

Russell Hirshfield, piano

Katzin Concert Hall
Guest Artist Concert Series
Monday, October 13, 2008
7:30 PM

Program

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| Prélude pour piano (1964) | Olivier Messiaen
(1908-1992) |
| Musica Ricercata (1951-53) | György Ligeti
(1923-2006) |
| III. Allegro con spirito | |
| IV. Tempo de Valse (poco vivace – ‘à l’orgue de Barbarie’) | |
| V. Rubato. Lamentoso | |
| VI. Allegro molto capriccioso | |
| IX. Béla Bartók in memoriam. Adagio. Mesto – Allegro maestoso | |
| XI. Omaggio a Girolamo Frescobaldi. Andante misurato e tranquillo | |
| Seeker of Truth – A Piano Fantasy (1997) | Piet Swerts
(b. 1960) |
| Vingt Regards sur l’enfant-Jésus (1944) | Oliver Messiaen
(1908-1992) |
| Regard du silence | |
| Regard de l’Onction terrible | |
| Première communion de la Vierge | |



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Program Notes

György Ligeti is recognized as one of the most important composers of the late twentieth century. Born in 1923 to Hungarian parents in Dicsőszentmárton (now Tárnaveni) in Transylvania, Romania, Ligeti and his family moved to Cluj where he began studying composition with Ferenc Farkas at the Cluj Conservatory in 1941; he later continued studies in Budapest with Pál Kadosa. In 1942 his education was interrupted when, because of his Jewish background, he was sent into forced labor for the remainder of World War II. Ligeti survived, although the Nazi occupation destroyed his family. After the war he resumed his studies with Farkas and Sándor Veress at the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest. After the revolution he fled Hungary, living in Germany and then Austria, where he became a citizen in 1967. For many years he was a visiting professor of composition at the Stockholm Academy of Music, and from 1973 until 1989 he served as professor of composition at the Hamburg Music Academy. The composer was awarded the German decoration "Pour le merit" and the Bach Prize of the City of Hamburg in 1975. In 1986 he received the Grawemeyer Prize for his *Études pour piano – premier livre*. In 1996 he was awarded the Music Prize of the International Music Council.

Ligeti's early works include mostly of folksong arrangements and music based on Romanian or Hungarian folk music. Political repression and censorship restricted his access to new musical ideas. The composer writes, "*Musica ricercata is a youthful work from Budapest, still deeply influenced by Bartók and Stravinsky. The first piece contains only two tones (along with their octave transpositions); the second, three tones; and so on, so that the eleventh piece (a monotonous fugue) uses all twelve pitches. A severe, almost noble piece, hovering between academic orthodoxy and deep reflection: between gravity and caricature.*" (Sony Classical SK 62308/Schott ED 7718)

Piet Swerts was born in Tongeren, Belgium in 1960. He studied from 1974 to 1989 at the Lemmens Institute in Leuven, where he earned ten first prizes and studied piano with Robert Groslot and Alan Weiss. He was the first recipient from the Lemmens Institute of the Lemmens Tinel prize for composition and piano magna cum laude. Piet Swerts now teaches piano, analysis and composition at the same institute, positions he has held since 1982. In 1985 he became the conductor of the Ensemble for New Music at the school. As a composer, Swerts has won numerous prizes, including the Camille Huysmans Composition Prize in 1986 for his work, Droombeelden (Dream images) and, in that same year the Composition Prize of the Province of Limburg for his Capriccio for Guitar and Chamber Orchestra. He received the Baron Flor Peeters Prize for his Apocalyps I for organ in 1983 and in 1985 he was awarded the prize for Belgian artistic promotion for his song Ardennes for soprano and piano. He won the SABAM Prize for his Rotations for piano and orchestra, the work that was chosen as the compulsory concerto for the final round of the International Queen Elisabeth Competition in 1987. The newspaper, De Gazet van Antwerpen awarded him its prize for his Symphony No. 1 in 1989. In 1993 a choral work earned him the Composition Prize of the Province of Brabant, while in 1993 his violin concerto Zodiac was selected as the compulsory work for the finals of the International Queen Elisabeth Competition. With this work he won First Prize in the International Queen Elisabeth Competition for Composition (with a jury that included Górecki). An important moment in his career was the premiere of his large-scale opera Les liaisons dangereuses in 1996 at the Flemish opera. (<http://www.cebedem.be>) *Seeker of Truth – A Piano Fantasy* was commissioned by the International Music Competition Queen Elizabeth. The fantasy takes its title from the poem by E.E. Cummings:

*Seeker of truth
follow no path
all paths lead where
truth is here*
(Zodiac Editions ZEP07)

