

## **Review: Marino Formenti and a startling piano recital to die for**

Mark Swed, Los Angeles Times, Feb 13, 2019

It was not the first time the Marino Formenti seemed to stage his own death at the keyboard. Nor was it the first time the Italian pianist and new-music specialist has mixed early and modern music.

Formenti's done that in Monday Evening Concerts recitals and at the Ojai festival. He's done the lots-of-little-pieces-from-all-over-the-map bit before as well. He's been admired as much for working himself into a hallucinatory trance as he has for playing with pouncing violence and sublime tenderness.

This time, for a draining Monday Evening Concerts recital, though, Formenti finally let the cat out of the bag, or more accurately, he put the cat in a bag from which it would never escape. Calling his program at Zipper Concert Hall on Monday "Ma Mort," Formenti summoned many classic signs of dying — be they denial, confusion, anger, loneliness, hyper-awareness, withdrawal, acceptance, peace, bliss — as he alternated between the Baroque era and our own.

Without the aid of program notes or explanations, I think that was what Formenti was up to in the 25 short pieces. The direction of the evening was toward the penultimate piece, "Meditation sur ma Mort Future" (Meditation on my Future Death), a mournful allemande from a keyboard suite by the visionary 17<sup>th</sup> century composer Johann Jakob Froberger. It is a dance movement with shocking harmonic turns of phrase and little sense of rhythmic regularity, nothing you'd actually want to dance to.

But what was shocking about Formenti's performance was the extent to which he removed the chromatic sting of Froberger, a pianist normally celebrated for his ability to startle. Formenti underplayed all in the music that had been meant to alarm. The result was a profound sense of acceptance that could come about only after a good deal of nonstop disconcertment in downright startling performances of the 23 pieces that preceded Froberger's — and Formenti's — "Ma Mort." Indeed, by this point it had become impossible to distinguish between composer and pianist.

Formenti began the two-part program by segueing between meditative movements by the Italian Baroque composer Girolamo Frescobaldi (who had been Froberger's teacher), and ones written three centuries later by the contemporary Italian composer Salvatore Sciarrino, whose music tends to inhabit the ambiguous edges of sound and silence and of what is conventionally felt to be differences between noise and music. Sciarrino's dust-to-dust "Polveri Laterali" (Side Powder), with the piano mimicking the tinkling bells at its highest register and the tolling of them at its lowest, somehow seemed to keep ringing into Frescobaldi's depressing madrigal, "Ancidetemi Pur" (Do Kill Me).

Kill me do, indeed. It didn't take long for Formenti's performances to feel like an audio Rorschach test, with each piece calling forth an aspect of dying. The journey was not linear, as I imagine dying isn't necessarily, but rather delusional, especially given the concentration and physical intensity of Formenti's playing.

About 90% of his playing is out-of-body, and that can mean deadly force in a sonata by the Galina Ustvolskaya or a dreamy Bach adagio during which Formenti turned away

from the audience and toward the stage behind him. By this point, he was Marino in the Underworld, an Orpheus looking at his Eurydice and knowing that his goose was now cooked for good.

Wolfgang Rihm's Klavierstück No. 7 became a temper tantrum, with Formenti stamping his feet as his hands manically covered every inch of the keyboard. He ended the first part by tenderly moving right along a sequence of unrelated chords in an excerpt from John Cage's "ASLSP" (which stands for as slow as possible), but then adding distracted hesitation to Louis-Nicolas Clerambault's "Fort Tendrement" (Very Tenderly).

Much of the second half of the evening was devoted to pairing Bach with the György Kurtág, the Hungarian miniaturist who is in his 90s. Here, Formenti's Bach could be insistently heavy, like labored breathing, while his Kurtág sounded like fanciful flourishes, visions.

The climax was Ustvolskaya's Sonata No. 6, which Formenti played with spectacular fury of an inmate strapped to an electric chair, the current coursing through his body, death throes raging from head to toe. Once the fight was lost, the struggle over, Froberger's underplayed "Ma Mort," in which notes and harmonies bled into each other like heavy oils with no contours, the soul left the body.

Then in John Lennon's "Oh My Love," which in Formenti's arrangement and utterly unworldly playing, was the unheard voices of loved ones saying goodbye from a now distant land.

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