



American Recital

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The rise of the piano in America lags only slightly behind its hegemony in Europe. Its origins are often traced to Alexander Reinagle of Portsmouth, who settled in Philadelphia and whose four surviving sonatas, composed around 1790, are generally considered the first important piano music written on the continent. Long and rich though the tradition may be, Americans seldom hear their piano music, save for a few obvious pieces, played by Europeans. Exceptions, such as Leon McCawley's espousal of Samuel Barber, only prove the rule.

Ulrich Roman Murtfeld began his piano studies at the Hoch Conservatory in his native Frankfurt am Main. Perhaps fatefully for his future musical interests, he was a student at the prestigious Philips Academy, a boarding preparatory school in Andover, Massachusetts, not far from Boston. Throughout his advanced training back in Europe and a career with an important emphasis on new music, Murtfeld apparently never lost his sympathy and enthusiasm for the American piano tradition. His choice of 12 representative pieces, ranging from the 1850s through the late twentieth century, demonstrates a long-standing artistic commitment and rare understanding.

Murtfeld begins the recital appropriately with Louis Moreau Gottschalk, who returned to the United States in 1853 as the first American musician to attain a European reputation. The Gottschalk group is bracketed with two extrovert virtuoso pieces, the exquisitely realized Pasquinade and Le Banjo. Both are played with enormous vitality and élan, recalling that the Paris critics often compared Gottschalk to Alkan.

More remarkable, however, are Murtfeld's interpretations of three meditative pieces, Ricordati, Berceuse and the most popular of Gottschalk's works during his lifetime, The Last Hope. They represent a vein of Gottschalk's oeuvre that nowadays seems to embarrass the few American pianists who play him. Part of the reason is that Gottschalk's particular type of pure sentimentality, not unlike Stephen Foster's, became almost grotesquely maudlin in the hands of his successors as the century wore on. Murtfeld's astonishing success in these pieces is his ability to meet them on their own terms, without prejudice. They sound uncluttered and fresh, with their original charm restored. Elaborately decorative fioriture is given scrupulous attention, but a beautifully unabashed cantabile, spun out with great skill, never leaves centre stage.

Suave New York sophistication emanates from this reading of the ubiquitous Gershwin Preludes. Their pianistic sheen may sound too refined or their rhythmic emphases a little tame, but the proud peacock display of Gershwin's saucy harmonics is more than ample compensation. Murtfeld's grasp of the mature East Coast minimalism of Philip Glass seems second nature. The opening piece of the

1981 Glassworks is imbued with the perfect atmosphere, all the more enigmatic for its simplicity. Frederic Rzewski, that latter-day representative of the nearly extinct species of virtuoso pianist-composers, is represented by the last of his Piano Pieces from 1977. This nine-minute study in rhythmic repetition moves through a kaleidoscope of constantly shifting colours and mood. In terms of piano playing, the aura of shimmering beauty created by means of a seemingly infinite variety of touch is the disc's summit achievement. It speaks to Murtfeld's stylistic discernment that, following Glass and Rzewski, Barber's 1959 Nocturne and the perennial Sonata of a decade earlier seem less a backward glance than a window onto another culture, if not another world.

Murtfeld is a pianist to reckon with. He has a point of view and a vivid imagination. His playing is both a pleasure to listen to and (speaking as an American) downright refreshing. Heartily recommended.