Olivier Messiaen was preparing to enter the Paris Conservatory when Debussy was writing his last works. The innovations in Messiaen's piano music resulted, in part, from the adaptation of many diverse sources: Debussy's music, Hindu rhythms, birdsong, modal harmony and religious symbolism. The incorporation of these highly individual characteristics led to a unique compositional language, one whose advances in harmony, rhythm and timbre established him as a leader of the avant-garde. The fascination with sound and color, with timbre, preoccupied the French composers. Messiaen continued on the harmonic path that Debussy initiated, searching for



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alternatives to the major-minor tonal system. The *Prélude* (1964), opus posthumous, published in 2000, is in two parts. The preface to the score identifies the first theme "brass orchestra style, with echos in the lower register. Rising figures in unison triplet quarter notes lead to a warbling bird-song." (Editions Durand 15355).

The *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* ("The Twenty Contemplations on the Child Jesus") were composed in Paris in 1944 during a tumultuous period in French history. During the five-month period of composition, the Allies landed in Normandy in June, and Paris was liberated in late August. Messiaen, while serving in the French army, experienced the hardships of war first hand for he was captured and held prisoner in a German war camp in 1940. Upon his release in 1941, the composer returned to Paris and accepted a position at the Paris Conservatory. Among Messiaen's first pupils at the Conservatory was Yvonne Loriod; the pianist (and later, his wife) to whom Messiaen dedicated several of his compositions, including the *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*. The occupied Paris that Messiaen returned to was beset by oppressive conditions: food and fuel shortages, curfews, and the violence of Nazi domination. Still, the war years represented a time of heightened productivity for the composer. Throughout the tragedy of World War Messiaen turned to religion and his creative output can be viewed as an affirmation of hope and faith.

The *Vingt regards sur l'enfant-Jésus* are unified by cyclic themes, including the "theme of God," representing the eternity of the Lord, and the basis for "*Première communion de la Vierge*" ("First Communion of the Virgin"), a work characterized by a more romantic, traditional setting. "*Regard du silence*" ("Contemplate the Silence") is innovative, because of elements drawn, in part, from the Hindu rhythms, suspending the traditional notion of meter for a timelessness symbolic of the eternal. "*Regard de l'Onction terrible*" ("Gaze of the Terrible Unction") represents the ultimate sacrifice. Musical and rhythmic symmetries are symbolic of the cross; a percussive work of extreme energy. (Durand Edition 13,230)

In 1950 composer and music critic Virgil Thompson commented that "Debussy is the summit toward which, during the two centuries since Rameau's death, French music has risen and from which, at least for the present, it seems to decline." While it is safe to agree with the reference to Debussy's supremacy, with the piano music of Messiaen, that "summit" is certainly maintained.

Russell Hirshfield has appeared in recital throughout the United States, including performances in the cities of New York, Miami, Boston and San Francisco. Hirshfield has programmed the piano works of Olivier Messiaen for audiences in Brazil and the United States, including recitals at Lincoln Center's Bruno Walter Auditorium and Florence Gould Hall of the French Institute. "His brilliant performance..." in South Africa was "one of the highlights of the festive season" (Hermanus Times). His collaboration with the Rainbow Trust of Hermanus resulted in recitals to benefit the Township of Zwelihle. Hirshfield's Connecticut performance of the Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 3 was noted for his "playing in sync with the conductor...taking center stage eloquently..." (Danbury News Times). He has been a visiting teacher and recitalist at numerous schools, including the University of Louisville, the University of Costa Rica, and SIAS University in Henan Province, China. In September he presents a lecture-recital on the music of György Ligeti, and a recital celebrating the centenary of Olivier Messiaen's birth for the Annual Convention of the College Music Society in Atlanta.

A graduate of the Eastman School of Music, Boston University, and the University of Colorado, Hirshfield received his earliest musical training in New Haven. A participant in the Eastern Music Festival and London Masterclasses, his teachers include Robert Spillman, James Avery, Anthony di Bonaventura and Alvin Chow. While still a student his adventuresome programming was deemed "challenging even to the most ambitious pianist..." (Boulder Daily Camera).

A devoted music educator, Dr. Hirshfield is Associate Professor at Western Connecticut State University. He has lectured and presented at the conventions of the Connecticut Music Teachers Association and College Music Society. His commitment to music education was recognized by *Who's Who Among America's Teachers*. He has served on the faculty of Northwestern State University in Louisiana, and as visiting professor at the State University of Campinas, Brazil.

An active chamber pianist, Hirshfield has collaborated with numerous vocalists and instrumentalists, including members of the Detroit Symphony, Slovak Philharmonic, Orpheus Chamber Ensemble, Chicago Lyric Opera, New York City Opera and Cleveland Orchestra.



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