

MUSIC REVIEW

Composers Inspired by an Idyll in Rome

By PAUL GRIFFITHS

The "Americans in Rome" series — concerts of compositions by former fellows of the American Academy in Rome — reached its second installment in a piano recital by Donald Berman on Wednesday night at Weill Recital Hall. As the artistic director of this whole festival, he had already shown both his deep familiarity with what might be called the American-Roman repertory and his flair for programming. What this recital further proved is that he is an excellent musician, and a good companion to composers.

If a lot of the music in his program sounded particularly elegant, that had as much to do with what was happening under his fingers here and now as with the lingering effect on the composers of months spent in the Eternal City thinking of art. Mr. Berman is a clear projector of phrases and articulator of complex textures; he also has in him a nice sense for lines that draw sustaining energy from the syncopations of remembered jazz.

That was one common feature, in pieces that otherwise ranged from the total limpidity of Harold Shapero's Sonata No. 1 in D to the short sharp mysteriousness of two baga-

telles by George Rochberg and the energetic tumult of Billy Jim Layton's Three Studies (Op. 5), to mention three composers of the same generation (now around 80), all of them represented by strong, youthful works.

Mr. Shapero wrote his sonata in his early 20's, several years before he went to the academy, clearly with

Americans with
one thing in
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his European polish already acquired. He had learned all he needed from Scarlatti and Haydn — and surely not only from studying their music but also from playing it, for while being so poised, his piece is also physically alive with the dexterity of mobile fingers. It is also, as Mr. Berman showed, deliciously witty.

Equally astonishing were Mr. Layton's pieces, especially the second,

with its complex and hugely difficult (but, as Mr. Berman played it, fluent) thrust of information over a fast perpetual-motion machine.

And it was good to hear Hunter Johnson's Sonata of 1936, coming from the earth and heat of the South, with the blues in its slow movement.

Among younger academician — Kamran Ince and Loren Rush had both been listening to Mozart (without learning as much as Mr. Shapero did from his chosen masters), while Arthur Levering, in his "School of Velocity," offered a ranging and averse piece that owed only its title to the grand pedagogue Czerny — unless perhaps also a certain manic energy. James C. Mobberley's "Caution to the Winds" and Mark Wingate's "Three Sombras" made precise and inventive use of electronic resources, a synthesized accompaniment in the first, and in the "Sombras" a live computer response (a little piano-ish wobble for every note played).

Both were quick-witted works, and quick-wittedly performed, Mr. Mobberley piece sharing with Mr. Shapero's sonata an intelligent and gamesome sense of humor.