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MUSIC REVIEW

*Donald Berman: A Focus
on Small Musical Changes*

By PAUL GRIFFITHS

Donald Berman is a robust, positive and persuasive pianist, a musician who knows his own mind (and fingers). At Merkin Hall on March 3 he played music by composers born in a rather small part of Central Europe during a period of two centuries, from Haydn to Gyorgy Ligeti by way of Schubert and Kodaly. An American work in the middle of the program, Tamar Diesendruck's "Sound Reasoning in the Tower of Babel" (1990), was not so much a contrast as a corollary, stemming from the same tradition of integration and integrity.

Mr. Berman's own program notes encapsulated his thinking (and the effect of his playing) with vigor and clarity. Of the first movement of Haydn's A flat Sonata, for instance, he remarked, "Subtle alterations in direction and note density quickly shift the work from poignancy to startlingness to wit." Criticism cannot do better.

The remark also pointed to larger qualities in Mr. Berman's playing. Changes in direction - in the way a passage is moving, which often is largely a matter of

harmony - not only change the destination but also even create it. Schubert's D major Sonata was full of examples, in Mr. Berman's thrillingly clear performance. In its first movement, especially, he showed very explicitly how the same idea keeps proceeding along different harmonic paths toward different goals, most of them illusory or in some way insufficient. The inner movements, too, were constant journeys, and the finale bounced with a folk-music spirit Mr. Berman had found earlier in the evening in the works by Mr. Ligeti and Haydn.

His placing of Mr. Ligeti's "Cordes Vides" and "Fanfares," from the composer's first book of Etudes (1985), between two pieces from Kodaly's Opus 3 was apt: elemental gestures and intervals were shaking hands across a gap of three quarters of a century. "Fanfares" also gained from being jazzed a bit.

There were things Mr. Berman might want to do differently another time. His quiet ending to the Schubert sonata, for instance, was perhaps too abrupt. But so much here was right.