiritual one implied by the title — namely, where does Kurtág's unearthly music come from? — was most easily explained. Along with the Machaut, bits of Purcell, Bach, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, Mussorgsky, Bartók, Janáček, Webern, Messiaen, Stockhausen and Boulez bumped up against Kurtágian fragments with no serious collisions and many "aha" moments.

The second mystery was the amazing Formenti. Save that for a minute — he is a complicated character.

The third is what could have possibly come over LACMA? Here it had attracted a healthy, enthralled audience of art lovers savvy enough to find their way to an extraordinary unpublicized concert. But the museum has done its best to permanently alienate them by inexplicably discontinuing a series of historic import that it had supported for 30 years.

Cheers greeted an announcement from the stage that the Monday Evening Concerts will survive. A board has been formed, fundraising has begun, and four concerts, at least, are scheduled next season. Where has yet to be finalized. This much, though, is known: Esa-Pekka Salonen, Kent Nagano and Steven Stucky have agreed to curate concerts.

But the biggest cheers were reserved for Formenti, an MEC discovery who has built up a large fan base in the five years he has been appearing here. In each half of the program, he played 35 pieces, which he ran together, alternating Kurtág pieces (mostly from his "Játékok" series) with miniatures or short movements by all the other composers. Several of the Kurtág works in this series (whose title translates as "Games") are tributes, and Formenti took that into account, but not rigidly. Nothing about the Italian pianist is rigid, other than his rock-solid technique.

That Formenti embodies opposites may not seem remarkable; all musicians must. Even the fact that he embodies extremes in the louder, softer, faster, slower senses is not the full story. What astonishes is the mercurial speed with which he can change emotions, the lightning shifts from brutal violence to unworldly calm.

His is the dramatic concentration of a great actor. And what he presented Monday was in effect two draining, unforgettable soliloquies, the first lasting 45 minutes, the second 53. The freedom of expression with which he approaches everything he plays gives the impression of improvisation. But the ferocious intensity he brings to the keyboard bespeaks a thorough command of dramatic form.

Still, the changes could be startling. One moment he had the stage shaking from his banging out a Haydnesque earthquake and Kurtág's "Sirens of Deluge." The next, a Scarlatti sonata sounding insubstantially tranquil, bled into Kurtág's "Fugitive Thoughts About the Alberti Bass," which he made sound like Scarlatti imperfectly erased, music far closer to silence than sound.

Eventually a kind of meta-narrative emerged, especially in the recital's second half. It began with Purcell (a tune known from Benjamin Britten's "Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra"). There followed huge waves of tension and release, as Janáček, Schubert, Chopin and Schumann alternated with Kurtág. And then came an apotheosis of anguish, violent death and transfiguration. Liszt's "La Lugubre Gondola" No. 1 and "At Richard Wagner's Grave" were its terrifying and otherworldly center.

Next week, Formenti will finish the LACMA Monday Evening Concerts era with a marathon recital celebrating the series' history. It may just wind up making a bit of history itself.

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