Pittsburg State University
Pittsburg, Kansas

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

Faculty Recital

Keith C. Ward, Piano

Tuesday, February 4, 1997
McCray Recital Hall
7:30 p.m.

PROGRAM

Tides of Manaunaun ..................... Henry Cowell
Aeolian Harp
Exultation

Fantasien, Op. 116 ..................... Johannes Brahms
Capriccio
Intermezzo
Capriccio
Intermezzo
Intermezzo
Intermezzo
Capriccio

(1897-1965)

(1833-1897)

INTERMISSION

Sechs kleine Klavierstücke, Op. 19 ..................... Arnold Schoenberg
Leicht, zart
Langsam
Sehr langsam
Rasch, aber leicht
Etwas rasch
Sehr langsam

(1874-1951)

Etude pour les “cinq doigts” ..................... Claude Debussy
Des pas sur la neige (Preludes)
Clair de lune (Suite bergamasque)
L’Isle joyeuse

(1862-1918)

program notes

This evening's program offers a sampling of piano music written around the turn of the century, a time when tradition became challenged by the new ideas of a younger generation. The result, the birth of modernism, was a development that was far from linear. I hope the music this evening will give you a sense of the contradictions and incongruities of this fecund time in Western music, a turning point in its history.

It is not stretching the truth to say that Henry Cowell was one of the founders of American modernism. Though his music has not assumed a position in the musical canon, his ideas and experiments -- and his advocacy -- laid the groundwork for many ultra-modern composers in the generations that followed him. When composing for piano, Cowell viewed the instrument as a source for sound, not necessarily an instrument that required a particular compositional approach. Thus, he experimented with clusters of sound, not just complex harmonies. He saw strings as objects that could be plucked as easily as struck. The three pieces you hear this evening are good examples of his less traditional approach toward the instrument. With an ominous beginning, rising from the depths of the piano, “The Tides of Mananaun” (1912) attempts to depict the legend of Mananaun, who, according to a story told to Cowell, was “the god of motion” who existed “long before the creation” and who “sent forth tremendous tides which swept to a fro through the universe.” “Aeolian Harp” (1923) places the performer inside the piano to create an aural representation of an aeolian harp. “Exultation” (1919) is a high-spirited exclamation that combines huge clusters of sound with melodies that evoke Cowell’s musical childhood, which was filled with Celtic and American folk songs.

Musically speaking, Johannes Brahms was anointed four times in our historical narrative: first by Robert Schumann in the 1850s as the new voice of a new generation of composers; then by Hans von Buelow as the third “B” in the mighty triumvirate of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms; a third time by the Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick, who held Brahms in the highest esteem and helped sustain the composer’s dominant influence in late nineteenth-century Vienna; and finally by Arnold Schoenberg, who placed Brahms’s music in a lineage he constructed to justify his own musical language. The seven pieces of Opus 116 date from 1892, just five years before Brahms’s death and well within the creative life span of another composer on this program, Claude Debussy. They contain all the trademarks of his style: a sonorous bass, rich textures, and remarkable craftsmanship.

As controversial as he may have been, one cannot avoid the fact that Austrian Arnold Schoenberg was instrumental in shaping musical modernism. Indeed, his method of twelve-tone composition, founded in the 1920s, had a profound effect on generations of 20th-century composers. He was the first European composer to consciously and systematically compose outside of tonality. The six short pieces on tonight’s program, written in 1911, are some of his first atonal compositions. They are so brief that they seem more like musical utterances, not thorough expositions in musical form. The final work has particular autobiographical importance: Schoenberg wrote it upon hearing of the death of Gustav Mahler, a conductor and composer who had been a proponent of avant garde composers in Vienna. The large, sustained sonorities and the listless tempo create a picture of vast emptiness, a hollowness arising from the absence of such an important mentor.

Today Claude Debussy remains one of the best known composers from this era. Though his experiments with the coloristic possibilities of harmony may have gotten him in trouble during his student days at the Paris Conservatory, they contributed to the exploration of new musical scales, and they helped liberate harmony from functionality. The four pieces I play this evening span most of his creative years. Etude “pour les cinq doits” (1916) is a parody on an exercise by one of the most famous of piano pedagogues, Carl Czerny. “Des pas sur la neige” (“Footsteps in the Snow,” 1910) presents the aural picture of a stark winter landscape, one that evokes feelings of melancholy. “Clair de lune” (1890), one of Debussy’s most famous works, creates images of moonlight in a romantic, silvery sheen. L’Isle joyeuse (1904), one of Debussy’s most exuberant works, was inspired by the painting, “The Embarkment for Cythere,” by the eighteenth-century French artist, Antoine Watteau.