

REVIEW

Edgy compositions from centuries ago

By Joshua Kosman

CHRONICLE MUSIC CRITIC

Long before classical music was stodgy, it was sometimes dangerous, unpredictable and bizarre — transgressive, as today's more advanced cultural theorists might say. Monday night's engaging Berkeley recital by violinist Jeanne Johnson-Watkins and harpsichordist Yuko Tanaka conjured up a little of that old magic.

The program, presented in Hertz Hall as part of the weeklong Berkeley Festival and Exhibition, focused on the music of Giovanni Antonio Pandolfi, a shadowy violin virtuoso of the mid-17th century, as well as some keyboard composers who shared his taste for the freewheeling.

Almost nothing is known of Pandolfi's life, and even his compositions survive only spottily. But it's clear that like other virtuosos of the period, he indulged in what was called the "fantastical" style, spinning out formally venturesome and often wildly improvisatory sonatas.

Monday's concert included 10 of them, which comprised nearly all of Pandolfi's known works. Each is named for some contemporary of his (the opera composer Antonio Cesti being the best-known), and the links probably hint at some personal in-jokes whose meanings are now lost.

Still, the vibrancy and freedom of these works remain striking. In Pandolfi's world, structural clarity and dramatic unity are for the birds; what matters is immediate impact.

Thus each sonata proceeds at will through a loosely linked series of episodes, some plangent and melodic, some fiery and athletic. And though much of the music calls for rapid finger work, the sudden shifts of tone, key and meter must have been part of the virtuosity on display as well.

Johnson-Watkins and Tanaka



Violinist Jeanne Johnson-Watkins demonstrated the vibrancy and freedom inherent in Pandolfi's works.

EARLY MUSIC

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handled that end of things with particular flair, moving from one idea to the next with the fluency of true improvisers. In "La Mondella Romanesca," for instance, long sweeping melodies gave way in a flash to bursts of extroverted passagework; "La Vinciolina" pursued a number of almost morbidly droopy melodies before drawing to a brightly vigorous close.

Pandolfi's harmonic liberties were also highlighted, even if one or two of the more surprising notes seemed to be unscripted. The chromatic twists and turns of "La Clemente" were the most startling, and Johnson-Watkins delivered them with gusto.

In between servings of Pandolfi, Tanaka stepped in with exquisitely rendered solo keyboard works by Giovanni Picchi, Girolamo Frescobaldi and Michelangelo Rossi — the last one cycling through weirdly chromatic harmonic landscapes whose excesses far outpaced anything of Pandolfi's imagining.

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