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Pianist Donal Fox and Cellist Maya Beiser at the ICA

By Michael Ullman | April 12, 2013

Pianist-composer Donal Fox is an audacious musician. Although one would expect that his recital would be designed to show the influence of Bach on the Argentinian composer of the “new tango,” Astor Piazzolla, Fox ends up reimagining both of them . . . and a half dozen other composers in between. He’s a classical musician by training, and in style, with a yen for improvisation and, one might add, an unwillingness to let things be.

During much of the evening, he was reading his imaginative rearrangements; at other times, he seemed to be improvising flamboyantly on what he had written. Fox, who in 2006 gave the first musical performance ever in the ICA concert space, announced that his initial piece would draw on Dowland, Brahms, Handel, Thelonious Monk, and Bach. He started with a sober reading of a Dowland lute piece, transcribed for piano. He then elaborated on Dowland’s work, again soberly, before moving on. This listener never heard a recognizable Brahms piece. Instead, Fox interjected an oblique version of the standard “Autumn Leaves,” before moving on to Monk’s “Ugly Beauty.” This was in many ways an un-Monklike performance. Graceful where Monk would most likely have used force, Fox’s approach was full of elaborate arpeggios and subtle changes in dynamics without the rhythmic eccentricities of the composer. He brought Monk, along with Bach and Piazzolla, into his distinctive world.

When he brought the stunning cellist Maya Beiser on, Fox quipped that perhaps he would get her to improvise. He did, just barely, on a piece he constructed from a rhythmic phrase in Scarlatti. Beiser, a virtuoso, played the bass part and then tried a few long tones and harmonic variations before giving it up to Fox. She was clearly more comfortable in her gorgeous playing of a piece based on Spanish folk songs written by Joaquin Nin (father of writer Anais Nin). This series of duets ended with both musicians delivering a compelling performance of the ravishing ballad “Soledad” by Astor Piazzolla.

Bach was not neglected, if not precisely respected: the two played a Bach invention at an extraordinarily fast tempo, and then, in a kind of coda, with Beiser reduced to a vamp, Fox improvised a light-hearted blues. It was hardly a down-and-out, Blind Lemon Jefferson-like performance. Fox is charming, even eloquent, sometimes flashy, even on a blues. He only touched the depths with Beiser on pieces like Osvaldo Golijov’s “Mariel,” which was originally written for cello and marimba. Here, Beiser’s lyricism and Fox’s playfulness came together in an elementally uplifting way.

