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MUSIC: CLASSICAL CD REVIEWS; Old Fairy Tale, New Voice and 'New' Vivaldi

By ALLAN KOZINN

Avner Dorman: Piano Sonatas Nos. 1-3, Piano Works
Eliran Avni, pianist. Naxos 8.579001; CD.

THE most common complaint of listeners who dislike new music is that its language, whether atonal, avant-garde or Minimalist, stands apart from the syntax and harmonic vocabulary that developed over earlier centuries. But composers can't win; those who try to reconnect with that lost thread are often dismissed as throwbacks.

Avner Dorman, a 31-year-old Israeli composer who lives in New York, clearly believes that the language of the early 20th century -- essentially tonal but ripping free of tonality; within shouting distance of Romanticism but not under its shadow -- can still be useful. Though the piano works here are accessible and inviting, describing Mr. Dorman as conservative wouldn't be quite right. These works draw on the energy and spikiness of Prokofiev and Bartok in textures interwoven with moves borrowed from rock, jazz and Middle Eastern folk music.

Mr. Dorman's genre mixing begins with the earliest work here, the Prelude No. 1 (1992), which uses an arpeggiated Bach prelude as a template but rounds out its chords with blue notes and jazz harmonies. A set of "Moments Musicaux" (2003) offers a ruminative, soulful opening movement offset by a vigorous, bright-edged Presto that combines a Prokofiev-style harmonic steeliness with a salsa rhythm. Popular influences of a more antique strain animate the "Azerbaijani Dance" (2005), a brief, assertive showpiece that examines a folk theme through the lens of splashy pianism.

Mr. Dorman's Sonata No. 1 (1998) remains fully in Prokofiev mode, with finger-breaking, big-textured outer movements and a long, mostly lyrical central one. Though the piano writing is appealing and supremely idiomatic, it only hints at how Mr. Dorman's compositional voice will develop. The two-movement Sonata No. 2 (2001) is more idiosyncratic. It begins with a quiet but increasingly acidic slow movement, which builds toward an eerie tolling figure, and ends with a forceful, rhythmically sharp-edged finale.

But Mr. Dorman seems to have found himself in the Sonata No. 3 ("Dance Suite," 2005). Here he prowls territory similar to that of the "Azerbaijani Dance" and draws on post-tonal and pop influences as well. In the central movement, "Oud and Kanun," Mr. Dorman evokes the gentle timbres of the oud, an Arabic lute, and the modal language of traditional Arabic music. Then he creates a dialogue in which the oud melodies and harsher contemporary figures gradually adopt each other's characteristics. Surrounding this cultural interplay is an introspective Prelude, which uses the keyboard's extremes, and a quick finale that Mr. Dorman calls "Techno" but that doesn't quite evoke the electronic characteristics of that pop form.

Eliran Avni plays these works with an assurance and flexibility that make them sound as if they had been in his repertory forever. He has the ironclad technique that Mr. Dorman's writing demands, but there is ample suppleness in his playing as well, a quality that makes the slow, quiet movements as arresting as the fiery ones. ALLAN KOZINN