

Composer-pianist Andres plays with skill and zest

By Richard Dyer, Globe Staff | June 30, 2006

Two years ago at a seminar in New York organized to honor the work of veteran piano guru Dorothy Taubman, a teen age pianist named Timothy Andres made a profound impression with a daring and authoritative performance of Ives's "Concord" Sonata.

What I didn't know until after Andres had played was that he is not a full-time pianist but a very busy and successful young composer who happens to play the piano supremely well. This summer, in fact, he is a composing fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center. He played the "Concord" like a composer, from within; he engaged with its multiple meanings by understanding how the music is put together, how it works, and demonstrating that through performance.

Andres, who turns 21 this year, was back for another recital at the Taubman Seminar last Friday night in New York. He didn't play any of his music, but focused on two 20th-century classics, Bartok's "Dance Suite" and Ligeti's "Musica Ricercata," George Crumb's "A Little Suite for Christmas," and pieces by two of his contemporaries, Alex Temple and Nico Muhly.

The Bartok and Ligeti were superb, and they paired nicely. Ligeti's piece is an astonishing compositional exercise; the first movement uses only two pitches; the second, three, and so on, up to the full 11-note chromatic scale. But one is never conscious of the exercise, only of the invention, color, and passion of the music. Several sections are reminiscent of Bartok and the ninth movement is a memorial tribute to the earlier Hungarian master.

Crumb's "Little Suite" dates from the '70s, when the composer was at the peak of his popularity. The seven movements sometimes sound like Messiaen with the "wrong" notes taken out; the pianist often plucks and strums the strings inside the instrument, and there are many unusual pedal effects.

It's all very pretty, and in the "Canticle of the Holy Night," the familiar Coventry Carol magically emerges from the mists. Crumb could not have anticipated that someone's cell phone would go off between two of the movements and sound like part of the music, but this was not a juxtaposition flattering to the music.

The kids are up to a lot of good. Muhly's "Three Etudes for Piano" (amusingly but not inaccurately titled "Three Dudes for Piano" in the program book) are clever, full of contrast, and pianistically effective -- it makes me eager to hear more of his music; a piece of his will be played on a TMC concert July 29. Temple's "Grass Stem Behaviors" is a knockout. The title refers to bird and animal courtship rituals; the music romps back and forth through the history of keyboard writing from Scarlatti to the present with intricate and amusing cross-references.

On Temple's website, he exclaims, "Down with good taste! Down with canons! Down with stylistic purity! When culture is dead, anything is possible!" His piece delivers the same message.

The performances were sensational; Andres had no trouble taking the audience along with him wherever he wanted to go -- new music cannot be intimidating when played with this degree of skill and zest. The elegant and beautiful woman in the front row, visibly enjoying the musical journey, looked familiar. Closer inspection revealed she is the distinguished actress Marian Seldes, who, when approached, revealed that she was appearing in one of her favorite roles -- Andres's grandmother.

You can order Andres's recording of the "Concord" Sonata and other discs from his website, www.andres.com.

Singers revise season

Conductor David Hoose and the Cantata Singers have revised the preliminary announcement of the 2006-2007 season which will focus on music of Bach and survey some of the works it has commissioned, including Andrew Imbrie's "Adam" (1994), John Harbison's "The Flight Into Egypt" (1986, Pulitzer Prize) and "But Mary Stood" (2006), and the world premiere of Stephen Hartke's "Indicia Virtutis" for chorus and oboe (Peggy Pearson; the piece is a co-commission with Pearson's Winsor Music Series).

The season opens Nov. 10 in Jordan Hall with two Bach cantatas and the Imbrie. The Harbison works share a program with Bach Jan. 29. There will be two performances of Bach's B-Minor Mass March 16 and 18; the Hartke premiere is May 11. ■