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Pianists create sounds without keyboards

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The Golandsky Institute is the newest entry in New Jersey's summer classical offerings. Actually a week-long symposium for pianists who flock to Princeton University to learn career-saving technical tips from Edna Golandsky, a disciple of pedagogue Dorothy Taubman, the institute includes public evening recitals almost as an afterthought.

Tuesday's performance at tiny Taplin Auditorium by pianists Emanuele Arciuli and Richard Steinbach, though, was well attended, an indication that Princeton audiences might well be hungry for a little piano music in the midst of summer's heat.

Arciuli and Steinbach were taking a break from the parade of Bach, Beethoven, Chopin and Haydn being offered by other performers this week. Tuesday's program was dedicated entirely to the keyboard works of composer George Crumb, who attended the performance.

Crumb's use of the piano might be described as anti-virtuosic -- he doesn't ask for rapid scale runs, pounding double octaves, or even fast tempos. His aesthetic is inward-gazing, more concerned with the gently wafting perfume of notes smeared together and held by near constant use of the sustaining pedal than by forward linear motion. Crumb also exploits the percussive possibilities of the piano, which meant Arciuli and Steinbach spent a lot of time plucking strings with their fingers, tapping on the piano case and otherwise finding novel ways to create sound with a piano.

Crumb's "A Little Suite for Christmas, A.D. 1979" was inspired by Giotto's Nativity frescoes, and the music, like the art, dealt with capturing brief, delicate moments in the story of Christ's birth. Steinbach moved through the work with meditative discipline, shaping the broken fragments of movements like "The Shepherd's Noel" and the vivacious "Nativity Dance" with equal doses of controlled accuracy and relaxed resonance.

Crumb's take on Thelonius Monk's "Round Midnight," titled "Eine Kleine Mitternachtmusik" (A Little Midnight Music), for amplified piano, further muddied the waters between rhythm and melody, often offering snippets of both but rarely together. Arciuli took on the work gamely, perusing its wry humor (snippets of Wagner are interwoven where a jazz player might quote a popular song) and spidery scoring, which has the pianist vamping with one hand while reaching to the piano's interior to pluck with the other.

For a grand finale, the two played Crumb's "Other Worldly Resonances" for two amplified pianos, which gives one pianist a repeating, pentatonic theme while the other moves through a wide spectrum of plucked, hit and played notes against it.

In all, it was an eerie evening of shimmering, delicately stroked keyboard sounds, with far fewer notes played than one might expect two pianists with 10 fingers to produce. Two generations of younger composers have labored years to try to program computers to interact and manipulate musical tone in real-time performance. Crumb, with the wisdom of experience and an unusually relaxed sense of time, simply asks his performers to be extremely accurate in how they hit the piano keys and extremely patient in allowing the afterglow, or cloud of sustained tones and overtones, be part of the fabric.

In the midst of a piano institute intended to send out young players to reconquer the musical world, this gentle, thoughtful evening seemed calculated to rein in the more egregious excesses of ego and technique that pianists today can't help but encounter.

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