

A Mozart for today?

By Andrew L. Pincus, Special to The Eagle
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Music moves on, whether we want it to or not. There will never be another Bach, Mozart or Beethoven. That doesn't mean there can't be a Mozart or Beethoven for our times. He (or she) may not sound anything like the masters. But he will do in the language of today what they did in the language of their times.

Pianist Eliran Avni, who played a benefit recital yesterday for the Berkshire Theatre Festival, believes he has found such a composer in Avner Dorman. Dorman is 30, Avni 31. Both came from Israel, where they first met in the army, to take doctorates at the Juilliard School in New York.

Avni's recent recording of Dorman's piano music, including three pieces that he played at the fundraiser, shows that whether Dorman is a new Mozart or not, he has a distinctive voice and ideas worth putting before the public. The style is what Avni describes as an "incredible mash," mixing classical with pop, jazz, ethnic, Jewish and who-knows-what-other influences.

The mash is something like Osvaldo Golijov's in his music, which is better known — in demand, in fact. The personalities, however, are different, with the Argentine-American Golijov pushing his Latin and Jewish roots more to the front.

Golijov is just one of the more prominent composers drawing attention these days. Just recently, the media made a big fuss over Jay Greenberg, a 14-year-old whose Symphony No. 5 and Quintet for strings (performed by the Juilliard String Quartet, no less) was released on a Sony Classical compact disc. Then there are the old standbys, ranging from Elliott Carter to John Adams.

They haven't displaced Mozart or Beethoven, nor are they likely to. But they have taken music to places undreamed of by their predecessors, and you can hardly go to a concert these days without encountering a composition written within the last 50 years. With recordings, grants, commissions and faculty appointments, it's actually a thriving time to be a composer.

To go back to Dorman: Avni's Naxos compact disc, recorded a year ago in Tanglewood's Seiji Ozawa Hall, contains Dorman's Sonatas Nos. 1, 2 and 3, "Moments Musicaux," Prelude No. 1 and "Azerbaijani Dance," the whole lot dating from 1992 to 2005. Avni plays the music as if he had composed it, which in a sense he did.

"People ask me if I write music and I say no, because I don't feel I have anything to add to the canon of already existing music," he said in an interview before yesterday's concert. "And I heard his (Dorman's) music, and I figured I do want to say something, and he said it."

Bartok and Prokofiev crop up as influences in the earlier works. Bach, Beethoven and Schubert are more consciously evoked throughout in adaptations of their forms. (The slow-movement variations of the early Sonata No. 1 evoke Beethoven's variations in his late sonatas too conspicuously, despite Dorman's pop-like theme.) But these figures from the past are just part of a mash that finds inspiration in far-flung places.

For example, the Sonata No. 3, titled "Dance Suite," depicts the journey of a blind player of the oud, the Middle Eastern lute. "The piece," according to the album notes, "opens with a passionate

prelude that symbolizes the musician's inner conflict." During the second movement, "sounds from the contemporary world begin to penetrate the classical Arabic music" represented by Arabic dances.

Fascinated by the sounds, the oud player "begins to follow them instinctively in his music." In the final movement, titled "Techno," Middle Eastern sounds yield to contemporary rock.

Also with an implicit program, the two-movement Sonata No. 2 mixes up psychology and jazz. The first movement "envisions a pianist sitting very late at night in a club, trying to play a melody from memory." Every time he thinks he has found the tune, he loses it. This, purportedly, demonstrates the gap between feeling and memory. Memory triumphs in a bravura finale, which takes off from the jazz piano of Art Tatum.

Will the listener hear the stories without the verbal signposts? No. Even with the signposts, it's hard to make the connection. The point is that this is music trying to connect the past with the present, as composers have always done. (Think of Bach quoting a popular tune in his "Goldberg" Variations, a keyboard tour de force.)

Colliding styles? So what, says Avni (who does actually play 19th-century music). "It's so great to go onstage and feel that I'm playing the music of today, not the music of the courts of the 18th century, but music that is happening right now."

Let's not write off the music of the courts quite yet. It's also too soon to make pronouncements about the staying power of any composer writing today. Posterity has a way of making nobodies out of heroes, and heroes out of nobodies, and keeping Mozart and Beethoven alive. Let's leave it that in the hands of a champion like Avni, Dorman is a composer who makes you sit up and listen.