

REVIEWS

A Savvy Pianist in the Middle of the Room

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Taking to a topless Bösendorfer grand piano situated smack-dab in the middle of Zankel Hall on a recent Friday night, Timo Andres got busy immediately with the world premiere of *Fiddlehead*, a new piece he'd written for the occasion. You could sympathize with his hustle. On the one hand, Andres—a skillful, eclectic young pianist and composer—had started his Carnegie Hall solo debut right on time. On the other, he was nearly four years late, his original 2020 engagement having been canceled by the coronavirus lockdown.

"Fomenting its gestural figures from spirals, springs, coils, vortices, loops-de-loop, and other calligraphic flourishes, *Fiddlehead* is an irrepressible stream of piano energy based on the intervals of a minor second and major third," Andres writes in the foreword atop his score, a Carnegie Hall commission. When a composer can write that efficiently and elegantly about his own music, a reviewer can feel, well, superfluous.

Still, as Andres splashed, whirled, and gamboled, spinning dizzy across the keyboard through a succession of time signatures, the music held an optimistic tone throughout. It felt like a deeply personal program; bearing witness was privilege and pleasure alike.

"Nice to be here," he said when he'd finished. "I love what you've done with the place," he added, "though I'm not really sure where to talk to." Presumably he was addressing the Carnegie Hall curators who included him in "Zankel Hall Center Stage" series, in which artists perform in the middle of the auditorium, surrounded on all sides by the audience. Add to that intimate scenario an abundance of devotees, including fellow composers and pianists, and the result was a context as welcoming as a bear hug.

A few of his favorite things

"The next thing that I'll play is one of my absolute favorites," he said. "I'm going to be saying that a lot tonight, actually," he added, acknowledging he literally was playing favorites, roughly half of which had been meant for [his original 2020 program](#).

Specifically, he was setting up *Wherein Lies the Good* by Robin Holcomb, a singer, songwriter, pianist, and composer whose music weds folksy melodies to heady harmonies by turns seductive and unsettling. The piece involves disparate vignettes in swift succession, a *Pictures at an Exhibition* retooled for the cultured grit of rural photographs by Walker Evans. Andres gave every mood and move its own impact, then segued into "The Single Petal of a Rose" by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn.

In introducing *Imaginary Pancake*—commissioned by Carnegie Hall for the ill-fated 2020 recital, and subsequently presented in [a virtual recital on YouTube](#)—Andres explained that composer [Gabriella Smith](#) had meant her title to evoke a pianist with arms spread out and body flattened against the keyboard to reach both ends at once. Smith clearly hadn't reckoned with Andres's height and long arms, which enabled him to play ... *Pancake* unflattened.



Andres finesses Gabriella Smith's *Imaginary Pancake* unflattened

The piece, an amiable tempest, demonstrates Smith's exultation in the piano's sheer capacity for sound, showcased via rumbling figurations, clanging chords, woody pecking, and ringing harmonics. For Andres, it was also an opportunity to flex real muscle without seeming to make a big deal about it. After a brief, resonant silence, he ended the recital's first half with Ellington's "Reflections in D," in his own ornately embellished arrangement of the impressionistic ballad.

The second half included two landmark works of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century piano canon. Introducing Copland's Piano Sonata, Andres likened the 1941 work to "a Great American Novel of music – a tragic novel." Intimations of Copland's more populist style are evident, but held at arm's length. Andres's account had the sheen and exactitude of poetry chiseled into marble.

Duke Ellington's "Prelude to a Kiss" provided a dreamy interlude, with the implacable machine-murmur opening of Frederic Rzewski's *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* emerging from its afterglow. Where Copland turned inward, Rzewski mounted a soapbox and shouted. From an opening din of rumbling mechanical gestures, the protest song of the title emerges, only to be hammered down again with fists and forearms. You can't escape an impression of human labor ground up by the unyielding gears and cogs of mechanized industry.

"This is a piece that can only end a concert," Andres said in introducing Philip Glass's Etude No. 20, "which [the composer] describes as 'leaving the room and closing the door.'" Andres would know, having worked with Glass for more than a decade and co-editing a new edition of the Etudes last year.

Glass's signature repetitions are present—just—steeped here in a wistful melancholy akin to late Brahms. A bit over 10 minutes long, the etude is among Glass's most moving works, and Andres's close connection to the music and its creator resonated in a deeply felt account.

It was a profound ending to a generous bill, but the audience wanted more. Andres obliged with an encore: *Wise Words*, his retirement gift for longtime Nonesuch Records President Bob Hurwitz, in which a gesture lifted from Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 27 is made to sing and swell like a ballad by Radiohead.



Above: Zankel Hall, reconfigured



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