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MUSIC REVIEW | EMANUELE ARCIULI

By Chance and Design, a Pianist Leaves an Indelible Impression

By JEREMY EICHLER

As concerts go, this one was pretty random.

And intentionally so.

As part of an academic conference on the idea of randomness, the pianist Emanuele Arciuli performed a thoughtful program of works at the Italian Academy Teatro at Columbia University on Friday night.

Before the concert, well-appointed theorists of happenstance sipped wine and chatted, while a computer projected random numbers onto a wall and a prerecorded male voice recited an ancient philosophical tract by Lucretius.

For the concert, Mr. Arciuli juxtaposed pieces based on improvisation and chance procedures with works based on complex and fixed notational schemes.

At the improvisational end of the spectrum was a selection from Karlheinz Stockhausen's "Aus den Sieben Tagen," so-called intuitive music generated by the performer in response to the composer's verbal text alone. In this case, Mr. Stockhausen's words were read aloud: "Give up everything; we were on the wrong track," the text said. "Begin with yourself: you are a musician." The pianist answered with a freewheeling improvisation that scampered over centuries of music's past, pristinely voiced major chords disintegrating into ominous clouds of atonal chaos.

At the opposite extreme was John Adams's "Phrygian Gates," a long-form essay in propulsive minimalism, which Mr. Arciuli played with exacting clarity and vigor. Carlo De Incontrera's vividly drawn "Meeres Stille" added a flute (played by Margaret Lancaster) and a pre-recorded chorus of cicadas. The natural world made a more abstract appearance in Mr. Stockhausen's Klavierstück IX, based on the Fibonacci sequence of numbers that also describes patterns common in living things.

Short works by Morton Feldman, Talib Rasul Hakim and Alessandro Sbordoni explored concepts of indeterminacy, chance and memory. Mr. Arciuli dispatched this music with impressive technique and seriousness of purpose.

A brief program note by the pianist alluded to the music's development. The high point of chance music arrived after World War II, partly as a challenge to the very notion of grand ideologies that was now implicated by the war itself. The style gained momentum in the 1960's era of radicalism and Zen-inspired musical experimentation. It's a fascinating history. But while the music in question may be indeterminate, the length of this review, alas, is not.