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CELEBRATING THE JOHN CAGE CENTENNIAL

Eliza Garth, piano

Thursday, October 4, 2012 . 8PM
Joseph & Alma Gildenhorn Recital Hall
Celebrating the John Cage Centennial

JOHN CAGE (1912 – 1992)
Sonatas and Interludes
for prepared piano

I
II
III
IV

First Interlude
V
VI
VII
VIII

Second Interlude
IX
X
XI

Third Interlude
XII

Fourth Interlude
XIII
XIV and XV “Gemini” – after the work by Richard Lippold
XVI

“One should never go to the woods looking for something, but rather to see what is there.”
—John Cage

Pianist Eliza Garth has achieved international distinction as a performer of the music of our time, through her recordings and her appearances in major cities in the U.S., Europe and Asia. An artist with a passionate voice and adventurous spirit, she has championed some of the most demanding works in the repertoire. Writing for the New York Times, music critic Bernard Holland has stated, “Ms. Garth … has an exquisite ear for piano sound. One can think of no one better qualified to play this intricate, shining music.”
One of her current adventures is The Enchanted Piano: Dances for Piano with Electronics, Piano Strings, and Amplified Piano for five dancers and live piano, developed by Garth in partnership with choreographer James Martin. Featuring music by American composers Mario Davidovsky, Henry Cowell, George Crumb and Maurice Wright, The Enchanted Piano received its world premiere performances in October 2011 at the Manhattan Movement and Arts Center in New York City.
In 2012 she is joining the worldwide celebration of the centennial of John Cage with numerous performances of his music, including his masterpiece for prepared piano, Sonatas and Interludes. This past January she performed this landmark work in New York City under the auspices of the League of Composers/ISCM; in March she performed it in Chicago as part of “a.pe.ri.od.ic presents A John Cage Festival” in collaboration with the renowned Floating World Gallery, one of the world’s foremost dealers in Japanese art.
Garth’s recordings of the complete solo piano works of the eminent American composer Donald Martinio (Centaur Records) have attracted national critical acclaim. The first of these, her debut solo CD, was the first-ever recording devoted entirely to Martino’s solo piano music, and was included in a New York Times survey of its own music critics’ favorite recordings of music written since 1945.
A creative recitalist, in the 2009-2010 season Garth invited pianist Brian Ganz and percussionists Jonathan Haas and Sean Smets to join her in an evening of music featuring Bartók’s Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion and George Crumb’s Music for a Summer Evening. After a performance in Merkin Hall (NYC) that was described in the New York Times as “mesmerizing,” the group was invited to repeat the Crumb work at the 2010 Alba (Italy) Music Festival.
After graduating from The Juilliard School, Garth made her New York recital debut with a program of solo and chamber works by Alban Berg that included the Chamber Concerto For Piano, Violin, and Thirteen Wind Instruments, conducted by Harvey Sollberger. Since then, she has performed nearly 200 new works, including many written for her. Recent among these is Gradualia, a piano concerto by the American composer Scott Wheeler. Garth and conductor Jeffrey Sillschlag performed the world premiere of Gradualia at the 2006 Alba Music Festival, and the American premiere at the 2006 River Concert Series in Maryland.
A founding member of the Chamber Players of the League – ISCM in New York City, Garth has also made guest appearances for the Chamber Music Society of Baltimore, the Rotterdam (Holland) Arts Council, Collage (Symphony Hall in Boston), the Twentieth Century Consort (the Smithsonian Institution), Parnassus, the New York New Music Ensemble, the Washington Square Contemporary Music Society, the New Music Consort, the Fromm Foundation concert series (Boston) and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, among many others.
Garth’s recording (with violinist Rolf Schulte and cellist Eric Bartlett) of The Open Secret, by Pulitzer Prize winner Paul Moravec, is available on the CRI label. Her recording of David Froom’s Piano Suite, written for her with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, is available on the Arabesque label. Her recordings for Opus One include the complete duo piano music of Frank Martin (with pianist Yolanda Liepa). Her broadcast performances have included the BBC Radio 3, WQXR and WNYC in New York, WBUR and WHRV in Boston, Radio de la Suisse Romande in Geneva, WUCF in Cincinnati and WUSF radio and television in Tampa.
Eliza Garth is a member of the faculty at St. Mary’s College of Maryland, where she directs Piano Festival by the River, a summer retreat for pianists. In 2005 she traveled to China with faculty colleagues to appear in the centennial celebration at Fudan University in Shanghai, and to give performances in Beijing and Dalian.

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Garth has been recognized by the Maryland State Arts Council with two Individual Artist Awards, most recently in 2010 for her performance of John Cage's Sonatas and Interludes.

www.elizagarth.com

PROGRAM NOTES

From Six Views of the “Sonatas and Interludes”

The Sonatas and Interludes by John Cage, 1912-1992, has the reputation of being a masterwork, and this is well deserved. A word like “masterpiece” creates certain expectations, however: you expect grandeur, big effects that sweep you off your feet; you expect the exposition, development, and exploration of grand themes; you expect an epic, a monumental journey. You think, perhaps, of other keyboard masterworks: Bach's Goldberg variations, Beethoven's Diabelli variations, Ives’ Concord Sonata.

Cage's masterwork is quite different from this: it is a big piece with a quiet voice. The very instrument he writes for, the prepared piano, undermines the grand statement. This is an instrument that operates entirely by muting: by attaching objects to the strings of the piano, Cage has altered their sounds in various ways. The results are different from note to note — some resonant, some dry, some metallic, some wooden — but they are always, always quieter than before. The prepared piano is an instrument that is personal and intimate; the music written for it must by necessity be music for a small space, music between two people. Even when the sound is “loud” it is the sort of loudness that is more a function of intensity than of amplitude.

Cage, as a composer for this instrument of lyrical percussion, faced the problem of how to make a large work in such a modest medium. The instrument would seem to demand smaller structures; indeed, before the mid-1940s most of Cage's music for prepared piano consisted of brief dance movements . . .

With the Sonatas and Interludes Cage solved the problem. Instead of working by force, he quietly and patiently built his large piece out of short structures. By constructing the work on the timeless foundation of Hindu aesthetics, he could make each piece perfect and unhurried; the focus could be on the subtle modulations of his voice. At its premiere some criticized the work for its monotony, but the lack of contrast is its strength. His earlier dramatic works speak loudly to grab our attention; this one instead speaks quietly to draw us in. It is as if we are sitting in Cage's loft, straw mats on the floor, listening to him explore this softly-colored world . . .

Cage was fond of telling a story from Irish legend, in which a prince and a magical horse follow the path of a magic ball that rolls in front of them. The rolling ball takes them from one adventure to another, ultimately taking them to the object of their quest. These large ongoing pieces of Cage's have this same quality: start here and follow the rolling ball. While composing them, he knows exactly what he's doing — he's following his system — but he has no idea where he's going.

Writing a large piece that is a journey creates the effect of an epic without being ponderous or monolithic. The Sonatas and Interludes are lacking that feeling of the self-consciously monumental statement that accompanies so many grand works. Instead its epic nature affects you gradually over time as you follow the continuity of events, from point to point in the journey, until you emerge from the other side — transformed.

And it is not just the listener who is transformed. By the time he had finished writing these twenty short pieces, John Cage was not the same composer; he had changed. As he emerged from the other side of this adventure, his technical stance (a tendency towards quietness, the individual sound and silence, the subtle modulations of phrase) and his spiritual stance (a tendency towards quietness, silence, poverty) were permanently altered. The Sonatas and Interludes is not just a string of pieces, it is a passage in Cage's life.

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