

THE BOSTON GLOBE • APRIL 29, 1993

The first-rate Donald Berman

By Richard Dyer
GLOBE STAFF

Donald Berman has added his name to the list of Boston's essential pianists.

Music Review

A pupil and protege of John Kirkpatrick (friend and interpreter of Charles Ives and a leading authority on the composer) and a teaching assistant of Leonard Shure's, Berman has been for several seasons the resident pianist of the new-music ensemble Dinosaur Annex. Last night, Dinosaur presented him in a solo recital; Berman returned the favor with an interesting program of American music and first-class playing.

The program was called "Pioneers and Premieres" - Berman played pioneering works by Ives, Ruggles and Cage and new pieces by Tamar Diesendruck, Arthur Levering, Ruth Lomon and Scott Wheeler.

Three of the new works stand in the grand continuity of writing for the piano and a bit in the shadow of the French Impressionist school. Ruth Lomon's "Esquisses" is a suite of three effective pieces. The first is an evocation of tower bells, the second a "color" piece based on the Turtle Dance of the Indians of Taos New Mexico; through the French haze of the third, one caught glimpses of the unlikely figure of Brahms.

Diesendruck's "Sound Reasoning in the Tower of Babel" is a survey of the piano sounds and styles any contemporary listener has in his or her memory that coheres because of Diesendruck's idiomatic knowledge of the instrument and how to write for it. Two etudes from Arthur Levering's "School of Velocity" demonstrated a Czerny-like concern with technical matters (chromatic scales; tremolos) and less common magic in transmuting exercise into poetry.

DONALD BERMAN, pianist

In a recital presented by Dinosaur Annex at First and Second Church last night.

Scott Wheeler's "Flow Chart" breaks with keyboard tradition. Its concern is with transition itself rather than with what transitions bridge, and the sound is New Agey, although of course Wheeler has far more technical resources at his disposal than most New Age composers. This may be Wheeler's only charmless piece - it was like listening to someone without much talent who is noodling away, too loud, alone with a piano, pedal to the floor, wounded soul on parade. It was profoundly irritating, I hope on purpose.

Four of John Cage's "Sonatas" for prepared piano are wonderful, evocative pieces from his early period when he wanted to make his music sound "inevitable" - instead of letting it come out as it inevitably would. The simple preparations make the piano sound as if a Javanese gamelan orchestra is also on-stage; this music does have charm, and Cage might have been delighted by the office telephone that rang throughout.

Berman also played four "Studies" by Ives, one of which was having its world premiere. These are characteristic sound-collages of immense vigor of purpose and musical imagination - hymns collide with "Hello My Baby" in a transcendental mist that is also a form of clarity.

Thirty years ago, only two pianists played Ives; now every student does. But no one I have ever heard plays Ives better than Berman: he seems to have a polyphonic mind to go along with the polyphonic fingers, a springing sense of rhythm, a sense of humor and of awe at the wonder of things. Berman is a first-rate new-music pianist because he is a first-rate pianist, period.