

## Kent Keyboard Series: Conrad Tao premieres Adam Roberts' *Book of Flowers* (Oct. 6)

by Daniel Hathaway



Greeting pianist Conrad Tao after his Kent Keyboard Series recital on October 6 in Ludwig Recital Hall, I exclaimed, “What a marathon!” He gently corrected me. “Two marathons!”

Indeed, Sunday’s amazing, two-hour performance by the seemingly indefatigable pianist included not only the debut of Kent State composition professor Adam Roberts’ *Book of Flowers* — sixteen “character pieces” written for Tao — but also Claude Debussy’s formidable twelve *Études*, written in 1915.

The title of Roberts’ *magnum opus* is metaphorical. This is no Victorian album of salon pieces inspired by horticulture or a tramp through the woodlands, but rather a catalog of striking but ephemeral states of being. In his composer’s notes, Roberts writes, “Each piece

aims to capture a particular energy, from the playful and rhythmic, to the fragile and breakable, to the brutal and ferocious.”

The movement titles convey the range of their inspiration: Chaconne (Pink Flowers with Thorns), Shavasana — the “corpse” position in Yoga, Rolling Waves, Etude: Mad Dance, Stained Glass, Block Screams. In performance, they run the gamut of emotions from dreamy and meditative to explosive and dramatic, but are always colorful, complex, and virtuosic.

Conrad Tao was a sympathetic interpreter of Roberts’ often thorny music, making its textures clear and perceptible, fashioning a grand arch from the raw materials of the sixteen individual pieces, and pacing the movements to make the most of their contrasts.

A very physical player, Tao's body movements and arm choreography always made sense and only served the music.

The hour-long Roberts work alone would have been plenty for the audience to process — and they gave the piece and its performer a very warm ovation — but Tao had a companion piece to offer after an extended intermission.

Even more challenging in some respects than *Book of Flowers*, Debussy's *Études* explore specific compositional elements and keyboard techniques, beginning with intervals (from "Monsieur Czerny's five fingers" through thirds, fourths, sixths and octaves) and continuing with chromaticism, ornaments, repeated notes, opposing sonorities, arpeggios, and chords.

The pianist found even more colors, varieties of touch, and dynamics to put across in these twelve exercises, and still had the strength to move the air in Ludwig Hall with crashing, full-handed chords in No. 12.



After a resounding ovation, students and other audience members flocked to the stage to congratulate Adam Roberts and Conrad Tao. The pianist's residency at Kent would continue on Monday with the presentation of his own works in the Composition Studio Class, and on Wednesday with a master class for piano students, followed by a Q&A with Tao moderated by Roberts and Professor Donna Lee.

That session promised a rich agenda of topics: "...the multiple facets of Tao's career, including his own compositions, commissions from various organizations, his approach to programming, and a number of innovative and

impactful projects."

Kent students were lucky last week to spend quality time with one of today's most formidable — and at the same time most approachable — pianist-composers. And to witness the launch of a major work that should attract future performances by pianists who have the chops and ambition to take it on.

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