

**Oberlin Artist Recital Series:
Dynamic Buffet from
Pianist Jeremy Denk (Nov. 30)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Oberlin alumnus Jeremy Denk returned to Finney Chapel on Thursday, November 30 to play an intriguing program on the Artist Recital Series. Inspired in part by Judy Chicago's 1979 permanent installation at the Brooklyn Museum that sets 39 personalized place settings for famous women at an enormous table, for the first half of his program, the pianist chose pieces by nine women to create a dynamic musical menu.

The second half featured a pair of 19th-century works by Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms, composers with close personal connections to Clara Schumann, whose *Romanze*, Op. 21, No. 1 launched the whole evening.



Denk's mental wheels are constantly in motion. A program insert reflected his most recent thinking about the order and pairing of pieces in the first half, and his opening remarks to the audience completely changed the works to be featured in the second. He then treated his listeners to a 35-minute, continuous setlist of pieces in a variety of styles, performed with the brainy, insightful, and effortless playing for which Denk is famous, and impressive for his ability to discover the essence of each brief work and to move so quickly and decisively from one to the next.

Purely romantic, beautiful, and sad, the opening Clara Schumann work led to Tania León's *Ritual*, a Cuban dance that begins slowly, then bursts out in crazy rhythms before fading away.



Cécile Chaminade's salon piece *The Flatterer* was followed by Missy Mazzoli's suspenseful and funereal-sounding *Heartbreaker*, a natural pairing as Denk pointed up in his colorful interpretations.

Denk adroitly brought out the humor of Amy Beach's "In Autumn" (from *Four Sketches*), captured the minimalist busyness of Meredith Monk's *Paris*, teased out the Gallic charm of Louise Farrenc's *Mélodie in A-flat*, and attacked the double-handed fury of Ruth Crawford Seeger's *Piano Study in Mixed Accents*.

Phyllis Chen, another Oberlin grad — who is best known for her toy piano works — was represented by her *Sumitones*, an improvisatory, colorful piece expressed in graphic notation that comes to a tragic ending. Catharsis followed in the form of

“Dreaming,” another Amy Beach work from her *Four Sketches* that is gorgeously and harmonically true to its early 20th century era, and that Denk played with both affection and conviction.



After intermission, Denk gave a thoughtful, structurally clear performance of Robert Schumann’s love letters to Clara in the form of his *Fantasia*. The three-movement piece is probably the closest thing we have to a transcription of one of Robert’s dreamy improvisations. Too many pianists get lost in this work, but Denk found a convincing path through its perils.

He ended his program with expressive accounts of Brahms’ Op. 119 *Four Pieces*, explaining beforehand that these very late works, especially the first — which he played with a lingering sense of nostalgia — found Brahms bidding adieu to established norms of western tonality.

This very personally chosen program could have made a listener feel as though they were eavesdropping on a private conversation between pianist and piano, but Denk’s intention was obviously to share music widely that he deeply cared about. He ended the evening by responding to the long, warm ovation with a lovely Scott Joplin rag.

Photos by Abe Frato.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 7, 2023.

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