

THE NEW YORK TIMES, TUESDAY, MARCH 30, 1999

MUSIC REVIEW

Donald Berman: American Innovators Bracketing the Century

By PAUL GRIFFITHS

Donald Berman is a thorough, exciting and persuasive musician, and his piano recital at Merkin Hall last Tuesday night was memorable. His program consisted entirely of works by Americans, from Charles Ives and Carl Ruggles through to present-day composers. None of the music was familiar, and all of it was delivered with vitality. This was not music one has lived with, but it may need to be there as one goes on through life.

Berman's Ives pieces were three of the studies. In Nos. 20 and 23 he was duly humorous and engaging in the ragtime, but strong and resolute elsewhere, with luminous, neatly placed chords that left no doubt as to why Ives needed to have so many notes in play. Everything sounded well.

No. 6 was offered as the intervening slow movement, a vision of the hymn tune "Bethany" against a watery background reminiscent of the same composer's "Housatonic at Stockbridge." Because "Bethany," according to some reports, was being played by the Titanic's band as the ship went down, one might have taken Ives's study as an elegy, but apparently it was written before the ocean liner sank. Of Ruggles, Berman offered the first performances of two pieces his teacher, John Kirkpatrick, worked up from

pianistic than the one earlier piano work the composer allowed to be published, "Evocations." This opinion of "Evocations" might need to be revised, however, in light of Berman's new recording, on a Composers Recordings disk that also contains a large group of Ives's shorter pieces, including the three studies he played in his concert. "Valse Lente" provides a reminder of how important Scriabin was to American innovators of early this century.

As to American innovators of late this century, Berman put the whole weight of his musicality behind excellent pieces by Dana Brayton, Jeff Nichols and Arthur Levering. Brayton's "A Little Traveling Music" makes its quick journey up the keyboard with rhythmically tight ideas, somewhat suggestive of Messiaen-style bird song from another planet.

Nichols's "Caracole" is a playful fantasy of turning gestures in intricate rhythms, with a lovely close. Levering's "School of Velocity," also played by Berman on a new Composers Recordings album of works by this composer, is a highly impressive set of studies, packed with musical energy and testing the performer's ability to run off perfectly even downward chromatic scales or gauge gradual

the composer's sketchbooks:
"Visions" and "Valse Lente."
The first has the authentic
Rugglesian upward urge and
sounds more

crescendos and decrescendos
on repeated notes. Berman
excelled in all such
opportunities, to the music's
benefit.