



Music

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Vivacious Variations

Young Israeli composer's music shines at the Schermerhorn

by **John Pitcher**

Anyone who thinks classical music is in a creative slump has clearly never heard the work of Avner Dorman. A 31-year-old Israeli-born composer, Dorman is already well known overseas for writing music that mixes classical techniques with jazz, rock and Middle Eastern music. Now, after recently becoming the youngest composer on the roster of the prestigious publishing house G. Schirmer, Dorman seems set to become a prominent composer in America as well.

Certainly, he deserves a big reputation for writing works such as *Variations Without a Theme* (2003), which opened the Nashville Symphony Orchestra's classical program last week at the Schermerhorn Symphony Center. Composer John Corigliano, who taught Dorman at Juilliard, described the piece as sounding like the symphonic equivalent of an "Arabic market." Without question, there's a frenetic quality to this music that calls to mind the bustle of an Arab bazaar; moreover, the music is positively redolent of Middle Eastern harmony. Yet the most remarkable thing about it is its extreme musical economy.

As the title suggests, Dorman dispenses with a traditional theme and instead bases his entire 20-minute work on just a few musical odds and ends—a repeated note, an ornament, a few Arab-flavored scales and a half-step interval. It's all amazingly simple, but the end result is sophisticated music that cleverly explores both Eastern and Western sonic worlds.

In the opening, the woodwinds play an ornament consisting of E, E flat, F and G flat. It's clearly an Arab-tinged decoration, but Dorman later gives it a German twist, transposing and inverting the notes to form one of old Johann Sebastian's favorite motifs—B flat, A, C, B (in German musical notation that motif is spelled B-A-C-H). One more inversion and—presto—the motif sounds like music out of Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich's notebook.

There were other equally imaginative moments in this piece—the jazzy rhythms and Ellingtonesque walking bass lines, the sparkling harp and celesta notes, and that final, catastrophic pileup of dissonance, which resulted in a series of downward arching violin slides that released tension like air escaping a balloon. To their credit, guest conductor Asher Fisch and the NSO gave this dauntingly difficult music their all, playing with

passion, precision and an unfailing sense of drama.

Pianist Alexander Kobrin's performance of Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1*, on the same program, was less successful. A winner of the 2005 Cliburn piano competition, Kobrin tried to downplay the concerto's overt virtuosity, but it didn't work. His approach to the concerto's majestic opening was so casual (he played everything at a milquetoast mezzoforte instead of fortissimo) that he seemed bored, like a cashier ringing up the hundredth meatloaf special of the day.

His pacing in the first-movement cadenza seemed more erratic than lyrical—he played rubatos way too slow and accelerandos way too fast. And his overall sound in the mellifluous second movement was way too dry. He rebounded slightly in the finale, playing with more fire and flair. But it wasn't enough to save the performance as a whole, especially since Fisch and the NSO added little to the rendition and were mostly along for the ride.

Fortunately, Fisch and the NSO fared better in Stravinsky's *The Firebird*, which closed the program. There were some truly fine moments in this performance—the dark and brooding introduction, the deeply felt princesses' round and the bright starburst of a finale. But there were also some weaknesses. In particular, the performance lacked a sense of direction and forward momentum, resulting in a patchwork interpretation that too often showed its seams. Still, Fisch and his players created considerable excitement with their playing, which was intensely in the moment. It won them a deserved ovation.

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