

Piano Festival Rolls Out Echoes of Jazz Virtuosos

Monday, March 13, 2006

Friday evening, pianists Steven Mayer and Anthony de Mare visited an overlooked corner of music history as they demonstrated the influence of African American music on the broader landscape of American composers over the past 150 years. "Black Virtuoso Tradition" was part of the American Piano Festival, a week of multi-disciplinary events shepherded by musicologist Joseph Horowitz at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland.

It would be impossible to explore this topic without focusing on America's indigenous art form: jazz. The highlight of the evening was Mayer's renditions of note-rich compositions by Jelly Roll Morton, Art Tatum, Fats Waller and James P. Johnson. Painstakingly transcribed from 1920s and '30s recordings to printed music, the works were transformed from improvisations frozen in time to fiendishly difficult sheet music.

In one very telling juxtaposition, the playback of a 1929 recording of Morton's "Frances" was followed by Mayer's performance of the transcription of the same piece, effectively bringing Morton to life in the recital hall with the same joie de vivre. If any spontaneity was lost in the translation, it was barely perceptible.

De Mare explored the hip-hop influence in "Jam!" by Daniel Bernard Roumain, his hands frenetically flying across the keyboard while pounding out the insistent rhythmic cadences. The liquid melodic lines of a beautiful lullaby by Fred Hersch based on Thelonious Monk's "Round Midnight" showed De Mare's sensitive side.

By design, most of the music required muscular playing, which Mayer and de Mare easily delivered.

-Gail Wein